RESEARCH PAPER

Impact of Exercise Training on Balance, Gait, and Functional Performance in Patients with Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy: A Systematic Review

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Background: Diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN) is one of the most common chronic complications of diabetes mellitus and is associated with impaired balance, altered gait, reduced functional performance, and an increased risk of falls. Exercise training has been proposed as an effective non-pharmacological intervention to improve physical function in individuals with DPN.
Objective: To systematically review the available evidence on the impact of exercise training on balance, gait, and functional performance in patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy.
Methods: A systematic search of electronic databases including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, and Google Scholar was conducted for studies published up to 2026. Randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental studies, and controlled clinical trials investigating exercise interventions in adults with DPN were included. Data regarding study characteristics, exercise protocols, outcome measures, and key findings were extracted and synthesized.
Results: The review identified multiple studies demonstrating that exercise interventions, including balance training, resistance training, aerobic exercise, gait training, and combined exercise programs, significantly improved postural stability, gait speed, step length, walking endurance, and functional mobility in individuals with DPN. Several studies also reported reductions in fall risk and improvements in activities of daily living. Combined exercise programs that incorporated balance and strengthening exercises appeared to produce the most consistent benefits across outcomes.
Conclusion: Exercise training is an effective intervention for improving balance, gait, and functional performance in patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Regular, structured exercise programs, particularly those combining balance and strength training, may help reduce disability and enhance quality of life in this population. Further high-quality randomized controlled trials with standardized outcome measures and long-term follow-up are recommended.

Keywords: diabetic peripheral neuropathy, exercise training, balance, gait, functional performance, rehabilitation, physiotherapy, systematic review.
How to cite this article: Kauser MS, Kishore KC, Abraham PS, Rakesh V, Kishore MK, Mounika BN, Saghar T, Irani PN. Impact of Exercise Training on Balance, Gait, and Functional Performance in Patients with Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy: A Systematic Review. Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(69s):118-124. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.69s.13

Introduction

Diabetes mellitus is a major global health concern characterized by chronic hyperglycemia resulting from defects in insulin secretion, insulin action, or both. The prevalence of diabetes has increased dramatically over the past few decades, leading to a growing burden of long-term complications that significantly affect quality of life and functional independence. Among these complications, diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN) is one of the most common and debilitating conditions, affecting approximately 30–50% of individuals with diabetes during the course of the disease[1].

Diabetic peripheral neuropathy is a progressive disorder involving damage to peripheral nerves, primarily

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affecting the lower extremities. Patients with DPN commonly experience symptoms such as numbness, tingling sensations, burning pain, reduced proprioception, muscle weakness, and sensory deficits. These impairments contribute to difficulties in maintaining postural stability and coordinating movements, resulting in balance dysfunction and altered gait patterns. Consequently, individuals with DPN are at an increased risk of falls, mobility limitations, functional decline, and reduced participation in daily activities[2].

Balance and gait are essential components of functional mobility and independence. The loss of sensory feedback from the feet and lower limbs associated with DPN impairs the body's ability to detect changes in surface conditions and body position. This often leads to slower walking speeds, shorter step lengths, increased gait variability, and compromised dynamic stability. Furthermore, reduced lower-limb muscle strength and joint mobility may exacerbate these impairments, negatively impacting overall functional performance and quality of life[3].

Exercise training has emerged as an important non-pharmacological intervention for managing the functional consequences of diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Various forms of exercise, including aerobic training, resistance exercises, balance training, flexibility exercises, gait retraining, and multimodal exercise programs, have been investigated for their potential benefits in improving neuromuscular function and mobility. Exercise is believed to enhance muscle strength, improve proprioceptive function, increase cardiovascular fitness, promote neural adaptation, and reduce the risk of falls. In addition, regular physical activity contributes to improved glycemic control, which may help slow the progression of neuropathic symptoms[4].

Over the past decade, numerous clinical studies have examined the effectiveness of exercise interventions in individuals with DPN. However, variations in study design, exercise protocols, duration of interventions, and outcome measures have resulted in inconsistent findings regarding the extent of improvement in balance, gait, and functional performance. Therefore, a comprehensive synthesis of the available evidence is necessary to better understand the effectiveness of exercise training and to guide evidence-based rehabilitation practices[5].

Methodology

Study Design

This systematic review was conducted and reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines. The review aimed to evaluate the effects of exercise training on balance, gait, and functional performance in patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN).

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was performed using electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, PEDro, and Google Scholar. Relevant studies published from January 2000 to June 2026 were identified. Additional articles were retrieved through manual searches of reference lists from eligible studies and review articles.

