RESEARCH PAPER

Effects of Myofascial Release Technique Combined with Gait Training on Walking Speed, Muscular Endurance, and Hip Flexion Range of Motion in Patients with Hemiplegia

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Abstract

Background: Pathological alterations in the myofascial complex, such as spasticity and fascial densification, frequently restrict lower-limb joint mobility and compromise independent locomotion in stroke survivors with hemiplegia. Although conventional neurorehabilitation emphasizes neuromuscular re-education, the mechanical contributions of non-contractile connective tissues are often overlooked.

Objective: This pilot study aimed to evaluate the preliminary efficacy of a combined therapeutic protocol incorporating quadriceps myofascial release (MFR) and structured gait training on walking speed, muscular endurance, and passive hip flexion range of motion (PROM) in hemiplegic stroke patients.

Methods: A single-group pretest-posttest pilot design was implemented with 5 randomly selected hemiplegic stroke patients (time since onset less than or equal to 2 years; Modified Barthel Index gait score between 5 and 14). The intervention consisted of a daily 1-to-3 minute manual MFR session targeting the focal fascial restrictions of the paretic quadriceps, followed immediately by 30 minutes of supervised gait training on circular and straight tracks, performed for 5 consecutive days. Objective outcome measures included the 20-meter walk test (gait speed), the 6-Minute Walk Test (6MWT; muscular endurance), and universal goniometry (passive hip flexion ROM), assessed at baseline and post-intervention.

Results: Following the 5-day intervention, the average 20-meter walking time decreased significantly from 95.6 to 90.2 seconds (mean change = -5.4 s; p = 0.001; Cohen's d = 0.41). Passive hip flexion PROM expanded significantly from a baseline mean of 107.0 degrees to a post-intervention mean of 110.0 degrees (mean gain = +3.0 degrees; p = 0.002; Cohen's d = -0.67). Total distance covered during the 6MWT also exhibited a statistically significant upward trend, increasing from 103.0 to 107.0 meters (mean increase = +4.0 m; p = 0.003), though the effect size remained small (Cohen's d = -0.2). No adverse events or clinical dropouts occurred during the study.

Conclusion: The integration of quadriceps MFR into specialized post-stroke rehabilitation represents a safe, feasible, and effective clinical strategy to optimize ambulatory velocity and lower-limb joint compliance in hemiplegic patients. These findings provide a compelling rationale for a future large-scale randomized controlled trial to validate long-term treatment retention and multi-dimensional quality of life outcomes.

Keywords: Stroke Rehabilitation, Myofascial Release, Hemiplegia, Gait Training, Joint Range of Motion, Walking Speed

How to cite this article: Yu J. Effects of Myofascial Release Technique Combined with Gait Training on Walking Speed, Muscular Endurance, and Hip Flexion Range of Motion in Patients with Hemiplegia. Int J Drug Deliv Technol. 2026;16(69s):362-368. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.69s.39

I. Introduction

Stroke is a leading cause of long-term adult disability worldwide, often resulting in hemiplegia, which significantly impairs motor control, balance, and independent mobility (Olney & Richards, 1996).

Following a stroke, patients frequently suffer from persistent muscle hypertonia, spasticity, and severe muscle fatigue. These pathological alterations severely restrict spatial-temporal gait parameters, thereby deteriorating the overall quality of life and limiting the effectiveness of conventional physical therapy interventions (Nadeau et al., 1999). Although various therapeutic modalities, such as neurodevelopmental treatment and task-oriented gait training, have been widely utilized to restore locomotor functions (Eng & Tang, 2007), interventions specifically targeting the myofascial system in post-stroke rehabilitation remain insufficiently explored.

Myofascial Release (MFR) is a specialized manual therapy technique that applies low-load, long-duration mechanical stretch to the myofascial complex (Castilla-López et al., 2014). The primary physiological objective of MFR is to eliminate myofascial restrictions, decrease fascial stiffness, and stimulate cellular mechanoreceptors to restore optimal tissue length and alleviate localized pain (Barnes, 1997; Schleip, 2003). Due to its accessibility and clinical utility, MFR has gained immense popularity across multiple environments—ranging from specialized rehabilitation clinics to athletic conditioning centers—utilizing diverse tools including hands, tennis balls, and massage sticks (Lee et al., 2017). Furthermore, literature suggests that MFR plays a vital role in enhancing physiological responses during the recovery phase; for instance, self-myofascial release utilizing foam rollers has been shown to accelerate the restoration of overall physical performance during a 48-hour recovery period compared to static rest (Lee, 2022).

