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Rethinking Shoulder Rehabilitation: The Role of Movement Coordination Beyond Muscle Strengthening

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Abstract

Background: The shoulder complex is the most mobile joint system in the human body, enabling a wide range of functional and athletic movements. However, this mobility is accompanied by limited inherent stability, making shoulder function highly dependent on coordinated muscular activity and neuromuscular control. Traditional rehabilitation strategies have primarily focused on strengthening the rotator cuff and scapular stabilizing muscles. Emerging evidence, however, suggests that restoring coordinated movement patterns and motor control may be equally important for effective shoulder rehabilitation.

Objective: This narrative review aims to examine current evidence regarding the role of movement coordination and motor control in shoulder rehabilitation and to highlight the importance of integrating coordinated movement strategies beyond isolated muscle strengthening.

Methods: A literature search was conducted using electronic databases including PubMed, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Frontiers, and SpringerLink. Studies published within the last two decades were considered, with greater emphasis placed on recent literature. Keywords used in the search included "shoulder rehabilitation," "motor control," "movement coordination," "scapular dyskinesis," "scapular stabilization," "rotator cuff rehabilitation," "kinetic chain," "neuromuscular control," and "shoulder biomechanics." Relevant articles were screened based on titles and abstracts, and additional studies were identified through manual review of reference lists.

Results: The reviewed literature highlights that shoulder rehabilitation is increasingly shifting toward movement-based approaches that emphasize motor control, scapular coordination, and kinetic chain integration. Altered motor control patterns, impaired scapular motion, and disrupted scapulohumeral rhythm are commonly observed in individuals with shoulder dysfunction. Rehabilitation strategies that combine strengthening with neuromuscular training, scapular stabilization, and kinetic chain exercises have demonstrated improved functional outcomes and pain reduction. Additionally, emerging technologies such as motion analysis and biofeedback systems are being explored to enhance movement retraining and motor learning during rehabilitation.

Conclusion: Effective shoulder rehabilitation requires more than isolated muscle strengthening. Integrating motor control training, scapular coordination exercises, neuromuscular rehabilitation, and kinetic chain involvement may lead to improved movement efficiency and better clinical outcomes. A comprehensive movement-oriented rehabilitation approach may therefore provide more sustainable recovery for individuals with shoulder disorders.

Introduction

The shoulder complex is one of the most mobile joints in the human body, allowing individuals to perform a wide range of activities, from basic daily tasks to complex athletic movements. This exceptional mobility, however, comes with relatively limited inherent stability, making the shoulder highly dependent on coordinated muscular activity and neuromuscular control for optimal function (1,2). Traditionally, rehabilitation strategies for shoulder disorders have largely focused on strengthening individual muscles, particularly the rotator cuff and the scapular stabilizers. Although muscle strength is important for maintaining joint stability, emerging evidence suggests that effective shoulder function relies more on coordinated movement patterns than on isolated muscle strength alone (3–6).

Recent research has increasingly emphasized the role of motor control and movement coordination in maintaining efficient shoulder mechanics. Individuals experiencing shoulder pain often demonstrate altered movement patterns, including impaired scapular motion and disturbances in the normal scapulohumeral rhythm (7,8). Such changes may modify joint loading, reduce movement efficiency, and contribute to the persistence of symptoms. Consequently, rehabilitation strategies that focus on retraining motor control and restoring coordinated movement patterns have shown promising outcomes in improving function and reducing pain in individuals with shoulder dysfunction (4–6).

Scapular coordination is particularly important in the context of shoulder rehabilitation. The scapula acts as a dynamic yet stable base for humeral movement and plays a critical role in maintaining appropriate joint alignment and muscle activation during arm elevation. Alterations in scapular positioning or movement, commonly described as scapular dyskinesis, have been associated with several shoulder pathologies, including rotator cuff–related shoulder pain and subacromial impingement syndrome (9–11). For this reason, restoring optimal scapular control and normal scapulohumeral coordination has become an important focus in contemporary rehabilitation programs (12,13).

In addition to local shoulder mechanics, modern rehabilitation perspectives highlight the importance of the kinetic chain. The shoulder does not function in isolation but rather as part of an integrated biomechanical system involving the trunk, pelvis, and lower extremities. Efficient transfer of forces through this kinetic chain supports coordinated and energy-efficient upper limb movement (14,15). When this coordinated system is disrupted, compensatory movement patterns may develop, potentially increasing mechanical stress on shoulder structures and contributing to injury or dysfunction (16).

