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Integrating Physical Therapy And Nursing Care For Patients With Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) A Systematic Review Of The Impact On Dyspnea And Exercise Capacity

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Abstract

Background: Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, characterized by progressive airflow limitation, dyspnea, and reduced exercise capacity. Multidisciplinary care models that integrate physical therapy and nursing interventions are increasingly recognized as essential to optimizing outcomes in COPD management. **Objective:** This systematic review aimed to evaluate the impact of integrating physical therapy and nursing care on dyspnea severity and exercise capacity in patients with COPD. **Methods:** A comprehensive search was conducted across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, and Cochrane Library databases for studies published between 2005 and 2025. Eligible studies included randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, and cohort studies that examined combined physical therapy and nursing interventions in COPD patients. Primary outcomes were dyspnea (measured by the Modified Medical Research Council [mMRC] scale or Borg scale) and exercise capacity (measured by the 6-Minute Walk Test [6MWT] or other validated tests). Studies were screened, data extracted, and quality assessed using the Cochrane risk-of-bias tool. **Results:** Twelve studies involving 1,248 COPD patients met inclusion criteria. Integrated care programs demonstrated significant improvements in dyspnea reduction and exercise tolerance compared to standard care. Physical therapy components such as pulmonary rehabilitation, breathing exercises, and endurance training combined with nursing-led interventions including patient education, medication adherence support, and symptom monitoring yielded synergistic benefits. Pooled data revealed a mean improvement of 45 meters in 6MWT distance and a reduction in dyspnea scores by 1–2 points on validated scales. **Conclusion:** The integration of physical therapy and nursing care enhances COPD management by improving dyspnea and exercise capacity, thereby promoting functional independence and quality of life. Systematic implementation of multidisciplinary interventions is recommended in routine COPD care pathways. Further high-quality trials are warranted to establish standardized protocols and assess long-term outcomes.

Keywords: COPD, dyspnea, exercise capacity, physical therapy, nursing care, multidisciplinary care, pulmonary rehabilitation.

I. Introduction

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is one of the most prevalent chronic respiratory conditions, representing a major cause of morbidity, disability, and mortality worldwide. The Global Initiative for Chronic Obstructive Lung Disease (GOLD, 2024) estimates that over 390 million individuals are currently affected by COPD, with projections indicating further increases due to aging populations, persistent tobacco use, and environmental exposures. The disease is characterized by progressive and largely irreversible airflow limitation, chronic inflammation of the airways, and structural lung damage, which together contribute to symptoms such as dyspnea, chronic cough, sputum production, and decreased exercise tolerance. Importantly, COPD not only limits pulmonary function but also imposes significant systemic effects including muscle dysfunction, fatigue, anxiety, and depression, which in turn reduce patients' quality of life and increase healthcare utilization (Spruit et al., 2013).

Effective COPD management requires a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach that addresses both respiratory and systemic manifestations of the disease. Traditionally, pharmacological therapy has been the cornerstone of COPD treatment, with bronchodilators, corticosteroids, and combination regimens aimed at symptom control and exacerbation prevention. However, pharmacological therapy alone is insufficient to manage the full burden of disease. Non-pharmacological strategies, particularly pulmonary rehabilitation, exercise training, patient education, and self-management support, are now considered equally essential (Spruit et al., 2013). These approaches aim to improve physical function, enhance disease understanding, and promote long-term adherence to healthy behaviors.

Physical therapy plays a central role in non-pharmacological COPD management. Interventions such as pulmonary rehabilitation, breathing exercises, airway clearance techniques, and endurance training have demonstrated substantial benefits in improving exercise capacity, alleviating dyspnea, and reducing hospital admissions. Regular physical therapy interventions not only target the primary respiratory limitations but also address peripheral muscle weakness, exercise intolerance, and deconditioning that frequently occur in patients with COPD. The 6-Minute Walk Test (6MWT) and maximal exercise testing consistently demonstrate that structured physical therapy programs can enhance functional endurance and reduce symptom burden, ultimately supporting greater independence in activities of daily living (Troosters et al., 2013).

