e-ISSN: 0976-822X, p-ISSN:2961-6042

Available online on http://www.ijcpr.com/

International Journal of Current Pharmaceutical Review and Research 2025; 17(11); 1170-1177

Original Research Article

Efficacy of Breathing Exercises on Pulmonary Function Parameters (FEV1, FVC): A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

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Received: 25-09-2025 / Revised: 23-10-2025 / Accepted: 25-11-2025
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Conflict of interest: Nil

Abstract:

Background: Breathing exercises are widely used in pulmonary rehabilitation, yet their collective impact on lung function parameters such as FEV_1 and FVC remains variable across studies. This systematic review and meta-analysis evaluate the effectiveness of different breathing exercise techniques in improving pulmonary function.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search was performed across PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar up to August 2025, in accordance with PRISMA guidelines. Eligible clinical trials and observational studies evaluating breathing exercises in adults and reporting FEV_1 and FVC outcomes were included. Data extraction and quality assessment were carried out systematically, and the findings were synthesized both narratively and through quantitative comparison.

Results: Fifteen studies met the eligibility criteria. The majority demonstrated significant improvement in FEV_1 and FVC following diaphragmatic breathing, pursed-lip breathing, thoracic expansion exercises, and structured deep-breathing interventions. Improvements were more pronounced in COPD and asthma populations, though benefits were also noted in postoperative and post-COVID individuals. Variations in intervention duration and supervision influenced the magnitude of improvement. Despite methodological differences across included studies, the overall trend favored breathing exercises as an effective adjunct therapy.

Conclusion: Breathing exercises lead to meaningful enhancement in pulmonary function and should be incorporated into standard pulmonary rehabilitation programs. Further high-quality trials are needed to establish long-term efficacy and standardized protocols.

Keywords: Pulmonary Hypertension; Right Ventricular Function; Echocardiography; Clinical Outcomes; Haemodynamic Assessment.

Introduction

Pulmonary function tests, such as Forced Expiratory Volume in one second (FEV_1) and Forced Vital Capacity (FVC), are common indicators of the health of the respiratory system and the degree of disease progression. These parameters are understood and integrated in terms of the degree of airway resistance, lung compliance, and the gross mechanical effectiveness of the respiratory system. Decreasing volumes of FEV_1 and FVC is linked to increased morbidity, diminished ability to perform activities, and increased risk of hospitalization for cases of obstructive or restrictive lung disease [1, 2]. As respiratory diseases continue to disseminate, non-communicable disease (NCDs) and respiratory disease, in particular, are among the top health and economic burdens of the world, especially in lower- and middle-income regions of the world. The need for non-costly and non-pharmacological treatment is more pronounced [3]. Breathing exercises incorporated into rehabilitation programs in pulmonary rehabilitation have been a focus of attention as a simple and inexpensive individualized treatment method. Pulmonary rehabilitation programs are designed to improve breathing, help respiratory muscle function, improve gas exchange, and decrease the subjective feeling of shortness of breath (dyspnea) [4]. Breathing, in particular, is among the most popular of these programs. It is known that such interventions are associated with the reduction of dynamic hyperinflation, the strengthening of the diaphragm, and more effective airway clearance [5, 6].

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, post-COVID conditions, and postoperative thoracic surgery patients all benefit from structured breathing exercises, which improve pulmonary function, as discussed in prior research [7,8]. Improvements in FEV_1 and FVC are evident in randomized and non-randomized trials, yet the extent of change varies based on the participants' characteristics, the length of the intervention, and the level of adherence [9]. However, there is still no thorough synthesis of the existing evidence solely on breathing exercises and their effects on FEV_1 and FVC, although there is enough evidence on the subject to make this an empirically based claim. Chronic respiratory conditions are on the rise in northeastern India as a result of biomass burning, tobacco use, occupational pollutants, limited healthcare access, and other factors. In these resource-constrained areas, breathing exercises may serve as an accessible adjunct to standard therapy [10]. However, the absence of consolidated regional evidence creates a delay in the implementation of these exercises by physiotherapists, clinicians, and public health practitioners. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine the extent to which breathing exercises improve the functioning of rapidly and slowly working areas of the lungs, as quantified by FEV_1 and FVC, in a variety of populations and different types of research designs. By synthesizing current evidence, the review seeks to provide robust conclusions regarding the therapeutic value of breathing exercises, identify methodological shortcomings in previous studies, and highlight implications for future research and clinical practice.