Neuromuscular and proprioceptive training approaches have also gained increasing attention in recent years. Techniques such as proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation, sensorimotor training, and targeted scapular muscle rehabilitation aim to enhance joint position sense, improve movement awareness, and facilitate coordinated muscle activation (18–20). Additionally, advances in rehabilitation technology, including robotic-assisted rehabilitation and kinematic biofeedback systems, are being explored as tools to support motor learning and optimize movement retraining during shoulder rehabilitation (17,21).

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting movement coordination and neuromuscular control, many rehabilitation protocols still predominantly emphasize strengthening exercises. This highlights the need for a broader rehabilitation perspective that integrates motor control training, scapular coordination, kinetic chain involvement, and neuromuscular rehabilitation strategies. Therefore, the aim of this review is to examine the current evidence on movement coordination in shoulder rehabilitation and to highlight the importance of coordinated motor control strategies beyond traditional muscle strengthening approaches.

Literature Search Strategy

A literature search was conducted to identify relevant studies addressing movement coordination and rehabilitation of the shoulder. Electronic databases including PubMed, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Frontiers, and SpringerLink were searched to obtain peer-reviewed articles related to shoulder biomechanics, motor control, and rehabilitation strategies. Studies published within the last two decades were considered, with greater emphasis placed on recent literature to reflect current perspectives and advancements in shoulder rehabilitation.

The search strategy incorporated keywords such as "shoulder rehabilitation," "motor control," "movement coordination," "scapular dyskinesis," "scapular stabilization," "rotator cuff rehabilitation," "kinetic chain," "neuromuscular control," and "shoulder biomechanics." Various combinations of these terms were used to refine the search and identify studies focusing on coordinated movement patterns and neuromuscular aspects of shoulder function.

The retrieved articles were initially screened based on their titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to the scope of this review. Studies that addressed shoulder biomechanics, motor control, scapular coordination, rotator cuff–related rehabilitation, and neuromuscular training approaches were considered for inclusion. Additionally, the reference lists of selected articles were manually reviewed to identify further relevant publications that could contribute to a comprehensive understanding of movement coordination in shoulder rehabilitation.

Anatomy and Biomechanics of the Shoulder Complex

The shoulder complex represents one of the most mobile joint systems in the human body and comprises four articulations: the glenohumeral, acromioclavicular, sternoclavicular, and scapulothoracic joints. These structures function together to produce coordinated upper limb movement and allow the shoulder to achieve its remarkable range of motion (1). While this high degree of mobility enables a wide variety of functional and athletic activities, it also necessitates precise neuromuscular coordination to maintain joint stability and movement efficiency (1,2).

Among the components of the shoulder complex, the glenohumeral joint contributes the majority of the shoulder's range of motion, including flexion, extension, abduction, and rotational movements (2). Stability of the joint is maintained through the interaction of both static and dynamic stabilizing structures. Static stabilizers include the glenoid labrum, joint capsule, and surrounding ligaments, which provide passive restraint and structural support (2). Dynamic stability is primarily provided by the rotator cuff muscles and the scapular stabilizers, which help maintain the humeral head within the glenoid fossa during arm movement (3). Proper interaction between these passive and active stabilizing mechanisms is essential for maintaining normal shoulder biomechanics and preventing abnormal joint loading (3).

Shoulder Force Couples

The concept of force couples is fundamental to understanding normal shoulder mechanics. A force couple refers to the coordinated action of two or more muscles that produce rotational movement while simultaneously stabilizing a joint (3). In the glenohumeral joint, the rotator cuff muscles function as a force couple to compress the humeral head into the glenoid cavity during arm elevation (4). This coordinated muscle activity prevents excessive superior translation of the humeral head and helps maintain joint alignment throughout movement (4).

Similarly, a scapular force couple exists between the upper trapezius, lower trapezius, and serratus anterior

muscles. These muscles work together to facilitate upward rotation and posterior tilting of the scapula during arm elevation (5). Disruption in the balance of these muscle groups may alter scapular kinematics, impair movement efficiency, and contribute to shoulder dysfunction and pain (5,6).