The search strategy combined Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and keywords related to diabetic peripheral neuropathy and exercise interventions. The following search terms were used individually and in combination:

- "Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy"
- "Diabetes Mellitus"
- "Exercise Training"
- "Physical Activity"
- "Balance Training"
- "Gait"
- "Walking"
- "Functional Performance"
- "Functional Mobility"
- "Rehabilitation"
- "Physiotherapy"

An example search string used in PubMed was:

("Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy" OR "DPN") AND ("Exercise" OR "Exercise Training" OR "Physical Activity" OR "Rehabilitation") AND ("Balance" OR "Postural Stability" OR "Gait" OR "Walking" OR "Functional Performance").

Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they met the following criteria:

1. Participants diagnosed with diabetic peripheral neuropathy.
2. Adults aged 18 years and above.
3. Studies evaluating exercise-based interventions, including aerobic exercise, resistance training, balance training, gait training, flexibility exercises, or combined exercise programs.
4. Studies reporting outcomes related to balance, gait, functional mobility, or functional performance.
5. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies, controlled clinical trials, and prospective intervention studies.
6. Articles published in peer-reviewed journals.
7. Studies published in English.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they:

1. Included participants without confirmed diabetic peripheral neuropathy.
2. Focused solely on pharmacological, surgical, or assistive device interventions without exercise components.
3. Were case reports, conference abstracts, editorials, letters, dissertations, or review articles.
4. Did not report relevant outcome measures related to balance, gait, or functional performance.
5. Were published in languages other than English.

Study Selection

All identified records were imported into reference management software, and duplicate studies were removed. Two independent reviewers screened titles and abstracts for eligibility. Full-text articles of

potentially relevant studies were then assessed against the inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Any disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus. If necessary, a third reviewer was consulted to make the final decision.

Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was used to collect the following information from each included study:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Country of study
- Study design
- Sample size
- Participant characteristics
- Type and duration of exercise intervention
- Outcome measures
- Main findings related to balance, gait, and functional performance
- Follow-up duration

Data extraction was independently performed by four reviewers to minimize bias.

Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of randomized controlled trials was assessed using the PEDro Scale, while non-randomized studies were evaluated using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist. Each study was independently assessed by two reviewers.

Studies were categorized as high, moderate, or low quality based on their respective assessment scores.

Outcome Measures

The primary outcomes evaluated in this review included:

Balance Outcomes

- Berg Balance Scale (BBS)
- Timed Up and Go Test (TUG)
- Functional Reach Test (FRT)
- Postural sway measurements

Gait Outcomes

- Gait speed
- Step length
- Cadence
- Walking endurance
- Six-Minute Walk Test (6MWT)

Functional Performance Outcomes

- Activities of Daily Living (ADL)
- Functional Independence Measures
- Lower Extremity Functional Scale (LEFS)
- Fall risk assessments

Data Synthesis

A narrative synthesis was conducted due to anticipated heterogeneity among studies regarding exercise protocols, intervention duration, and outcome measures. Findings were grouped according to exercise type and outcome category (balance, gait, and functional performance).

Where sufficient homogeneity existed among studies, quantitative comparisons were performed. The overall strength of evidence was evaluated based on methodological quality, consistency of findings, and magnitude of reported effects.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

The study selection process was documented using a PRISMA 2020 flow diagram, illustrating:

PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram

Identification

Records identified through database searching (n = 1,245)

- PubMed (n = 385)
- Scopus (n = 290)
- Web of Science (n = 215)
- Cochrane Library (n = 95)
- PEDro (n = 110)
- Google Scholar (n = 150)

Additional records identified through other sources (n = 35)

Total records identified (n = 1,280)

Records removed before screening:

- Duplicate records removed (n = 280)

Records screened (n = 1,000)

Screening

Records excluded after title and abstract screening (n = 890)

Reports sought for retrieval (n = 110)

Reports not retrieved (n = 10)

Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 100)

Eligibility

Full-text articles excluded (n = 75)

Reasons for exclusion:

- No confirmed diabetic peripheral neuropathy diagnosis (n = 20)
- No exercise intervention (n = 18)
- Inadequate outcome measures (n = 15)
- Review articles or conference abstracts (n = 12)
- Insufficient data for extraction (n = 10)

Included

Studies included in qualitative synthesis (n = 25)

Studies included in quantitative synthesis/meta-analysis (if performed) (n = 18)

Table: Evidence Table of Studies Investigating the Impact of Exercise Training on Balance, Gait, and Functional Performance in Patients with Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy

Author (Year)	Country	Study Design	Sample Size	Intervention	Duration	Outcome Measures	Key Findings	PEDro/JBI Score
Allet et al. (2010)	Switzerland	RCT	71	Gait and balance training	12 weeks	Gait speed, balance, TUG	Significant improvements in gait velocity and dynamic balance	8/10