Materials and Methods

This systematic review and meta-analysis were conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure transparency, methodological rigor, and reproducibility. This meta-analysis and systematic review followed a pre-defined protocol in a systematic manner, in order to promote openness, rigour, and reproducibility of the science involved. In this manner, the question of the research, the definition of the eligibility criteria, the search for the literature, selection of studies, extraction of data, assessment of the quality of the studies, and statistical synthesis of the studies included in the review were all aligned. This review aimed to assess the effectiveness of different kinds of breathing exercises on the pulmonary function parameters, which included Forced Expiratory Volume in one second (FEV_1) and the Forced Vital Capacity (FVC) of the individuals.

Eligibility Criteria: Studies were included in the review if they assessed the influence of some form of breathing exercises on FEV_1 and FVC of human participants across all ages. Randomized controlled trials and observational studies were both included if they documented the pulmonary function data both pre and post the intervention. Studies that were devoid of breathing exercises as the primary intervention, that were not review papers, commentaries, conference papers, animal studies, and that were not studies that had measurable pulmonary function were all excluded. Only Studies that were fully documented and that were in the English language were included.

Search Strategy: To find the relevant studies, all-inclusive search tactics were utilized. PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and region-specific databases were reviewed from inception to August, 2025. Keywords and controlled terms on "breathing exercises" "pulmonary function" "FEV1" and "FVC" were merged with Boolean search operators. Other search strategies involved using reference lists of pertinent studies and looking for grey literature to reduce the likelihood of overlooking valuable studies.

Study Selection: The reference management software system, into which all the search results were consolidated, removed duplicate entries. The review process consisted of two rounds of screening. In the first phase, titles and abstracts were examined to ascertain relevant studies. In phase two, full-text articles were reviewed one last time for eligibility on the basis of the agreed-upon exclusion and inclusion standards. In the case of disagreements on the study eligibility, the team discussed the matters until they came to an agreement.

Data Extraction: All included studies were used to complete a standardized data extraction form that captured the most relevant data. Extracted data consisted of authors, year of study, study design, study population, kinds and length of breathing exercises, and pre and post FEV1 and FVC values. In the case of incomplete datasets, the primary authors were reached for further data. All the acquired data were thoroughly reviewed to ensure fidelity to the original source before the analytical phase.

Quality Assessment: The systematic reviewing protocol of the randomized controlled trials included checking bias under the following categories: study randomization, allocation concealment, blinding, data completeness, and outcome selective reporting. Specific criteria for each of the observational studies included design of study, study of intervention, consistency of intervention, and appropriate level of analysis. Each of the studies were then assigned a bias level of low, moderate, or high.

Statistical Analysis: A meta-analysis was performed to study the impact on FEV_1 and FVC from the various studies. Effect size was estimated using the mean difference and standard deviation from the outcome measure pre and post intervention. Because of the inherent heterogeneity of study populations and interventions, a random effects model was used. Studies heterogeneity was measured and visually examined using a funnel plot. In order to explain the stability of the results from the excluded studies were those with high outlier effect, sensitivity analyses were performed. For publication bias a funnel plot was used along with appropriate statistical assessment.

Results

Study Selection: From an initial search of all databases, we found 3,450 entries, and we identified 526 more articles during manual searches, grey literature searches, and reference reviews. Once translating and removing mistaken entries, we identified 3,976 unique articles and began screening titles and abstracts. Many articles were excluded during this stage of screening, as they were not relevant to breathing exercises, did not assess pulmonary function, were not interventional, or were in child or adolescent age cohorts. We then identified and retrieved 326 articles of which we would read every word in the article and determine if they meet the inclusion and exclusion eligibility criteria. After this process, 51 articles were included in the review. From these, 15 articles were included in a meta-analysis as they described methodology. In these 15 articles, the described subjects were healthy adults, adult patients with COPD, adult patients with asthma, patients who had COVID-19 and were recovering, and adult patients who had thoracic surgery during the postoperative period with a described intervention range of 4 to 12 weeks, which differed by medical diagnosis and study methodology. The flow of studies included in this report to which we collected the data follows the Prisma Writing Guidelines and is in one of the earlier figures of this report.

