



Review Article

Age-related changes in skeletal muscle mitochondria: the role of exercise

Dae Yun Seo^{a,c}, Sung Ryul Lee^{a,b,c}, Nari Kim^{a,b,c}, Kyung Soo Ko^{a,b,c},
Byoung Doo Rhee^{a,b,c}, Jin Han^{a,b,c,*}

^a National Research Laboratory for Mitochondrial Signaling, Department of Physiology, BK21 Plus Project Team, College of Medicine, Inje University, Busan, Republic of Korea

^b Department of Health Science and Technology, Graduate School, Inje University, Busan, Republic of Korea

^c Cardiovascular and Metabolic Disease Center, Inje University, Busan, Republic of Korea

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 July 2016

Received in revised form 8 July 2016

Accepted 14 July 2016

Available online 22 July 2016

Keywords:

aging

exercise

mitochondria

skeletal muscle

ABSTRACT

Aging is associated with mitochondrial dysfunction, which leads to a decline in cellular function and the development of age-related diseases. Reduced skeletal muscle mass with aging appears to promote a decrease in mitochondrial quality and quantity. Moreover, mitochondrial dysfunction adversely affects the quality and quantity of skeletal muscle. During aging, physical exercise can cause beneficial adaptations to cellular energy metabolism in skeletal muscle, including alterations to mitochondrial content, protein, and biogenesis. Here, we briefly summarize current findings on the association between the aging process and impairment of mitochondrial function, including mitochondrial biogenesis and reactive oxygen species in skeletal muscle. We also discuss the potential role of exercise in the improvement of aging-driven mitochondrial dysfunctions.

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1. Introduction

Aging is associated with decreased skeletal muscle function and mitochondrial function, leading to a 25–30% reduction in functional capacity between ages 30 years and 70.¹ This phenomenon can lead to decreased physical activity and can increase the risk of falls in aged individuals.² Therefore, it is important to understand the mechanisms underlying aging-induced skeletal muscle atrophy in order to develop suitable therapeutic targets to promote health and mobility in the

elderly.³ While many possible strategies have been suggested, the best target for the maintenance and improvement of cellular functions in aging is the mitochondria.⁴

Mitochondria function as powerhouses of biological tissues to generate energy.^{5,6} Mitochondrial dysfunction in response to deterioration of skeletal muscle with aging alters the structure and function of organelles (Fig. 1).⁷ Although studies have described age-related mitochondrial dysfunction in skeletal muscle, the relationships among aging, exercise type, and healthy mitochondria have not been clearly elucidated. Furthermore, alleviation of mitochondrial dysfunction in skeletal

* Corresponding author. Department of Physiology, College of Medicine, Cardiovascular and Metabolic Disease Center, Inje University, 633-165, Bokji-ro 75, Busan jin-gu, Busan, 47392, Republic of Korea.

E-mail address: phyhanj@inje.ac.kr (J. Han).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.imr.2016.07.003>

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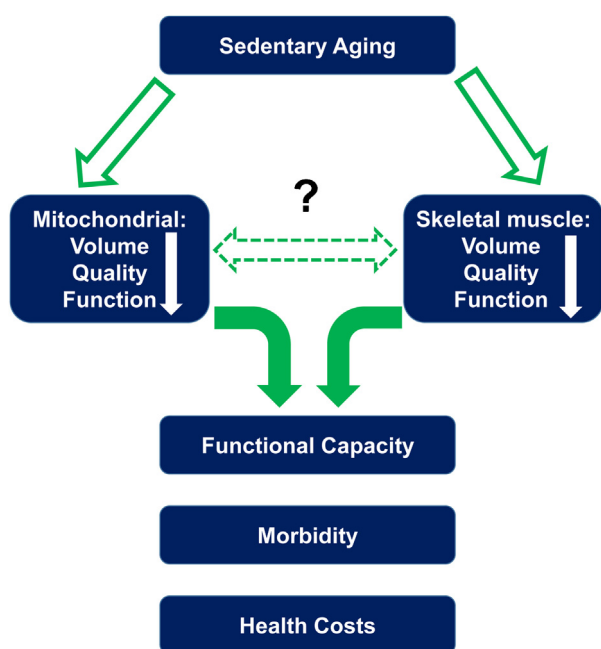


Fig. 1 – The effects of sedentary aging.