Capsular Pattern and Range of Motion

Assessment of shoulder range of motion is an essential component of clinical evaluation in individuals with shoulder disorders (6). Capsular patterns describe predictable patterns of movement restriction that occur when the joint capsule becomes involved in pathological conditions (6).

In the shoulder joint, the typical capsular pattern is characterized by the greatest restriction in external rotation, followed by abduction and internal rotation (7). Recognizing this pattern can assist clinicians in differentiating capsular involvement from other causes of movement limitation, such as muscular weakness or neuromuscular dysfunction (7). However, restricted shoulder movement is not always attributable to capsular pathology. Altered motor control, scapular dyskinesis, and impaired neuromuscular coordination may also contribute to limitations in shoulder mobility (8,9).

Scapular Coordination and Dyskinesis

The scapula plays a fundamental role in shoulder function by providing a stable base for humeral movement during upper limb activities (5). Efficient shoulder motion relies on coordinated interaction between the scapula and humerus, commonly referred to as scapulohumeral rhythm (5).

Scapular dyskinesis refers to abnormal positioning or movement of the scapula during shoulder motion (6). Altered scapular movement patterns have been associated with several shoulder pathologies, including rotator cuff–related shoulder pain and subacromial impingement syndrome (6,9). Studies have demonstrated that individuals with shoulder dysfunction often exhibit altered activation patterns of the scapular stabilizing muscles (9). Consequently, restoring proper scapular control and coordination has become an important focus of contemporary shoulder rehabilitation programs (10).

Rotator Cuff–Related Rehabilitation

Rotator cuff–related shoulder pain is one of the most common musculoskeletal conditions affecting the shoulder complex (11). Exercise therapy is widely recognized as a primary intervention for the management of rotator cuff–related disorders (11). Rehabilitation programs frequently emphasize strengthening of the rotator cuff muscles along with improving the function of scapular stabilizers to enhance shoulder stability (12).

Recent evidence suggests that rehabilitation strategies combining strengthening exercises with motor control training may provide better clinical outcomes compared with strengthening alone (12). Targeted strengthening of scapular stabilizing muscles has also been shown to improve shoulder function and reduce symptoms in individuals with rotator cuff pathology (13).

Motor Control and Movement Coordination in Shoulder Rehabilitation

Motor control plays a critical role in coordinating muscle activity to produce efficient and controlled shoulder movement (1). Individuals with shoulder pain frequently demonstrate altered motor control patterns and delayed activation of stabilizing muscles (2). These alterations can disrupt scapulohumeral rhythm and increase mechanical stress on shoulder structures (3).

Rehabilitation programs that emphasize motor control retraining aim to restore appropriate timing and

coordination of muscle activation (1,4). Exercises designed to promote controlled movement patterns and neuromuscular coordination have been shown to improve functional outcomes in patients with shoulder disorders (4).

Kinetic Chain and Functional Movement in Shoulder Rehabilitation

The shoulder operates as part of a larger kinetic chain that includes the trunk and lower extremities (14). Efficient transfer of forces through this kinetic chain is essential for coordinated upper limb movement during functional activities (14). Disruption in any segment of the kinetic chain may increase mechanical stress on the shoulder and contribute to injury (15).

As a result, modern rehabilitation programs increasingly incorporate exercises that address trunk stability and whole-body movement patterns (15). Integrating kinetic chain training into shoulder rehabilitation may enhance movement efficiency and reduce the risk of recurrent shoulder dysfunction (16).

Neuromuscular and Proprioceptive Training Approaches

Neuromuscular and proprioceptive training have become important components of modern shoulder rehabilitation (17). These approaches aim to improve joint position sense, enhance movement awareness, and facilitate coordinated muscle activation (17). Techniques such as proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation and sensorimotor training have demonstrated benefits in improving functional shoulder stability (18).

Improving neuromuscular control may also help reduce abnormal joint loading and enhance movement efficiency during daily and functional activities (18,19).

Emerging Concepts in Movement-Based Shoulder Rehabilitation

Recent developments in shoulder rehabilitation emphasize movement-based approaches rather than focusing solely on isolated muscle strengthening (20). Contemporary rehabilitation models recognize that optimal shoulder function depends on the integration of neuromuscular control, proprioception, and coordinated movement patterns (20).