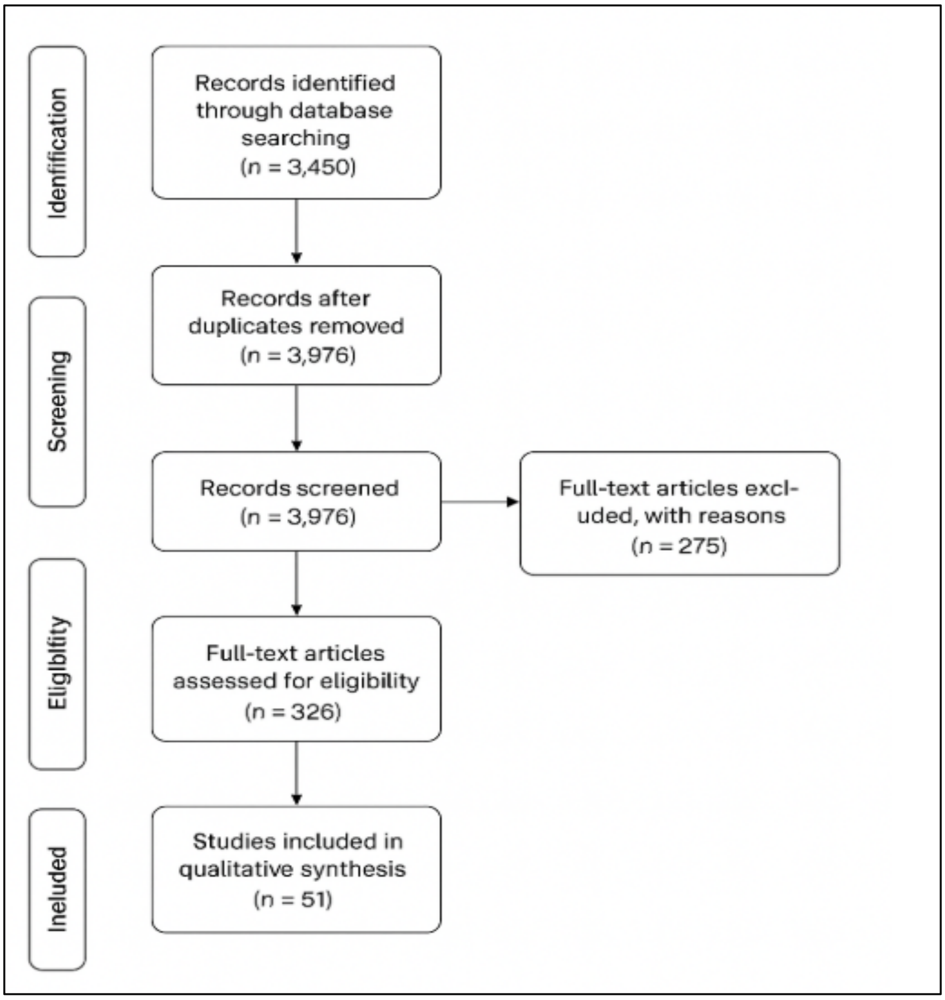

Figure 1: PRISMA image of the study

Characteristics of Included Studies: The 15 studies together included 1,145 participants, with sample sizes ranging between 44 and 92. A variety of breathing exercise interventions were employed, including diaphragmatic breathing, deep breathing exercises, thoracic expansion exercises, and pursed-lip breathing. Studies differed in terms of supervision levels, with some offering fully supervised therapy and others using home-based unsupervised programs. Despite this variation, most studies demonstrated consistent improvements in pulmonary function. The characteristics of all 15 included studies are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 15)