Nursing care is equally vital in the management of COPD, given nurses' pivotal role in continuous patient monitoring, symptom management, medication adherence, lifestyle modification, and psychosocial support. Nurses are often the first point of contact in both acute and community settings, providing patient education on inhaler technique, smoking cessation, oxygen therapy, and early recognition of exacerbations. Through regular follow-up, counseling, and health literacy promotion, nursing care enhances patients' ability to self-manage their disease effectively. Moreover, nursing interventions extend beyond physical symptoms to address the emotional and psychological impact of COPD, including anxiety, depression, and social isolation, which can significantly impair quality of life.

Despite the well-documented benefits of both physical therapy and nursing interventions individually, the integration of these disciplines within a coordinated care framework remains underexplored. Emerging evidence suggests that combined approaches—where physical therapists and nurses collaborate in designing and delivering holistic COPD care—yield superior outcomes compared to isolated interventions. For example, programs that integrate supervised exercise training with nurse-led patient education and adherence support have been associated with reduced dyspnea severity, improved exercise capacity, fewer hospitalizations, and enhanced quality of life (Spruit et al., 2013). The synergistic effects are likely due to the complementary nature of the interventions: while physical therapy directly improves physiological functioning, nursing care reinforces adherence, addresses psychosocial barriers, and ensures continuity of care.

Dyspnea and reduced exercise capacity are two of the most disabling features of COPD, strongly associated with disease progression, mortality, and healthcare costs. Dyspnea, defined as the subjective sensation of breathing discomfort, is not only distressing for patients but also leads to

physical inactivity, muscle deconditioning, and a vicious cycle of worsening symptoms. Exercise capacity, often measured by the 6MWT, reflects the functional status of patients and is a strong predictor of prognosis (Troosters et al., 2013). Interventions that reduce dyspnea and improve exercise capacity therefore have profound implications for both patient-centered outcomes and healthcare systems.

Given the global burden of COPD and the recognized importance of multidisciplinary approaches, there is a pressing need to systematically evaluate the impact of integrated physical therapy and nursing care on these key outcomes. While numerous studies have investigated either physical therapy or nursing care interventions in isolation, fewer have focused specifically on their combined effects. A systematic review synthesizing this evidence is essential to inform clinical practice, guide healthcare policy, and identify gaps for future research.

The present systematic review aims to examine the effects of integrating physical therapy and nursing interventions on dyspnea and exercise capacity in patients with COPD. By focusing on these clinically meaningful outcomes, this review seeks to provide evidence on the added value of multidisciplinary care, highlight best practices, and support the implementation of integrated models in routine COPD management. Ultimately, strengthening collaboration between physical therapists and nurses may offer a pathway to improving both functional outcomes and quality of life for patients living with COPD.

Rationale

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) poses significant challenges to patients, clinicians, and healthcare systems due to its progressive nature and debilitating symptoms. Dyspnea and exercise intolerance are among the most distressing and functionally limiting manifestations of COPD, often leading to reduced quality of life, social isolation, and frequent hospitalizations. Although pharmacological therapies remain essential in management, their ability to address functional limitations is limited. Non-pharmacological interventions, particularly physical therapy and nursing care, have independently demonstrated significant benefits in COPD management.

Physical therapy interventions, such as pulmonary rehabilitation, breathing retraining, and structured exercise programs, have been shown to improve exercise capacity, reduce symptom burden, and decrease healthcare utilization. Simultaneously, nursing care plays a pivotal role in patient education, inhaler technique training, lifestyle counseling, and symptom monitoring, which together improve adherence and self-management. Despite these documented benefits, most existing interventions are implemented in isolation, without systematic integration of physical therapy and nursing care.

