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ADAPTIVE CHANGES IN RESPIRATORY PARAMETERS UNDER HIGH-ALTITUDE HYPOXIA: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Background: Exposure to high-altitude environments (>2500 m above sea level) subjects the human body to progressive hypobaric hypoxia, triggering a complex series of physiological adaptations primarily orchestrated through the respiratory system. These adaptive responses — spanning ventilatory, hematological, and cellular levels — determine individual tolerance to altitude and underlie the pathophysiology of altitude-related illnesses. Objective: This study aimed to systematically review and analyze the adaptive changes in respiratory parameters occurring under high-altitude hypoxic conditions, with emphasis on the temporal sequence of acclimatization and the physiological mechanisms involved. Methods: A systematic review of 10 peer-reviewed studies published between 2012 and 2024 was conducted, encompassing human field studies, controlled hypobaric chamber experiments, and comparative investigations of lowlander versus high-altitude native populations. Results: High-altitude exposure consistently elicited hypoxic ventilatory response (HVR) characterized by increased respiratory rate (+42%), tidal volume augmentation (+28%), and reduced arterial PCO2 (hypocapnia, mean −8.3 mmHg). Peripheral chemoreceptor sensitization, erythropoietin (EPO)-driven erythrocytosis, and pulmonary vascular remodeling were identified as central adaptive mechanisms. Conclusion: Respiratory adaptation to high-altitude hypoxia involves a

coordinated, multi-phase physiological response. Understanding these mechanisms has important implications for altitude medicine, sports physiology, and the management of chronic hypoxic conditions such as COPD and pulmonary hypertension.

Keywords: high altitude; hypoxia; respiratory adaptation; hypoxic ventilatory response; acclimatization; erythropoietin; carotid body; pulmonary physiology; HIF-1alpha; altitude sickness

1. INTRODUCTION

Approximately 140 million people permanently reside at altitudes exceeding 2500 m above sea level (masl), with millions more exposed transiently through mountain trekking, military operations, aviation physiology, and occupational activities. At altitudes above 2500 m, the partial pressure of inspired oxygen (PiO2) falls progressively — reaching approximately 74 mmHg at 4000 m compared to 149 mmHg at sea level — creating a state of hypobaric hypoxia that challenges cellular oxygen homeostasis. The respiratory system constitutes the primary interface between the organism and hypoxic environment. Acute exposure to high altitude initiates an immediate ventilatory response mediated by peripheral chemoreceptors, particularly the carotid bodies, which detect declining arterial PO2. Over days to weeks, this acute response evolves into a sustained acclimatization process involving neurochemical, hematological, vascular, and metabolic adaptations. Failure to adequately acclimatize results in altitude-related illnesses: acute mountain sickness (AMS) affects 25–85% of individuals ascending rapidly to altitudes above 2500 m; high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE) and high-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) represent life-threatening complications. Central Asia — including Uzbekistan's Tian Shan and Pamir

mountain regions reaching 4000–7495 m — presents significant physiological challenges for military personnel, high-altitude workers, and mountaineers. Understanding the precise sequence and magnitude of respiratory adaptations to hypoxia is therefore of direct clinical and occupational relevance. This systematic review consolidates current evidence on the respiratory physiological changes occurring across the acclimatization timeline, from acute ventilatory responses through long-term hematological and structural adaptations.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This systematic review was performed in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Searches were conducted across PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, and EMBASE using the following MeSH and free-text terms: 'high altitude AND respiratory adaptation', 'hypoxic ventilatory response', 'altitude acclimatization AND lung function', 'carotid body AND hypoxia', 'erythropoietin AND altitude', 'HIF-1alpha AND respiratory physiology', and 'hypobaric hypoxia AND pulmonary vasculature'. Inclusion criteria: peer-reviewed studies published between January 2012 and December 2024; human participants or validated animal models; altitude exposures at or above 2500 masl or equivalent normobaric hypoxia ($FiO2 \leq 0.15$); studies reporting quantitative respiratory parameters (ventilation, spirometry, blood gas analysis, or chemoreceptor sensitivity). Exclusion criteria: studies restricted to pathological conditions without healthy control comparison; non-English publications; conference abstracts; studies with sample sizes fewer than 10 participants. Ten studies meeting all inclusion criteria were selected for final synthesis. Methodological quality was assessed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies and the Cochrane Risk of Bias Tool 2.0 for experimental and crossover designs.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Acute Ventilatory Response to Hypoxia. Within minutes of hypoxic exposure, peripheral chemoreceptors — primarily the carotid bodies — detect the fall in arterial PO2 and increase afferent firing to the respiratory centers in the brainstem. This elicits the hypoxic ventilatory response (HVR): respiratory rate increased by a mean of 42% (from 14.2 to 20.1 breaths/min; $p<0.001$) and tidal volume by 28% across included studies. Total minute ventilation (VE) increased by 67% within the first 24 hours at 4000 m ($p<0.001$). The resultant hyperventilation reduces arterial PCO2 by a mean of 8.3 mmHg (respiratory alkalosis, pH 7.47±0.03), which paradoxically constrains further ventilatory increase by reducing the central chemoreceptor CO2 drive — a phenomenon termed hypoxic ventilatory depression (HVD). Carotid body glomus cell sensitization, mediated by hypoxia-inducible factor 1-alpha (HIF-1α) and reactive oxygen species (ROS), was identified as the primary molecular mechanism of acute HVR amplification.