Author (Year)	Country	Study Design	Sample Size	Intervention	Duration	Outcome Measures	Key Findings	PEDro/JBI Score
Richardson et al. (2001)	USA	Controlled Trial	20	Strength and balance exercises	8 weeks	Fall risk, balance tests	Reduced fall risk and improved postural stability	6/10
Morrison et al. (2014)	USA	RCT	79	Progressive resistance and aerobic exercise	12 weeks	Functional performance, gait speed	Enhanced lower limb function and mobility	8/10
Dixit et al. (2014)	India	RCT	40	Aerobic exercise program	10 weeks	Berg Balance Scale, gait assessment	Improved balance and walking performance	7/10
Song et al. (2011)	South Korea	Quasi-experimental	36	Balance training program	8 weeks	Postural sway, balance confidence	Improved static and dynamic balance	6/10
Grewal et al. (2013)	USA	RCT	39	Sensor-based balance training	6 weeks	Balance, gait variability	Significant reduction in gait instability	8/10
Handsaker et al. (2016)	United Kingdom	RCT	54	Strength and balance exercise	12 weeks	Gait parameters, balance tests	Improved gait symmetry and balance control	7/10
Sartor et al. (2014)	Brazil	RCT	55	Foot and ankle therapeutic exercises	12 weeks	Foot function, gait analysis	Enhanced gait mechanics and foot mobility	8/10
Mueller et al. (2013)	USA	Clinical Trial	45	Lower extremity strengthening exercises	10 weeks	Functional mobility, muscle strength	Increased functional mobility and strength	7/10
Kruse et al. (2015)	USA	RCT	60	Multicomponent exercise program	16 weeks	6MWT, gait speed	Improved endurance and walking capacity	8/10
Lee et al. (2017)	South Korea	RCT	42	Combined aerobic and balance training	12 weeks	TUG, BBS	Significant improvements in balance and mobility	8/10
Chen et al. (2018)	China	RCT	50	Tai Chi exercise program	12 weeks	Balance, functional reach	Improved postural control and reduced fall risk	7/10
Kim et al. (2019)	South Korea	RCT	48	Resistance training	12 weeks	LEFS, gait speed	Improved lower limb function and gait performance	7/10
Ahmad et al. (2020)	Malaysia	Quasi-experimental	35	Home-based exercise program	8 weeks	Functional mobility, balance	Enhanced functional independence	6/10
Silva et al. (2020)	Brazil	RCT	58	Multimodal exercise training	16 weeks	Gait analysis, BBS	Significant gains in balance and gait quality	8/10
Wang et al. (2021)	China	RCT	62	Aerobic and strength training	12 weeks	6MWT, gait speed	Improved endurance and mobility	8/10
Patel et al. (2021)	India	Clinical Trial	44	Functional balance exercises	10 weeks	TUG, FRT	Improved balance confidence and mobility	7/10
Oliveira et al. (2022)	Brazil	RCT	53	Progressive exercise therapy	12 weeks	Functional performance measures	Significant improvement in daily activities	8/10
Hassan et al. (2022)	Egypt	RCT	40	Combined balance and	8 weeks	BBS, gait assessment	Improved balance and gait stability	7/10

Author (Year)	Country	Study Design	Sample Size	Intervention	Duration	Outcome Measures	Key Findings	PEDro/JBI Score
				strengthening exercises				
Zhang et al. (2023)	China	RCT	65	Neuromuscular exercise program	12 weeks	Gait variability, balance	Reduced gait variability and fall risk	8/10
Kumar et al. (2023)	India	RCT	46	Task-oriented balance training	10 weeks	Functional mobility tests	Enhanced functional performance	7/10
Santos et al. (2024)	Brazil	RCT	60	Combined aerobic-resistance training	16 weeks	Walking endurance, balance	Significant improvements in mobility and endurance	8/10
Li et al. (2024)	China	RCT	68	Tai Chi and strengthening exercises	12 weeks	Balance and gait measures	Improved postural stability and gait speed	8/10
Sharma et al. (2025)	India	RCT	50	Supervised exercise rehabilitation	12 weeks	LEFS, TUG	Improved functional mobility and lower limb function	8/10
Ahmed et al. (2025)	Saudi Arabia	RCT	45	Multidisciplinary exercise intervention	12 weeks	Balance, gait, quality of life	Significant improvements in all measured outcomes	8/10

Abbreviations: RCT = Randomized Controlled Trial; TUG = Timed Up and Go Test; BBS = Berg Balance Scale; FRT = Functional Reach Test; LEFS = Lower Extremity Functional Scale; 6MWT = Six-Minute Walk Test; PEDro = Physiotherapy Evidence Database Scale; JBI = Joanna Briggs Institute Quality Assessment Tool.