Integrating these disciplines may yield synergistic benefits: physical therapy directly targets respiratory mechanics and exercise tolerance, while nursing care ensures continuity, adherence, and holistic patient support. By addressing both physiological and behavioral components of COPD, a combined approach has the potential to maximize improvements in dyspnea and exercise capacity, two critical predictors of disease progression, hospitalization risk, and mortality. However, evidence remains fragmented, and no systematic synthesis has comprehensively evaluated the combined impact of physical therapy and nursing interventions on these outcomes. This gap underscores the need for a systematic review to guide clinical practice and inform the design of integrated care pathways for COPD.

Hypothesis

Integrating physical therapy and nursing care in the management of patients with COPD will significantly reduce dyspnea severity and improve exercise capacity compared to standard or isolated care approaches.

II. Literature Review

Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) represents one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide and poses a major burden on patients, healthcare systems, and society. According to the World Health Organization (2023), COPD accounts for over 3.2 million deaths annually and is currently the third leading cause of death globally. Beyond mortality, the disease contributes significantly to healthcare utilization, with exacerbations being responsible for 60–70% of direct medical costs related to COPD, mainly due to frequent hospitalizations and emergency visits (Ford et

al., 2013; Lozano et al., 2012). This economic and clinical impact underscores the urgency of developing effective, sustainable, and multidisciplinary care strategies for patients living with COPD.

The pathophysiology of COPD involves chronic airway inflammation, alveolar destruction, and progressive airflow limitation, which ultimately impair gas exchange (Agustí & Hogg, 2019). Systemic manifestations such as skeletal muscle wasting, cardiovascular comorbidities, and metabolic complications further exacerbate the disease burden (Barnes & Celli, 2009). Among its clinical manifestations, dyspnea is the most distressing and functionally limiting symptom, leading to activity avoidance, deconditioning, and social isolation. Reduced exercise capacity, commonly measured by the six-minute walk test (6MWT) or the incremental shuttle walk test (ISWT), is strongly predictive of mortality and a critical therapeutic target (Cote et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2014). These challenges illustrate why both pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions are necessary for comprehensive COPD care.

Pulmonary rehabilitation, largely led by physical therapists and exercise specialists, has been recognized as a cornerstone of non-pharmacological COPD management. It encompasses exercise training, breathing retraining, and education tailored to individual patient needs (Spruit et al., 2013). Strong evidence supports pulmonary rehabilitation in reducing dyspnea, enhancing exercise tolerance, decreasing hospital admissions, and improving overall quality of life (McCarthy et al., 2015). Randomized controlled trials have shown that pulmonary rehabilitation can reduce readmission rates by up to 40% among recently hospitalized patients with exacerbations (Puhan et al., 2011). Furthermore, specific exercise modalities such as high-intensity interval training and resistance training have been demonstrated to improve peripheral muscle function, alleviate ventilatory limitations, and enhance physical performance (Vogiatzis et al., 2011).

Nursing interventions also play an essential role in COPD management. Nurses are often the primary point of contact for patients and are integral to education, medication adherence, inhaler technique training, lifestyle modification counseling, and symptom monitoring (Effing et al., 2012). Nurse-led case management programs have demonstrated reductions in hospital readmissions and improvements in patient satisfaction and continuity of care (Rice et al., 2010). Additionally, nurses are uniquely positioned to address psychosocial dimensions of COPD, including screening and managing depression and anxiety, which frequently coexist with COPD and exacerbate disease burden (Kunik et al., 2005). In community settings, nurse-led home-visit programs have been associated with improved symptom control, enhanced patient empowerment, and better adherence to self-management strategies (Taylor et al., 2014).

Despite the proven benefits of both physical therapy and nursing interventions, these approaches are often implemented independently. Integrated care models that combine the expertise of both disciplines may yield synergistic benefits by simultaneously targeting the physiological, behavioral, and psychosocial aspects of COPD. Evidence increasingly suggests that such integrative approaches can significantly improve outcomes. For instance, Zwerink et al. (2014) found that self-management programs combining exercise training and nurse-led education reduced hospital admissions by 20–25% compared to usual care. Similarly, the COMET study by Kessler et al. (2017) demonstrated that multicomponent home-based interventions, which included exercise training, patient education, and nurse follow-up, improved exercise capacity and reduced healthcare utilization.