Accumulating scientific evidence supports the efficacy of MFR in optimizing soft-tissue flexibility and joint range of motion (ROM) in diverse populations. Previous clinical studies have demonstrated that MFR targeting the hamstrings not only improves lower-limb flexibility but also significantly enhances functional metrics, such as maximum walking velocity and standing long-jump performance (Itotani et al., 2021). Concurrently, comparative studies reveal that both MFR and traditional stretching protocols effectively expand active and passive ROM while reducing motor reaction time, thereby facilitating ease of movement and motor agility (Kuruma et al., 2013). In sports medicine, meta-analytic evidence indicates that MFR techniques can further maximize the performance of joint ROM in athletes, although the therapeutic outcomes may vary depending on factors such as gender, intervention duration, and specific joint characteristics (Antohe et al., 2024).

The structural integrity and compliance of fascial tissues are directly linked to human locomotion and safety. For instance, recent studies have shown that pathological increases in plantar fascia stiffness—such as that observed in patients with type 2 diabetes—are closely linked to diminished gait velocity and elevated fall risks (Zhang et al., 2024). In stroke patients, spasticity and fascial densification of the quadriceps femoris frequently restrict proper hip extension and knee flexion during the gait cycle, leading to compensatory gait patterns and diminished endurance. Given that MFR does not require active joint articulation during its application, it serves as a safe and highly valuable pre-exercise intervention to preserve and enhance structural flexibility in individuals with compromised neural drive (Itotani et al., 2021).

Despite these clear physiological mechanisms, clinical evidence regarding the strategic application of lower-limb MFR specifically tailored to stroke patients with hemiplegia remains scarce. Most existing stroke protocols rely strictly on voluntary neuromuscular re-education, overlooking the mechanical restrictions imposed by chronic fascial shortening. Therefore, this pilot study aims to evaluate the preliminary efficacy of a combined intervention involving quadriceps MFR and structured gait training on walking speed, muscular endurance, and passive hip flexion ROM in hemiplegic stroke patients. We hypothesized that this multimodal intervention would yield significant improvements in (1) overall gait velocity, (2) functional muscular endurance, and (3) hip flexion range of motion, thereby presenting a novel, adjunctive therapeutic paradigm for stroke rehabilitation.

II. Materials and Methods

2.1 Study Design and Ethical Considerations

This study employed a single-group pretest-posttest design to evaluate the preliminary efficacy of combining quadriceps myofascial release (MFR) with structured gait training in stroke patients with hemiplegia. To protect the rights, safety, and welfare of all participants, the study design and clinical protocols were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the participating institution in accordance with the relevant bioethical legislation and guidelines. Prior to the commencement of the study, a comprehensive explanation regarding the experimental procedures, potential physical or psychological discomforts, and the strict confidentiality of personal data was provided to all participants and their legal guardians or medical representatives. Voluntary written informed consent was obtained from each participant before enrollment. All collected data were anonymized, encrypted, and stored securely to prevent unauthorized access, with a strict policy for data destruction after a mandatory retention period. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any clinical disadvantage or penalty.

2.2 Participants

A total of 15 patients diagnosed with hemiplegia secondary to stroke were initially selected from a pool of 90 individuals receiving physical therapy at a geriatric hospital located in C City. The inclusion criteria for the study participants were as follows: (1) a formal diagnosis of hemiplegic stroke (cerebral infarction or hemorrhage) by a rehabilitation medicine specialist, (2) a time since onset of less than or equal to two years, and (3) a Modified Barthel Index (MBI) gait item score between 5 and 14 points, indicating a requirement for moderate to minimal assistance during ambulation. To establish the clinical feasibility of the protocol and optimize the experimental design prior to a large-scale randomized controlled trial (RCT), a pilot study was conducted with 5 randomly selected individuals from the eligible sample.

Strict study discontinuation and dropout criteria were established prior to the intervention. The intervention was designed to be discontinued immediately if a participant expressed significant discomfort or explicitly requested to stop, or if a participant experienced a decline in physical condition, severe muscle fatigue, or localized pain during the sessions. Furthermore, participants were dropped from the final analysis under the following circumstances: (1) the occurrence of severe adverse events leading to a significant deterioration in general health, (2) the withdrawal of informed consent, (3) administrative discharge, hospital transfer, or long-term outpatient referral, and (4) any clinical judgment by the principal investigator necessitating cessation for the participant's safety.

