Is Pickleball the Magic Potion for Sustainable Health Benefits in Heart Failure?

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Heart failure (HF), a chronic and progressive condition known to impact the physical, nutritional, psychosocial, and quality of life (QoL) aspects of affected individuals, is best managed by combining comprehensive cardiac rehabilitation (CR) with guideline-directed medical therapy.[1] While there is substantial evidence to prove that CR is beneficial in patients with HF with reduced ejection fraction, we are still grappling with the management challenges pertaining to HF with preserved ejection fraction (HFpEF) and the need for sustainable lifestyle solutions in HF patients.[2]

Pickleball, a paddle sport that originated in the USA in the 1960s, is gaining rapid momentum in India and other Asian countries.[3,4] Recent research has revealed that around two billion people in Asia know what pickleball is and close to 812 million have played the sport at least once. India is notably at the forefront of the ongoing boom, with a whopping 178 million playing the sport at least once a month.[5] The launch of the Indian Pickleball League is a testimony to the growing popularity of the sport in India.[6] Pickleball is easy to pick up and suitable for all ages and skill levels; in other words, its inclusivity, blended with the social interaction, easy accessibility, and wide-ranging health benefits have been the major contributing factors to the sport's growth.[7-12] Pickleball combines some elements of tennis, badminton, and table tennis but has its own rules and equipment and offers scope for both competition and exercise.

Pickleball, Cardiovascular Disease (CVD), and Heart Failure

For a continent at the epicenter of the global CVD crisis with earlier onset of coronary artery disease, higher incidence of atherosclerotic sudden cardiac death in youth, and a rising HF burden,[13] an ocean of opportunity and optimism opens up when a sport like pickleball takes center-stage. The key points to be highlighted are that pickleball is (a) replacing hours of sedentary activity with physically and cognitively engaging playtime; (b) providing a platform for real-world social interaction as opposed to social media and online gaming; (c) offering new-skill acquisition and skill-mastery components to boost self-esteem and reestablish one's identity, particularly as age advances; and (4) creating an intergenerational bonding tool that is enjoyable and safe. Uniquely poised to be a potent antidote to the cardiovascular and cardiometabolic risk factors like sedentary behavior, obesity, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, dyslipidemia, chronic psychological stress, depression, and poor sleep habits, it is only intuitive to visualize pickleball as the secret ingredient for a successful CR recipe and sustainable health benefits in HF patients [Figure 1]. In fact, the skyrocketing incidence of noncommunicable diseases compounded with the lack of uniform access to advanced medical care in our country are some reasons why a higher inclusion of behavioral interventions in the form of recreational sports is likely to help address the crisis.[14]

A CR program is the gateway to recovery, fitness, risk reduction, and HF reversal, where participants are monitored and supervised either in-center or virtually while exercising, are provided with real-time guidance on daily dietary choices, and supported with sleep, stress,

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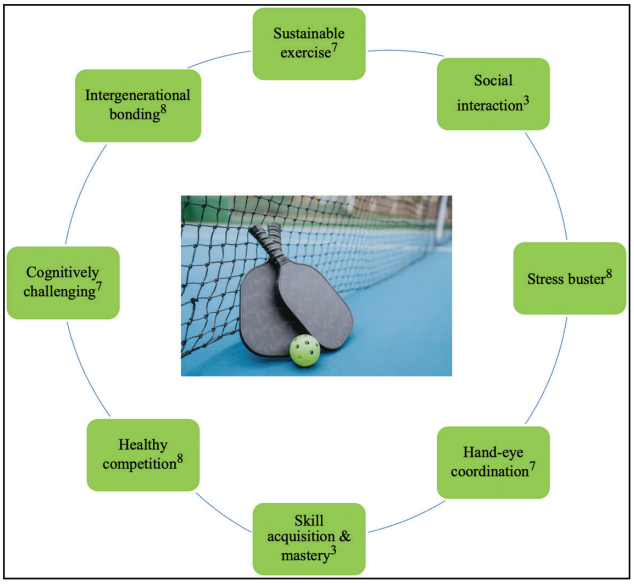


Figure 1: Physical, mental, and social benefits of pickleball

return to work, and sexual health–related concerns.[15,16] Based on prior fitness levels and the presence of comorbidities like musculoskeletal conditions, the rehab team works closely with participants to improve their endurance, strength, balance, and flexibility components. Hence, the intensive cardiac rehab phase could potentially be the training ground for safe entry into and a lifelong relationship with the sport.

Playing pickleball regularly is known to improve agility and lateral stability, mainly due to the player required to taking quick steps in multiple directions to return the opponent's ball.[17] An effective training strategy would, therefore, involve a comprehensive mobility and conditioning program tailored to the biomechanical and physiological demands of the sport. This would include a dynamic warm-up routine,targeted resistance training to enhance muscular strength, balance, power, and postural endurance, particularly of the core musculature, and finally an effective cool-down period.[18] Given that pickleball players get hooked on to the sport easily, it is compelling to believe that continued participation in the sport during the maintenance phase of CR and beyond will automatically ensure long-term adherence to healthy behaviors in HF patients.

Coronary Microvascular Dysfunction and Heart Failure with Preserved Ejection Fraction

Though sparse, there is evidence to show that structured CR programs are beneficial in reducing angina and improving functional capacity and QoL in individuals with angina with non-obstructive coronary arteries, ischemia with non-obstructive coronary arteries, and myocardial infarction with non-obstructive coronary arteries (ANOCA, INOCA, MINOCA).[19] Coronary microvascular dysfunction, coronary vasospasms, and abnormalities in blood flow regulation are often implicated in the etiopathogenesis of these conditions as well as HFpEF, all of which are more prevalent in women. And women are taking to pickleball like fish to water![20] Pickleball, among all the racket sports, may indeed be the magic potion that addresses HF in women, and in seniors, while keeping them socially connected, heart-smart, and health-savvy.[8,21,22]

Optimizing Benefits and Minimizing Risks

Pickleball renders itself as an ideal tool to promote "life's essential 8" and as an adjunct to the nonpharmacological armamentarium in individuals at risk for CVD and peripheral artery disease.[23] However, awareness about the impact of the sport on cardiorespiratory and other physiologies and the potential for complications like hypoglycemia, electrolyte imbalance, heart rate and blood pressure fluctuations, and musculoskeletal injuries is key to staying safe during sports activity. Research has shown that over 70% of singles and doubles playing time is in the moderate-to-vigorous heart rate zones and that the maximal oxygen uptake improves on average by ~1.0 metabolic equivalents following a 6-week pickleball intervention.[3,24] As the sport involves a combination of aerobic and anaerobic activities, an appropriate training regimen is recommended to optimize play. When it comes to managing HF effectively, addressing exercise intolerance through structured exercise training is at the core of CR, and engaging in a sport like pickleball could reap multiple benefits.[25] Also, with wearable health technology creating a significant impact on HF management and patient empowerment, it could help bridge the gap of monitoring patients during sports activity and thereby enhance their confidence level.[26] Educating HF patients on red flag signs, equipping courts with safety measures such as first aid kit and automated external defibrillators, training court personnel in basic life support, empowering physicians to cater to this growing population of patients, and conducting prospective research studies on the effectiveness of pickleball in managing HF should be priorities for the global cardiac rehab community.

In conclusion, pickleball is a fast-growing, low-impact, fun and safe sport with abundant scope to double up as a HF prevention and rehabilitation tool. With its unique ability to transcend age, gender, and experience barriers, pickleball can help promote holistic wellbeing, provided it is coupled with support and guidance from healthcare professionals who are knowledgeable about the sport.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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