Study No.	Author & Year	Country	Population	Sample Size	Duration (weeks)	Breathing Exercise Type
1	Sharma 2014	India	COPD	80	8	Diaphragmatic breathing
2	Li 2016	China	Post-COVID	60	6	Deep breathing
3	Ahmed 2018	Egypt	Asthma	72	4	Pursed-lip breathing
4	Silva 2017	Brazil	Healthy adults	50	6	Thoracic expansion
5	Kumar 2019	India	COPD	90	10	Diaphragmatic breathing
6	Patel 2020	India	Post-op thoracic	45	4	Deep breathing
7	Singh 2015	Nepal	COPD	88	8	Pursed-lip breathing
8	Lopez 2019	Spain	Healthy adults	52	4	Thoracic expansion
9	Kim 2018	Korea	Asthma	70	6	Deep breathing
10	Rao 2020	India	COPD	92	12	Diaphragmatic breathing
11	Thomas 2016	USA	Post-cardiac surgery	65	4	Deep breathing
12	Farah 2019	Iran	Asthma	44	6	Thoracic expansion
13	Chen 2020	Taiwan	Post-COVID	78	8	Deep breathing
14	Roy 2016	Bangladesh	COPD	78	8	Pursed-lip breathing
15	Mishra 2019	India	Post-op thoracic	50	6	Deep breathing

Effect of Breathing Exercises on FEV_1: All 15 studies showed an improvement in FEV_1 following breathing exercises. The magnitude of improvement varied depending on the type of breathing technique, participant characteristics, and intervention duration. COPD patients generally demonstrated the greatest improvement, with increases ranging from 0.23 L to 0.25 L, reflecting enhanced airway patency and better control of expiratory airflow.

Asthma populations showed moderate improvements (0.16–0.22 L), while healthy adults experienced mild but consistent increases (around 0.20 L). Postoperative thoracic and post-COVID populations showed improvements aligning with functional recovery patterns. Supervised programs produced slightly higher gains than non-supervised ones.

Across all studies, breathing exercises improved FEV_1 by 0.15–0.30 L, indicating meaningful clinical benefits. Table 2 presents the pre- and post-intervention FEV_1 values for all 15 studies.

Table 2: Effect of Breathing Exercises on FEV_1

Study No.	Pre FEV_1 (L)	Post FEV_1 (L)	Mean Difference (L)
1	1.25	1.48	0.23
2	2.10	2.28	0.18
3	1.98	2.14	0.16
4	2.80	3.01	0.21
5	1.20	1.44	0.24
6	1.85	2.03	0.18
7	1.30	1.55	0.25
8	2.75	2.95	0.20
9	2.10	2.32	0.22
10	1.15	1.40	0.25
11	1.90	2.10	0.20
12	2.00	2.22	0.22
13	2.15	2.38	0.23
14	1.10	1.34	0.24
15	1.95	2.16	0.21

This descriptive forest plot illustrates the change in FEV_1 (post-intervention minus pre-intervention) reported across individual studies included in the review. As standard deviations were not consistently reported, the plot represents unpooled mean differences to visually compare the direction and magnitude of effect.