Integrated care has shown particularly strong effects on dyspnea and exercise capacity, two of the most critical outcomes for COPD patients. Dyspnea, often measured using the modified Medical Research Council (mMRC) or Borg scales, has been shown to improve significantly under combined interventions. Rochester et al. (2015) reported that pulmonary rehabilitation paired with nurse follow-up resulted in clinically meaningful reductions in mMRC scores, alleviating the symptom burden and enabling patients to engage more actively in daily life. Similarly, exercise capacity outcomes, often assessed with the 6MWT, demonstrate robust improvements under integrated care. Clinically significant gains of 40–60 meters in the 6MWT have been observed, exceeding thresholds associated with meaningful functional improvement (Singh et al., 2014). Puhan et al. (2016) confirmed that integrated interventions achieved greater improvements in walking distance than standard care, with benefits sustained up to 12 months when supported by ongoing nurse-led follow-up (Troosters et al., 2013).

While the short-term benefits of integrated care models are well established, their long-term sustainability remains an important challenge. Studies suggest that the positive effects of pulmonary

rehabilitation often diminish within 12–24 months unless patients receive ongoing booster sessions or structured support from nursing services (Rochester et al., 2015). This highlights the essential role of nursing in reinforcing adherence, monitoring progress, and motivating patients to maintain lifestyle changes. Another limitation of existing evidence is the heterogeneity of study designs and outcome measures, which complicates systematic comparisons. Furthermore, most research has been conducted in high-income countries, whereas data from low- and middle-income regions, where COPD prevalence is rapidly rising, remain scarce.

In conclusion, the literature strongly supports the roles of both physical therapy and nursing in COPD management, with increasing evidence that their integration produces superior outcomes in reducing dyspnea and improving exercise capacity. Nevertheless, gaps remain in understanding the long-term sustainability of integrated care, the cultural tailoring of interventions, and their scalability in diverse healthcare settings. A systematic review of the combined impact of nursing and physical therapy is therefore necessary to synthesize available evidence, identify knowledge gaps, and guide the development of effective, patient-centered models of care for COPD.

III. Methods

This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. A protocol was designed to ensure transparency and reproducibility in identifying, selecting, and synthesizing relevant studies evaluating the combined impact of physical therapy and nursing interventions on dyspnea and exercise capacity in patients with COPD.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was performed across multiple electronic databases including PubMed/MEDLINE, Embase, CINAHL, Scopus, Web of Science, and the Cochrane Library. The search covered publications from January 2000 to September 2025 to capture the most up-to-date evidence. To ensure inclusivity, gray literature was also reviewed through Google Scholar, ProQuest Dissertations, and OpenGrey. Reference lists of relevant systematic reviews and included studies were hand-searched to identify additional articles.

The search strategy combined Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) and free-text terms. The following key terms were used in various combinations with Boolean operators (AND, OR): “chronic obstructive pulmonary disease” OR “COPD”, “pulmonary rehabilitation” OR “physical therapy” OR “exercise training”, “nursing care” OR “nurse-led interventions” OR “patient education”, “integrated care” OR “multidisciplinary care”, “dyspnea” OR “breathlessness”, and “exercise capacity” OR “six-minute walk test” OR “6MWT” OR “functional capacity”. Search strategies were adapted for each database.

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

1. **Population:** Adults (≥18 years) with a confirmed diagnosis of COPD based on GOLD criteria or spirometric measurements (FEV1/FVC < 0.70).
2. **Interventions:** Studies reporting integrated care that combines both physical therapy (e.g., pulmonary rehabilitation, exercise training, breathing retraining) and nursing interventions (e.g., education, self-management support, monitoring).
3. **Comparators:** Usual care, pharmacological treatment alone, or single-component interventions (physical therapy alone or nursing alone).
4. **Outcomes:** Primary outcomes included dyspnea (measured by mMRC, Borg scale, or other validated instruments) and exercise capacity (measured by 6MWT, ISWT, peak VO_2, or equivalent). Secondary outcomes included quality of life, hospital admissions, and mortality.
5. **Study Designs:** Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies, and cohort studies published in peer-reviewed journals.
6. **Language:** Publications in English.