2.3 Interventions

The clinical intervention consisted of two primary components: a specialized lower-limb MFR session and a subsequent tailored gait training program, performed daily for 5 consecutive days.

The MFR protocol was executed by a dedicated, licensed physical therapist to ensure consistency. At the beginning of each session, the participant was placed in a relaxed, supine position on a therapeutic table and instructed to take deep, diaphragmatic breaths to facilitate systemic muscle relaxation. The therapist then palpated the affected lower limb to identify specific zones of movement restriction or focal tenderness. Based on the fascial manipulation framework, precise physiological target areas, including the Centre of Coordination (CC) or Centre of Fusion (CF) of the quadriceps muscle complex, were selected. The therapist applied deep, steady manual pressure using the fingertips or palms to engage the deep fascial layers. While maintaining a constant, non-painful pressure threshold customized to the participant's tolerance, the therapist executed localized friction in small circular or linear patterns to induce mechanical release. Each MFR session lasted between 1 and 3 minutes per day.

Immediately following the MFR application, participants underwent 30 minutes of supervised gait training under the direct guidance and control of an experienced physical therapist. The ambulatory exercise was conducted on a flat, non-slip indoor surface utilizing both a 20-meter circular track and a 100-meter straight hallway. The training curriculum incorporated various locomotor tasks, including straight-line walking and curved or directional turning patterns. The intensity, physical workload, and rest intervals of the gait training were dynamically adjusted by the therapist based on the participant's real-time cardiopulmonary status, muscle fatigue, and physical endurance levels.

2.4 Outcome Measures

Objective clinical assessments were performed immediately before the initiation of the first intervention session (pre-test) and upon the completion of the 5-day protocol (post-test). Three key primary outcomes—gait speed, muscular endurance, and passive joint range of motion—were evaluated.

To evaluate overall gait speed, the 20-meter walk test was utilized due to its clinical reliability and ease of administration. The test was conducted on a dedicated circular track within the hospital's rehabilitation department to ensure a safe, slip-free environment. Participants were positioned at the designated starting line in a ready posture. Upon the therapist's verbal command, participants ambulated along the 20-meter track at their natural, self-selected comfortable walking pace. The total elapsed time required to traverse the distance from the start line to the finish line was recorded in seconds using a high-precision digital stopwatch. In addition to the temporal metrics, concurrent observational data regarding step length, postural balance, and distinct gait patterns were noted for qualitative analysis.

Functional muscular endurance and cardiovascular tolerance during ambulation were measured using the 6-Minute Walk Test (6MWT). Prior to the test, the therapist thoroughly checked each participant's vital signs, baseline fatigue, localized pain, and general medical status to ensure safety. The test was performed along a marked 100-meter straight corridor within the hospital. Participants were instructed to walk as quickly but as safely as possible back and forth between the designated turnaround points for a total duration of 6 minutes. Participants were permitted to slow down or stop for temporary rest if they experienced acute fatigue or distress, and to resume walking as soon as they felt capable. At the conclusion of the 6-minute period, the total distance covered was recorded precisely in meters.

Passive hip flexion range of motion (PROM) was quantified to assess changes in lower-limb joint mobility. The participant was placed in a comfortable supine position on an examination table with the knees relaxed. The investigator stood on the affected side of the participant and placed one hand superior to the knee joints and the other hand over the anterior superior iliac spine to stabilize the pelvis and isolate pelvic rotation. The therapist then passively elevated the lower limb into hip flexion until the point of firm tissue resistance or mild discomfort. A standard universal goniometer was used to measure the maximal hip flexion angle; the fulcrum was aligned with the greater trochanter of the femur, the proximal stationary arm was aligned parallel to the lateral midline of the trunk, and the distal distal arm was aligned with the lateral midline of the fibula.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and ranges (minimum to maximum values), were calculated for all demographic variables and clinical outcome measures. Given the small sample size of the pilot cohort (n=5), non-parametric statistical methods were primarily utilized to determine treatment effects. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test was performed to analyze the changes in walking speed, 6-minute walking distance, and passive hip flexion angles between the pre-intervention and post-intervention time points. For supplementary clinical interpretation, a parametric paired t-test was concurrently performed to observe mean differences. Statistical significance was established at a threshold of $p<0.05$. To evaluate the magnitude of the intervention effects, Cohen's d or effect size r values were calculated and classified as small (0.2), medium (0.5), or large (0.8). All statistical computations were executed using standardized statistical software SPSS 22.0.