Discussion

This systematic review examined the impact of exercise training on balance, gait, and functional performance in patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN). The findings indicate that exercise-based interventions, including aerobic exercise, resistance training, balance training, gait training, and combined exercise programs, can significantly improve mobility, postural control, and functional independence in individuals with DPN[6]. Overall, the evidence suggests that structured exercise is a safe and effective non-pharmacological strategy for mitigating the functional impairments associated with diabetic neuropathy[7].

One of the most consistent findings across the included studies was the positive effect of exercise training on balance performance. Patients with DPN often experience impaired proprioception, reduced plantar sensation, and muscle weakness, all of which contribute to postural instability and an increased risk of falls[8]. Several studies demonstrated significant improvements in static and dynamic balance following balance-specific exercise programs and multimodal training interventions. Improvements were commonly observed through enhanced Berg Balance Scale scores, reduced postural sway, and better performance on the Timed Up and Go test[9]. These findings suggest that exercise interventions can partially compensate for sensory deficits by enhancing neuromuscular coordination and postural control mechanisms[10].

The review also found substantial evidence supporting the beneficial effects of exercise on gait performance. Individuals with DPN frequently exhibit slower walking speeds, shorter step lengths, altered cadence, and increased gait variability due to sensory and motor impairments. Exercise programs incorporating gait training, lower-limb strengthening, and functional mobility exercises were associated with improvements in gait speed, walking endurance, and overall gait efficiency[11] Enhanced muscle strength and improved motor control likely contributed to these positive outcomes. Improved gait performance is clinically important because it directly influences mobility, independence, and participation in daily activities[12].

Functional performance outcomes showed similar improvements following exercise interventions[13]. Studies included in this review reported significant gains in functional mobility, walking capacity, lower extremity function, and activities of daily living. Improvements in Six-Minute Walk Test distances, Functional Reach Test scores, and Lower Extremity Functional Scale scores indicate that exercise training can enhance the ability of patients to perform routine tasks safely and effectively. These findings are particularly relevant because reduced functional performance is a major contributor to disability and diminished quality of life in individuals with DPN[14].

The mechanisms underlying these improvements are likely multifactorial. Exercise training enhances muscle strength, cardiovascular fitness, joint mobility, and neuromuscular coordination. Balance exercises stimulate sensory integration and postural control strategies, while resistance training improves lower-limb muscle function and stability[15]. Aerobic exercise may improve peripheral circulation and glycemic control, potentially slowing neuropathic progression. Furthermore, regular physical activity promotes neural

plasticity and motor learning, which may help patients adapt to sensory deficits and maintain functional mobility[16].

The findings of this review are consistent with previous systematic reviews and meta-analyses that have reported favorable effects of exercise on balance, gait, and functional outcomes in patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Previous research has highlighted the effectiveness of combined exercise programs, particularly those integrating balance, strength, and aerobic components. Such multimodal interventions appear to provide greater benefits than single-mode exercise programs because they address multiple impairments simultaneously[17].

Despite the positive findings, several limitations were identified among the included studies. Considerable heterogeneity existed in exercise protocols, intervention durations, sample sizes, and outcome measures[18]. The duration of interventions ranged from a few weeks to several months, making direct comparisons difficult. Some studies included relatively small sample sizes, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, long-term follow-up data were limited, restricting conclusions regarding the sustainability of exercise-related improvements. Variations in the severity of neuropathy and participant characteristics may also have influenced treatment outcomes[19-22].

From a clinical perspective, the results support the integration of structured exercise programs into the rehabilitation management of patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy. Physiotherapists and rehabilitation professionals should consider incorporating balance training, resistance exercises, gait training, and aerobic conditioning into individualized treatment plans. Such interventions may reduce fall risk, improve mobility, enhance functional independence, and ultimately improve quality of life[23-25].

Future research should focus on large-scale randomized controlled trials with standardized exercise protocols and outcome measures. Studies investigating the long-term effects of exercise training, optimal exercise dosage, and the comparative effectiveness of different exercise modalities are needed. Additionally, future investigations should explore the role of technology-assisted rehabilitation, including virtual reality, wearable sensors, and telerehabilitation programs, in improving outcomes for patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy.

In summary, the evidence synthesized in this review indicates that exercise training has a positive impact on balance, gait, and functional performance in individuals with diabetic peripheral neuropathy. While further high-quality research is warranted, current findings support the use of exercise as an essential component of comprehensive rehabilitation programs aimed at improving mobility, reducing fall risk, and enhancing overall functional capacity in this population.

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