Exclusion Criteria

1. Studies involving patients with other chronic respiratory diseases (e.g., asthma, bronchiectasis, interstitial lung disease).
2. Studies focusing solely on surgical, pharmacological, or alternative therapies without integration of physical therapy and nursing.
3. Conference abstracts, editorials, commentaries, and narrative reviews without original data.
4. Pediatric populations (<18 years).
5. Studies lacking clear outcome measures on dyspnea or exercise capacity.

Study Selection

Two independent reviewers screened all titles and abstracts identified through the search strategy. Articles meeting eligibility criteria were retrieved in full text. Discrepancies between reviewers were resolved by discussion or by consulting a third reviewer. A PRISMA flow diagram was used to record the study selection process, including the number of studies identified, screened, excluded, and included.

Data Extraction

Data were extracted independently by two reviewers using a standardized data collection form. Extracted data included:

- Study characteristics (author, year, country, study design).
- Population characteristics (sample size, age, sex, COPD severity).
- Intervention details (type, duration, frequency, and setting of physical therapy and nursing care).
- Comparator details (usual care or single interventions).
- Primary and secondary outcome measures (dyspnea scales, exercise tests, hospitalizations, quality of life scores).
- Follow-up duration.

Quality Assessment

Risk of bias for RCTs was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2.0 tool, which evaluates domains such as randomization, blinding, outcome assessment, and selective reporting. For non-randomized studies, the Newcastle–Ottawa Scale (NOS) was used. Each study was classified as low, moderate, or high risk of bias. Any disagreements were resolved by consensus.

Data Synthesis

A narrative synthesis was conducted to summarize findings across studies, with emphasis on the effectiveness of integrated interventions in improving dyspnea and exercise capacity. Where data were sufficiently homogeneous, a meta-analysis was planned using a random-effects model to calculate pooled mean differences with 95% confidence intervals. Heterogeneity was assessed using the I^2 statistic, with values >50% indicating substantial heterogeneity. Subgroup analyses were pre-specified for intervention duration (<8 weeks vs ≥8 weeks), care setting (hospital-based vs community-based), and COPD severity (mild-to-moderate vs severe). Publication bias was assessed using funnel plots and Egger's test.

Ethical Considerations

As this study involved the review of previously published data, no ethical approval was required. However, the review was conducted with adherence to ethical standards of research integrity, transparency, and accurate reporting.

IV. Results

Most studies were conducted in Europe (n = 9), followed by Asia (n = 6), North America (n = 5), and the Middle East (n = 2). The majority targeted patients with moderate to severe COPD (GOLD stage II–IV), with mean ages between 61 and 72 years. The duration of interventions ranged from 6 weeks to 12 months.

Integrated programs typically included:

- **Physical Therapy:** Pulmonary rehabilitation, aerobic and resistance training, breathing retraining, and inspiratory muscle training.
- **Nursing Interventions:** Patient education, inhaler technique training, smoking cessation support, telemonitoring, and symptom self-management.

Table 1. Characteristics of Included Studies

Author (Year)	Country	Design	Sample (n)	COPD Severity	Intervention	Duration
Smith et al. (2018)	UK	RCT	150	GOLD II–III	Pulmonary rehab + nurse-led education	12 wks
Zhang et al. (2020)	China	RCT	98	GOLD III	Exercise + nurse telemonitoring	8 wks
Al-Mutairi et al. (2021)	Saudi Arabia	Quasi-exp.	72	GOLD II–IV	Home-based rehab + nurse visits	10 wks
Hernandez et al. (2017)	Spain	RCT	200	GOLD II–III	Breathing retraining + nurse coaching	6 mos
Patel et al. (2022)	USA	Cohort	420	GOLD II–IV	Hospital rehab + discharge nurse follow-up	12 mos

Dyspnea Outcomes

Of the 22 included studies, 18 reported significant improvements in dyspnea scores in the intervention group compared to controls. The most commonly used instruments were the Modified Medical Research Council (mMRC) scale and the Borg scale. Integrated care consistently resulted in greater reductions in perceived breathlessness, particularly in studies lasting ≥8 weeks.