Note. From “Mitochondrial and skeletal muscle health with advancing age” by Adam R. Konopka, K. Sreekumaran Nair, 2013, *Mol Cell Endocrinol*, 379, p. 19–29. Copyright 2016, <https://s100.copyright.com/CustomerAdmin/PLF.jsp?ref=a1ee97ca-af28-4e18-867c-413e399da8a7>. Reprinted with permission.

muscle following physical activity is an important aspect affecting the contributions of mitochondria to the aging processes in skeletal muscle.

Exercise training modulates skeletal muscle metabolism by controlling intracellular signaling pathways that mediate mitochondrial homeostasis.^{8,9} In order to reduce or prevent skeletal muscle weakness that occurs with aging, it is necessary to understand exercise-mediated mitochondrial adaptations, in skeletal muscle in particular. These regulate mitochondrial activities and coordinate mitochondrial signaling pathways. Moreover, the potential therapeutic benefits of exercise training are likely to be associated with the suppression of aging-related mitochondrial dysfunction.

In this review, we briefly introduce the role of exercise on the modulation of aging-driven mitochondrial dysfunction in skeletal muscle.

2. Mitochondrial metabolism

Adenosine triphosphate (ATP) is an important promoter of cell differentiation, growth, and reproduction, supplying energy for the contraction of muscles for physical activity.^{10,11} Mitochondria are master sensors of metabolic and cellular processes and function to regulate energy (ATP) production through several enzymatic pathways, including the tricarboxylic acid cycle, oxidative phosphorylation, and fatty acid β -oxidation. The tricarboxylic acid cycle oxidizes acetyl-CoA to produce nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide and flavin

adenine dinucleotide, which can be used by the oxidative phosphorylation system to generate ATP.¹²

3. Age-related changes in the mitochondria in skeletal muscle

During aging, there are significant changes in mitochondrial ultrastructure and subcellular localization in skeletal muscle. The mitochondria of aged skeletal muscle appear enlarged and more rounded in shape, with matrix vacuolization and shorter cristae when compared with mitochondria from young skeletal muscle. Moreover, mitochondrial dysfunction is thought to be closely related to the loss of skeletal muscle mass during aging.¹³ Many studies have reported that a decline in organelle numbers such as loss of mitochondria content may induce loss of skeletal muscle. For example, reduced enzymatic activities (e.g., citrate synthase and cytochrome oxidase activities),¹⁴ protein markers, and mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) content combined with electron micrographic evidence of decreased intermyofibrillar mitochondrial size and reduced thickness of the subsarcolemmar mitochondrial layer are easily observed in mitochondria from aged muscle. This results in impairment of mitochondrial metabolism, including the maximal ATP production rate, mitochondrial protein synthesis, and respiration, partly as a result of increased uncoupling of oxygen consumption and ATP synthesis.⁴ However, increased physical activity has been shown to be associated with a decrease in age-related deficits in mitochondrial function.¹⁵ Therefore, increased physical activity is important to maintain mitochondrial function in aging skeletal muscle.

3.1. Mitochondrial biogenesis

Cellular senescence contributes to aging-related disorders and reduces mitochondrial biogenesis, which drives homeostasis.¹⁶ Dysregulation of mitochondrial biogenesis has been shown to reduce the risk of decreased organ function associated with aging.¹⁷ Mitochondrial biogenesis plays a role in transcriptional regulation by mediating regulatory factors such as peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor- γ coactivator 1 α , and downstream transcription factors such as nuclear respiratory factors 1 and 2 and mitochondrial transcription factor A.^{18,19} Enhancement of mitochondrial biogenesis can be achieved not only through pharmacological intervention,²⁰ but also through exercise; therefore, exercise may inhibit mitochondrial dysfunction and thereby ameliorate age-related complications. In 1967, John Holloszy²¹ first reported that exercise training improves mitochondrial biogenesis in aging skeletal muscle. Indeed, endurance treadmill exercise enhances mitochondrial protein and enzymes in skeletal muscle. Thus, from a practical standpoint, modulation of mitochondrial biogenesis capacity during aging may be applicable as an alternative method for lessening age-related complications (Fig. 2).

3.2. Mitochondrial reactive oxygen species generation

In skeletal muscle, increased exposure or modulation of mitochondrial reactive oxygen species (ROS) with aging reflects

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