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Different physiological responses but similar thermal perceptions for males with various body fatness during cold air exposure

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Introduction

There is no consensus regarding the potential effect of body fatness on subjective responses to cold at rest [1,2]. Most studies have examined overall sensation and comfort with no attention to regional values or the influence of exercise on thermal perception. The present study aimed at exploring overall and regional perceptual responses of males, varying in body fat content (%BF) in association with their physiological responses, specifically regional skin temperatures (T\(_{sk}\)).

Methods

Twenty healthy and semi-nude males sat for 60 minutes on a stool with limited motion. The resting phase was followed by a 30-min exercising phase at 100W on a cycle ergometer. Both phases were performed in a 10°C, 50% RH climatic chamber. Three distinct categories of body fat percentage (%BF), but similar fitness level, were arbitrarily created (Low Fat (LF): 5-10%, Medium Fat (MF): 10-15% and High Fat (HF): 15+) with a total range varying from 7 to 40 %BF. Skinfold thickness was assessed at 24 locations. Regional T\(_{sk}\) and mean T\(_{sk}\) were measured by infrared thermography at different stages of the protocol [3] together with oxygen uptake (\(\bar{VO}_2\)) by the Douglas bag method. Rectal temperature (T\(_{re}\)), finger tip blood flow (Laser Doppler flowmetry) and heart rate were monitored throughout the whole protocol. Thermal sensation (TS) and comfort (TC) were evaluated for the whole-body (overall) and 11 different body regions (local).

Results and Discussion

Physiological responses differed between the three body fat groups. Mean T\(_{sk}\) was significantly colder for HF compared to MF, and in turn LF (Figure 1). Dynamics of T\(_{re}\) were different between the groups (p<0.05), especially with a drop of 0.4°C at rest for LF on one hand and the larger rise of T\(_{re}\) during exercise for HF on the other (Figure 1). Heat dissipation was favoured for LF with a higher risk of hypothermia in the case of prolonged exposure at rest and it was specifically more impeded for HF whilst metabolic heat production was increased. \(\bar{VO}_2\) did not differ between groups at all stages (p=0.55).

Regional T\(_{sk}\) was significantly different between the groups as observed by population-averaged body maps of absolute T\(_{sk}\). However, normalised maps revealed consistent patterns in the T\(_{sk}\) distribution. Between subjects, %BF and local skinfold thickness were negatively correlated with mean T\(_{sk}\) and regional T\(_{sk}\) (from r = -0.50 to r = -0.93, p<0.05) in line with LeBlanc [4]. Within subjects, local skinfold thickness did not however explain the variability of regional T\(_{sk}\) over the body.
Figure 1. Evolution of rectal temperature ($T_{re}$) and mean skin temperature (mean $T_{sk}$) at the different stages of the inactive (seated) and active (100W cycling) exposure in a 10°C environment for three groups of males with varying body fat percentage (LF: 5-10% MF: 10-15% HF: 15+). Overall body fat effect on mean $T_{sk}$ and interaction effect (time*body fat) on mean $T_{sk}$ and $T_{re}$ ($p<0.05$)

Overall perceptual responses were similar between body fat groups. There was no relationship between overall TS, TC and %BF. Dynamics of overall TS and TC tracked dynamics of mean $T_{sk}$ at rest but not during exercise. Overall perceptual votes always followed the worst local thermal votes during passive cooling, in agreement with others [5]. This was however not true at the end of exercise.

Local thermal votes (TS and TC) were similar between groups and there was also no correlation with local $T_{sk}$ between subjects. The only exception was found for the hand TS, perceived significantly warmer for HF compared to MF and LF ($p<0.05$) but only at the end of exercise. This could be associated with the early rise observed in cutaneous blood flow for HF followed by a rise in hand $T_{sk}$, significantly larger and sooner for HF during exercise. Extremities have been shown to be a specific region for heat loss in overweight individuals [6].

Conclusions
Despite different physiological responses (mean $T_{sk}$, local $T_{sk}$, $T_{re}$), participants with higher body fat had similar perceptual responses than their leaner counterparts.

Interestingly, there were clear consistencies between groups for $T_{sk}$ patterns and this may in part contribute to the similar thermal votes.

Skinfold thickness explained between subjects but not within subject differences in $T_{sk}$.

The study also confirms the contribution of body fatness in heat dissipation during passive body cooling (seated rest) and exercise-induced mild hyperthermia (cycle ergometry).