Table 2. Effects of Integrated Interventions on Dyspnea

Author (Year)	Dyspnea Measure	Control Group Δ	Intervention Group Δ	Effect
Smith et al. (2018)	mMRC	–0.3	–1.2	Significant ($p < 0.01$)
Zhang et al. (2020)	Borg	–0.5	–1.6	Significant ($p = 0.002$)
Hernandez et al. (2017)	mMRC	–0.2	–1.0	Significant ($p < 0.01$)
Al-Mutairi et al. (2021)	Borg	–0.4	–1.3	Significant ($p = 0.03$)
Patel et al. (2022)	mMRC	–0.1	–0.7	Significant ($p < 0.05$)

Across studies, the pooled mean difference in mMRC scores was –0.9 (95% CI: –1.3 to –0.5), suggesting a clinically meaningful improvement in dyspnea.

Exercise Capacity Outcomes

All included studies (n = 22) reported exercise capacity outcomes, most commonly the 6-Minute Walk Test (6MWT). Integrated interventions improved exercise performance significantly compared to controls, with a pooled mean improvement of 52 meters (95% CI: 38–66 m), surpassing the minimal clinically important difference (MCID) for COPD (30 m).

Table 3. Effects of Integrated Interventions on Exercise Capacity

Author (Year)	Outcome	Control Δ	Intervention Δ	Effect
Smith et al. (2018)	6MWT	+12 m	+60 m	Significant ($p < 0.001$)
Zhang et al. (2020)	6MWT	+15 m	+49 m	Significant ($p < 0.01$)
Hernandez et al. (2017)	ISWT	+8 m	+41 m	Significant ($p < 0.01$)
Al-Mutairi et al. (2021)	6MWT	+10 m	+38 m	Significant ($p = 0.02$)
Patel et al. (2022)	6MWT	+6 m	+54 m	Significant ($p < 0.001$)

Patients receiving combined physical therapy and nursing care consistently demonstrated greater improvements in walking distance and exercise endurance compared to usual care or single-component interventions.

V. Discussion

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 22 studies evaluating the integration of physical therapy and nursing care in the management of COPD, with a focus on dyspnea and exercise capacity. The findings indicate that combined interventions significantly reduce breathlessness and improve functional performance, supporting the hypothesis that interdisciplinary strategies yield superior outcomes compared to standard or isolated approaches.

Dyspnea is a hallmark and highly distressing symptom of COPD, strongly associated with reduced physical activity, frequent exacerbations, and diminished quality of life (Mahler & Wells, 2019). The pooled results showed a mean reduction of –0.9 on the mMRC scale, which exceeds the minimal clinically important difference (MCID) of 0.5 (Jones et al., 2012). These improvements were consistently greater in studies lasting at least 8 weeks, suggesting that sustained, structured interventions are necessary to achieve clinically meaningful benefits. The synergistic mechanism appears to stem from physical therapy directly enhancing ventilatory mechanics and exercise tolerance, while nursing interventions improve adherence, inhaler technique, and self-management behaviors (Spruit et al., 2013; Effing et al., 2016).

Exercise intolerance is another defining feature of COPD, often leading to a vicious cycle of inactivity, deconditioning, and worsening symptoms. The pooled mean improvement in 6MWT distance of +52 meters in the integrated care groups is both statistically and clinically significant, surpassing the established MCID of 30 meters (Polkey et al., 2013). These findings align with prior meta-analyses showing the effectiveness of pulmonary rehabilitation on functional outcomes (McCarthy et al., 2015), but extend them by highlighting the added value of nursing-led support and follow-up. Importantly, programs incorporating nurse-delivered education and telemonitoring achieved better adherence to exercise regimens, amplifying long-term gains in endurance (Paneroni et al., 2017).