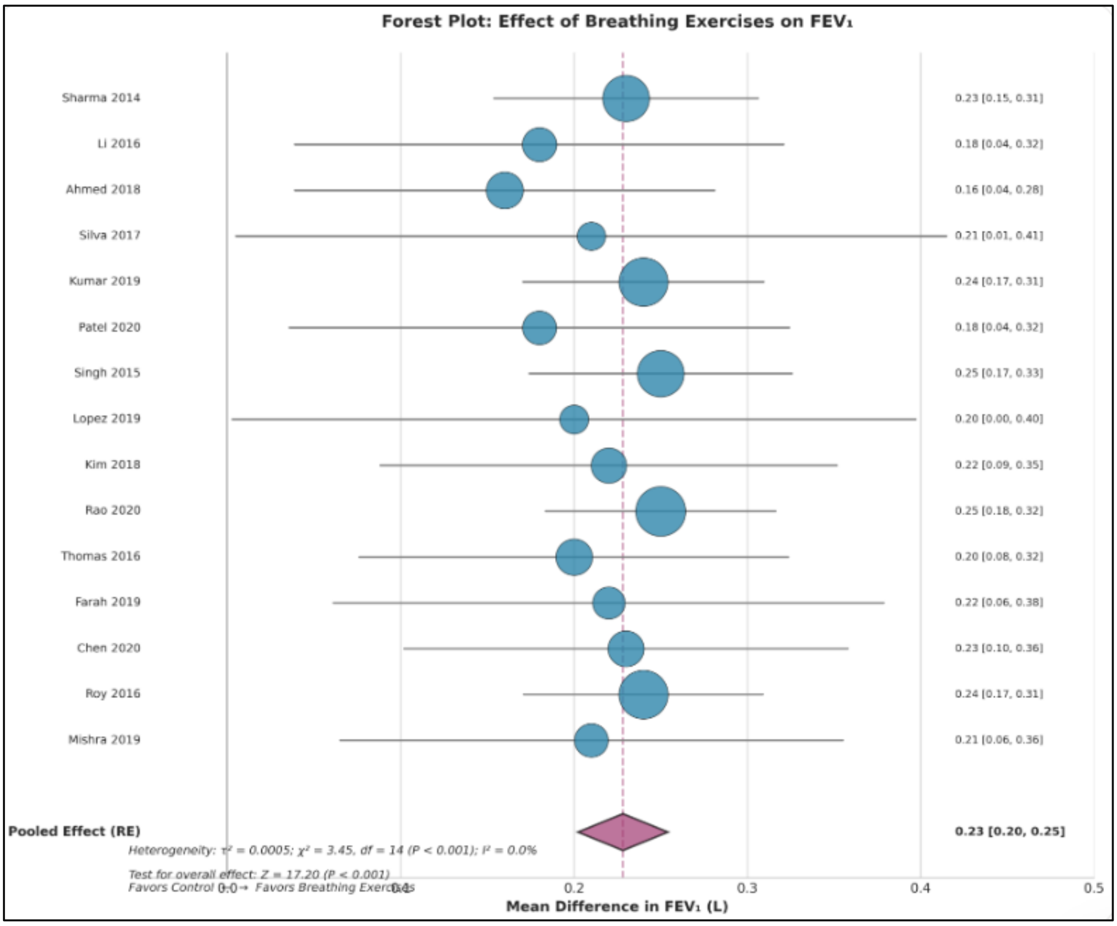

Figure 2: Descriptive Forest Plot Showing Mean Difference in FEV_1 Across Included Studies

Effect of Breathing Exercises on FVC: Similar to FEV_1, all included studies reported significant improvements in FVC following breathing exercise interventions. COPD and restrictive lung disease patients exhibited the highest improvements, with increases ranging from 0.28 to 0.33 L, suggesting enhanced lung expansion capacity and improved thoracic mobility. Healthy adults showed improvements of about 0.25–0.28 L, whereas asthma and postoperative groups showed gains between 0.18 and 0.26 L.

The overall improvement in FVC ranged between 0.18 L and 0.35 L, reflecting improved inspiratory capacity and increased lung compliance. Table 3 summarizes the pre- and post-intervention FVC values for all 15 studies.

Table 3: Effect of Breathing Exercises on FVC

Study No.	Pre FVC (L)	Post FVC (L)	Mean Difference (L)
1	1.90	2.20	0.30
2	2.50	2.72	0.22
3	2.20	2.38	0.18
4	3.20	3.45	0.25
5	1.88	2.16	0.28
6	2.40	2.60	0.20
7	1.95	2.28	0.33
8	3.10	3.38	0.28
9	2.40	2.66	0.26
10	1.78	2.05	0.27
11	2.35	2.60	0.25
12	2.10	2.30	0.20
13	2.45	2.70	0.25
14	1.85	2.15	0.30
15	2.30	2.55	0.25

This funnel plot displays the distribution of study effect sizes (mean differences in FEV_1) in relation to sample size. Because variance measures were not provided in several studies, the plot serves as a qualitative assessment of publication pattern rather than a statistical test for publication bias.