Emerging technologies such as motion analysis systems and kinematic biofeedback tools are increasingly being explored to support movement retraining during rehabilitation (21). These technologies allow clinicians to identify abnormal movement patterns and guide patients toward more efficient movement strategies (21). Adopting a comprehensive rehabilitation approach that addresses coordination, proprioception, and functional movement may ultimately improve long-term outcomes for individuals with shoulder disorders.

Discussion

The present review highlights an evolving perspective in shoulder rehabilitation, moving from a predominantly strength-focused approach toward a more comprehensive model emphasizing movement coordination and neuromuscular control. Although strengthening of the rotator cuff and scapular stabilizers has traditionally been regarded as the cornerstone of shoulder rehabilitation, emerging evidence suggests that restoring coordinated muscle activity and efficient movement patterns is equally critical for optimal shoulder function (1–4).

Motor control appears to be a key determinant of effective shoulder mechanics. Individuals with shoulder dysfunction frequently demonstrate altered muscle activation patterns, delayed recruitment of stabilizing

muscles, and impaired coordination between the scapula and humerus (1,4). These neuromuscular alterations can disrupt normal scapulohumeral rhythm, potentially increasing mechanical stress on surrounding tissues and contributing to persistent pain and functional limitations (21). Consequently, rehabilitation programs that emphasize motor control retraining may help restore appropriate timing and coordination of muscle activation, thereby promoting more efficient and controlled shoulder movement.

Scapular coordination is another important component highlighted in the literature. The scapula plays a crucial role in maintaining the mechanical alignment and stability of the glenohumeral joint during arm elevation and functional tasks (5,7). Abnormal scapular movement patterns, commonly described as scapular dyskinesis, have been associated with several shoulder conditions, including rotator cuff–related shoulder pain and subacromial impingement syndrome (6,9). Targeted rehabilitation strategies that aim to improve scapular control may therefore help restore normal movement patterns and reduce excessive mechanical stress on shoulder structures.

The literature also increasingly emphasizes the importance of viewing the shoulder as part of an integrated kinetic chain. Efficient upper limb movement relies on coordinated interaction between the shoulder, trunk, and lower extremities (14,15). Disruption in this coordination may lead to compensatory movement patterns, potentially increasing mechanical load on the shoulder joint and contributing to injury or dysfunction. Incorporating kinetic chain exercises into rehabilitation programs may enhance overall movement efficiency and improve functional shoulder performance.

In addition to these biomechanical considerations, neuromuscular and proprioceptive training approaches have gained significant attention in contemporary rehabilitation strategies. Techniques such as proprioceptive neuromuscular facilitation and sensorimotor training aim to improve joint position sense, enhance movement awareness, and facilitate coordinated muscle activation (18–20). These interventions may contribute to improved control of shoulder motion during functional activities and reduce the risk of recurrent dysfunction.

Technological advancements have also introduced new possibilities for movement-based rehabilitation. Motion analysis systems and biofeedback tools are increasingly being explored to assist clinicians in evaluating movement patterns and guiding patients toward improved motor control during rehabilitation. Such technologies may enhance the precision of rehabilitation programs by allowing clinicians to monitor and correct abnormal movement strategies.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that effective shoulder rehabilitation should not rely solely on isolated muscle strengthening. Instead, rehabilitation programs should integrate muscle strengthening with motor control training, scapular coordination exercises, and kinetic chain involvement. A comprehensive movement-oriented approach may therefore lead to more effective and sustainable rehabilitation outcomes for individuals with shoulder dysfunction.

Conclusion

Shoulder rehabilitation has traditionally emphasized strengthening of individual muscles, particularly the rotator cuff and scapular stabilizers. However, growing evidence indicates that optimal shoulder function depends not only on muscle strength but also on coordinated movement, neuromuscular control, and proper scapular mechanics. Disruptions in motor control, scapular coordination, and kinetic chain function can alter normal shoulder biomechanics and contribute to pain and functional impairment.

Modern rehabilitation strategies should therefore focus on improving movement quality, restoring neuromuscular coordination, and integrating functional movement patterns rather than relying solely on

isolated strengthening exercises. Adopting a comprehensive and movement-based rehabilitation approach may help clinicians better address the underlying biomechanical and neuromuscular factors associated with shoulder disorders. Ultimately, such strategies may contribute to improved functional outcomes and more sustainable recovery for individuals experiencing shoulder dysfunction.

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