3.2 Ventilatory Acclimatization (Days to Weeks). Over 3–7 days of high-altitude residence, ventilatory acclimatization progresses through bicarbonate-mediated compensation of respiratory alkalosis. Renal excretion of bicarbonate ($HCO3^-$) restores cerebrospinal fluid pH toward normal, removing the CO2-mediated brake on central chemoreceptors and enabling sustained ventilatory augmentation. Forced vital capacity (FVC) remained essentially preserved during acclimatization, while forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1) showed a modest but significant increase (+6.3%, $p=0.04$), likely reflecting reduced airway resistance in the lower-density hypoxic atmosphere. Diffusing capacity of the lung for carbon monoxide (DLCO) increased by 14% after 2 weeks at altitude

(p=0.002), attributable to pulmonary capillary recruitment and erythrocytosis-mediated expansion of the oxygen-carrying capacity of pulmonary blood.

3.3 Hematological Adaptations and Erythropoietin. Hypoxia-inducible erythropoietin (EPO) secretion, primarily from renal peritubular cells, represents the hallmark hematological adaptation to altitude. Within 24–48 hours of hypoxic exposure, plasma EPO levels rise by a mean of 270% ($p<0.001$), stimulating erythroid progenitor proliferation and differentiation in bone marrow. Reticulocyte count increased by 58% within 5 days ($p<0.001$), with hemoglobin concentration increasing from a sea-level mean of 14.8 g/dL to 17.3 g/dL after 4 weeks at 4200 m (+16.9%; $p<0.001$). Hematocrit correspondingly rose from 44.1% to 51.8%. The oxygen-hemoglobin dissociation curve demonstrated a rightward shift (increased P50) mediated by elevated 2,3-diphosphoglycerate (2,3-DPG; +31%), enhancing peripheral oxygen unloading to metabolically active tissues despite reduced alveolar PO2.

3.4 Pulmonary Vascular and Structural Adaptations. Hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction (HPV) — an intrinsic response of pulmonary vascular smooth muscle to alveolar hypoxia — serves to redirect blood flow away from poorly ventilated lung regions, optimizing ventilation-perfusion (V/Q) matching. However, global alveolar hypoxia at high altitude produces generalized HPV, elevating mean pulmonary arterial pressure (mPAP) by 37% (from 14.2 to 19.5 mmHg; $p<0.001$) within 48 hours. In susceptible individuals, this pulmonary hypertension predisposes to high-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE). Pulmonary arterial endothelial cells demonstrated upregulation of HIF-1α target genes — including vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) and endothelin-1 — promoting angiogenesis and structural vascular remodeling over weeks of

hypoxic exposure. Long-term high-altitude natives (Tibetan and Andean populations) showed blunted HPV responses and distinct genomic adaptations in the EPAS1 (HIF-2α) gene, conferring physiological advantage in chronic hypoxic environments.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this review delineate a coordinated, multi-phase respiratory adaptation to high-altitude hypoxia that unfolds across distinct temporal windows. The acute HVR — mediated by carotid body chemoreceptor activation — provides the initial physiological defense against hypoxemia but is constrained by hypocapnia-induced alkalosis. The subsequent ventilatory acclimatization phase, driven by renal bicarbonate compensation, enables sustained hyperventilation and represents a critical determinant of altitude tolerance. The hematological response — EPO-driven erythrocytosis with 2,3-DPG-mediated rightward oxyhemoglobin dissociation curve shift — augments oxygen delivery capacity and represents the most effective long-term adaptive strategy. These findings have direct clinical relevance beyond altitude physiology: the HIF-1α pathway activated in hypoxia is also a central driver of tumorigenesis, chronic kidney disease progression, and ischemic preconditioning. Pharmacological manipulation of the EPO-HIF axis is now applied therapeutically in anemia of chronic disease and is under investigation for ischemic cardioprotection. The pulmonary vascular adaptations documented — particularly HPV and VEGF-driven angiogenesis — share mechanistic overlap with pulmonary arterial hypertension pathophysiology, suggesting that altitude physiology research may yield novel therapeutic insights for this condition. Individual variability in HVR magnitude, largely determined by carotid body sensitivity and genetic

polymorphisms in HIF pathway genes, represents a key determinant of altitude sickness susceptibility and warrants further pharmacogenomic investigation.

5. CONCLUSION

High-altitude hypoxia triggers a sophisticated, temporally organized series of respiratory adaptations — spanning ventilatory, hematological, and pulmonary vascular domains — that collectively serve to maintain arterial oxygen delivery in the face of reduced ambient PO2. The carotid body-mediated HVR, bicarbonate-compensated ventilatory acclimatization, EPO-driven erythrocytosis, and HIF-1α-orchestrated cellular responses constitute an integrated physiological defense system. Failure or excess of these adaptive mechanisms underlies altitude-related illnesses, while their molecular pathways offer therapeutic targets for hypoxic diseases at sea level. Future research should prioritize personalized acclimatization protocols based on individual HVR phenotyping, genetic profiling of HIF pathway variants, and longitudinal studies of long-term respiratory health in high-altitude resident populations.

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