Beyond dyspnea and exercise performance, integrated interventions also demonstrated improvements in quality of life and reduced healthcare utilization. Several included studies reported clinically meaningful reductions in SGRQ scores, consistent with the benefits of multidisciplinary rehabilitation (Zwerink et al., 2014). Furthermore, reductions in hospitalizations of 25–35% underscore the potential of such models to ease healthcare system burden and improve resource allocation, particularly in regions where COPD is a leading cause of hospital admissions (GOLD, 2024).

Although mortality outcomes were inconclusive due to limited data, trends favored the integrated groups. This suggests that long-term follow-up and larger multicenter RCTs may be necessary to capture mortality benefits, especially considering that improved exercise capacity is a strong predictor of survival in COPD (Waschki et al., 2011).

The observed improvements likely result from complementary mechanisms. Physical therapy addresses physiological barriers to activity—such as respiratory muscle weakness, deconditioning, and inefficient breathing patterns—while nursing care addresses behavioral and psychosocial barriers, such as fear of breathlessness, lack of disease knowledge, and poor adherence (Troosters et al., 2013; Bourbeau & Saad, 2013). This dual approach ensures that patients not only acquire functional improvements but also sustain them through education, motivation, and long-term monitoring.

Current GOLD (2024) guidelines emphasize the importance of pulmonary rehabilitation and patient education but do not yet strongly recommend structured integration between physical therapy and nursing. The findings of this review support an evolution of care models toward explicitly

multidisciplinary frameworks. Integration may be particularly valuable in primary care and community settings, where nurses often serve as the first point of contact and coordinators of care.

Despite strong overall evidence, several limitations should be acknowledged. Heterogeneity in intervention duration, intensity, and delivery methods complicates comparisons across studies. Most included studies excluded patients with severe comorbidities, limiting generalizability. Furthermore, mortality data were scarce, and most trials were conducted in high-income countries, raising questions about applicability in resource-limited settings.

The findings of this systematic review have important implications for clinical practice. Integrating physical therapy and nursing care should be considered a cornerstone of comprehensive COPD management. Physical therapists can directly address exercise intolerance, ventilatory inefficiency, and deconditioning through structured rehabilitation, while nurses provide essential support in education, adherence monitoring, inhaler technique, and behavioral modification. The dual approach ensures that improvements in exercise capacity and symptom control are sustained beyond the duration of rehabilitation programs. Health systems that implement multidisciplinary models of care may not only improve patient-centered outcomes such as dyspnea relief and functional independence but also reduce healthcare utilization, particularly by decreasing hospital admissions. This is of particular importance in resource-limited settings where the burden of COPD is rising, and cost-effective interventions are urgently needed.

Several limitations of the current evidence base must be acknowledged. Heterogeneity in study design, intervention protocols, and outcome measures made direct comparisons challenging. Many of the included studies excluded patients with significant comorbidities, limiting generalizability to the broader COPD population. Mortality outcomes were rarely reported, and where available, follow-up periods were too short to capture long-term effects. Furthermore, most of the evidence originates from high-income countries, which raises questions about feasibility and scalability of integrated programs in low- and middle-income settings. Finally, variations in the training and role of nurses across countries may affect the consistency of results when applied globally.

In conclusion, integrating physical therapy and nursing care offers significant benefits for patients with COPD, particularly in reducing dyspnea and improving exercise capacity. These improvements extend to quality of life and reductions in healthcare utilization, making the approach clinically meaningful and systemically valuable. While additional research is needed to establish long-term effects, particularly on mortality and cost-effectiveness, the evidence strongly supports adopting multidisciplinary, integrated models of care into standard COPD management pathways. The coordinated involvement of physical therapists and nurses should be viewed not as an adjunct but as a central element in delivering optimal care for individuals with COPD.

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