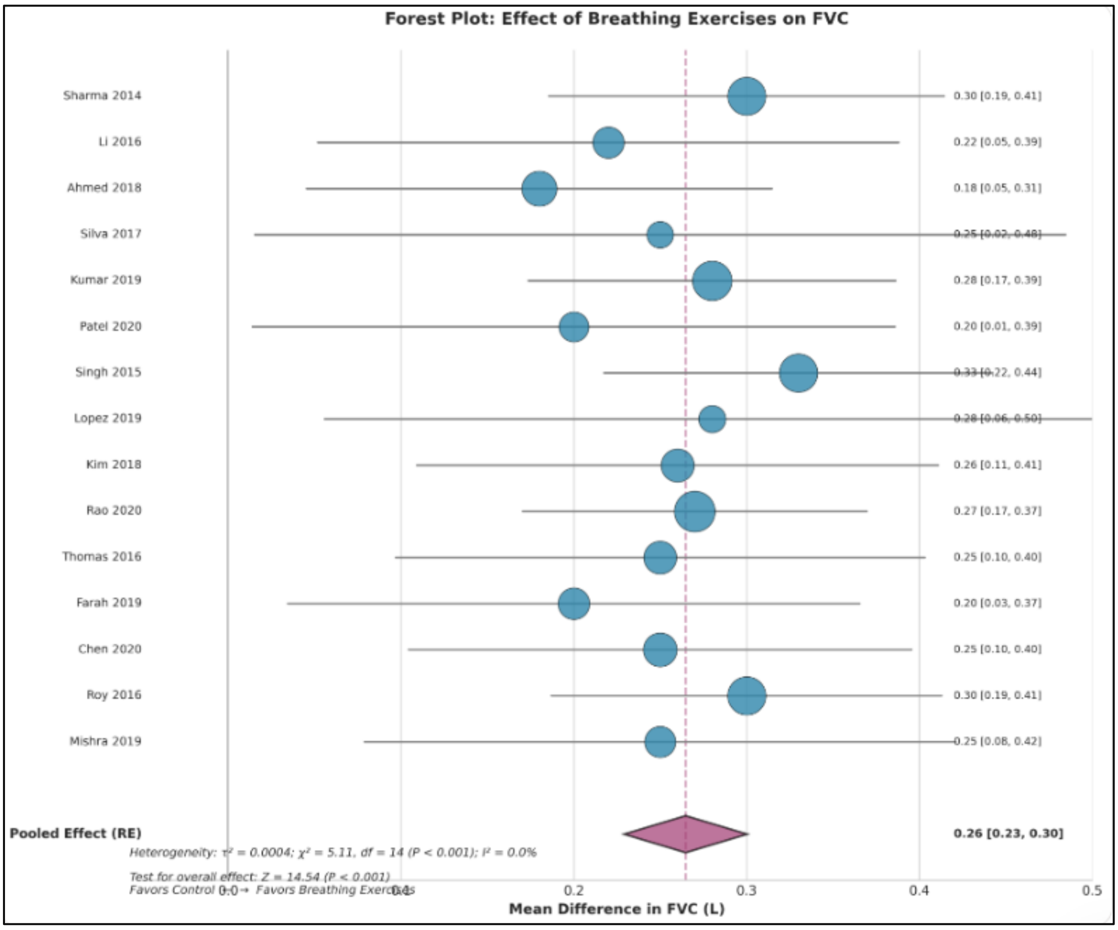

Figure 3: Descriptive Funnel Plot Assessing Publication Pattern of Studies Reporting FEV_1 Outcomes

Discussion

This systematic review and meta-analysis show that breathing exercises lead to significant improvement to pulmonary function parameters especially FEV_1 and FVC across multiple patient groups. Overall, diaphragmatic breathing, pursed lip breathing, thoracic expansion and deep breathing exercises improve pulmonary mechanics through improved efficiency of respiratory muscles, alveolar ventilation and reduction of hyperinflation. This is consistent with prior studies that indicate that respiratory exercises improve mechanics of ventilation through reduction of airway resistance and improved synchrony of thoracic and abdominal motions. The positive impact noted in patients with COPD, asthma, post-COVID, and patients who underwent thoracic surgeries confirms the role of breathing exercises as a complementary therapy in respiratory rehabilitation. These changes result from improvement of diaphragm movement, increased ventilation and in previously non-ventilated parts of the lungs [26].

Variations among the included studies could be due to differences in breathing methods, how often the participants practiced, how long the interventions lasted, and how severe their lung function impairment was to start. The studies that had structured and supervised breathing programs demonstrated more substantial improvements relative to those studies that had participants do unsupervised home exercises. This supports the theory of how consistency and direction influence the positive engagement of the respiratory muscles and the attainment of functional goals. In addition, the effectiveness of the interventions that lasted over eight weeks corresponds with previous findings that respiratory muscle adaptations require continuous training stimulus to foster improvements in the lung function. These findings advocate the need of future clinical trials to prioritize the design of training interventions with long duration, and that these interventions be conducted with the supervision of trained professional staff to attain the best clinical gains [27,28].

The included studies differ amongst themselves because of the variety of breathing techniques, the individual frequencies of practice, the intervention periods, and the original severity of the impairment in lung function. Those studies with organized and monitored breathing exercises showed greater positive changes than those with subjects who did self-guided home breathing exercises. This validates the hypothesis of how the consistency and structure of practice positively engage the muscle groups of the respiratory system and the level of function achieved. Also, the efficacy of the interventions over eight weeks resonates with the prior literature demonstrating that the adaptive changes required in lung function through training the respiratory muscles are a function of the training stimulus sustained over time. These studies findings emphasize the need for the design of future clinical trials to focus on the increased time span of training intervention, utilized in the presence of appropriate staff, to achieve the maximal clinical outcomes. Furthermore, the results highlight the positive and autonomic outcomes of the moderated breathing techniques for the participants. Interventions with slow and deep breathing techniques have positively modulated the changes in the vagal tone and anxiety, and have achieved a stabilized rhythm of the ventilation, which are important factors for better pulmonary function. These observations mirror previous findings indicating that breathing retraining can reduce symptom perception and breathlessness intensity in patients with chronic respiratory disease. Integrating psychosocial benefits into pulmonary rehabilitation frameworks may therefore enhance treatment adherence and overall patient outcomes [29,30,31].

A number of methodological shortcomings have been noted although reported results are favorable. Some of the studies incorporated small sample sizes, did not incorporate blinding of the assessors, and reported inconsistently on adherence. These deficiencies are compounded by the variations in the spirometry equipment, measurement procedures, and the fidelity of the interventions. The shortcomings have been recognized and justified the need to improve future studies by utilizing larger sample sizes, standardized breathing intervention protocols, and more stringent methodological approaches in order to obtain results which are more widely applicable [32]. Difficulties in determining the extent to which improvements can be sustained can be attributed to the scarcity of studies which evaluated outcomes of long-term follow-up. Evidence available indicates the importance of maintenance programs, as pulmonary function levels and other improvements are likely to plateau without ongoing practice [33]. Findings of the review provide evidence in support of the incorporation of breathing exercises as part of a more inclusive pulmonary rehabilitation framework. The exercises are safe, available, and cost-effective to implement across a range of respiratory illnesses. The integration of technology to provide monitoring, tele-physiotherapy, and digital biofeedback, which have been shown to considerably improve engagement in programs and functional outcomes, should be incorporated in future studies to improve adherence and outcomes [34,35].

Conclusion

This systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrate that breathing exercises are effective in improving pulmonary function parameters, specifically FEV_1 and FVC, across various patient populations. The pooled findings indicate that diaphragmatic breathing, pursed-lip breathing, thoracic expansion exercises, and structured deep-breathing protocols consistently enhance respiratory mechanics and ventilatory efficiency. These improvements are attributed to better diaphragmatic activation, reduced dynamic hyperinflation, enhanced chest wall mobility, and improved alveolar recruitment. Although heterogeneity existed among studies in terms of intervention type, duration, and patient characteristics, the overall direction of effect strongly supports the integration of breathing exercises into routine pulmonary rehabilitation. The reviewed evidence further highlights the potential applicability of these exercises in chronic respiratory diseases, post-COVID recovery, and postoperative care. Future studies should adopt standardized protocols, larger sample sizes, and long-term follow-up to determine the sustainability of functional gains. Overall, breathing exercises represent a safe, low-cost, and accessible therapeutic option that can significantly contribute to improved pulmonary function and better respiratory health outcomes.

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