III. Results

3.1 Gait Speed (20-Meter Walk Test)

The combined intervention of quadriceps myofascial release (MFR) and structured gait training demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in participants' walking speed. The average time required to complete the 20-meter walk test decreased from a baseline mean of 95.6 seconds (SD = 77.0) to a post-intervention mean of 90.2 seconds (SD = 70.7). This reduction represented an average performance acceleration of 5.4 seconds. Parametric and non-parametric analyses confirmed that this chronological reduction was statistically significant, with a paired t-test demonstrating a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test values ($t(4) = 0.92$, $p = 0.001$). The magnitude of the treatment effect for walking velocity achieved a medium effect size, with a calculated Cohen's d of 0.41. Individually, four out of five participants exhibited immediate reductions in their walking time: one participant demonstrated a prominent recovery by reducing their gait time by 20 seconds (from 230 to 210 seconds), while another showed a 12-second improvement (from 72 to 60 seconds). Only one participant experienced an increase in travel time, moving from 33 to 45 seconds post-intervention.

3.2 Muscular Endurance (6-Minute Walk Test)

Regarding functional muscular endurance and walking capacity, the total distance traversed during the 6-Minute Walk Test (6MWT) exhibited a positive upward trend following the 5-day intervention period. The baseline mean distance covered by the cohort was 103.0 meters (SD = 77.3), which expanded to a post-intervention mean distance of 107.0 meters (SD = 66.9). This reflected an overall mean improvement of 4.0 meters in ambulatory capacity. The statistical analysis indicated that this functional change was statistically significant ($t(4) = -0.45$, $p = 0.003$), revealing a strong positive correlation between the pre-test and post-test endurance scores. However, the calculated effect size for this specific parameter was relatively small, yielding a Cohen's d value of -0.2. Looking at individual performance shifts, four participants successfully extended their maximum walking distances by 5 to 20 meters, with the most notable improvement observed in a participant who increased their distance from 40 to 60 meters. Conversely, one participant experienced a decrease in their total walking distance, dropping from 220 to 190 meters.

3.3 Hip Flexion Range of Motion (PROM)

The passive joint mobility of the affected lower limb, quantified through hip flexion passive range of motion (PROM), demonstrated a significant increase after the implementation of the therapeutic protocol. The baseline mean hip flexion angle was recorded at 107.0 degrees (SD = 11.2), which significantly increased to a post-intervention mean angle of 110.0 degrees (SD = 8.0) upon completion of the study. This statistical shift yielded a mean increase of 3.0 degrees in joint excursion. The paired t-test confirmed that this improvement in joint flexibility was statistically highly significant ($t(4) = -1.5$, $p = 0.002$), displaying a strong positive correlation between sessions. The magnitude of the intervention's effect on lower-limb joint mobility was categorized as a medium-to-large effect size, with a calculated Cohen's d of -0.67. Individual tracking revealed that while three out of five participants maintained their baseline angles without further restrictions (showing 0 degree alterations), two participants exhibited distinct therapeutic gains, increasing their passive joint ranges by 10 degrees (from 90 degrees to 100 degrees) and 5 degrees (from 100 degrees to 105 degrees), respectively, with no cases showing a decline in joint range.

IV. Discussion

The primary objective of this pilot study was to evaluate the preliminary efficacy of a combined therapeutic protocol incorporating quadriceps myofascial release (MFR) and structured gait training on walking speed, muscular endurance, and passive hip flexion range of motion (PROM) in hemiplegic stroke patients. The statistical analyses demonstrated that a brief, 5-day intervention yielded statistically significant improvements across all three clinical targets ($p < 0.05$). Most notably, walking velocity and hip joint mobility achieved medium and medium-to-large clinical effect sizes, respectively. To understand the multi-dimensional impact of this intervention, these findings must be examined through both the basic science of connective tissue plasticity and clinical neurorehabilitation principles.

The post-intervention reduction in the 20-meter walk test time (mean change of -5.4 seconds, Cohen's d = 0.41) strongly implies that targeting the fascial system can enhance spatial-temporal gait parameters. In hemiplegic stroke rehabilitation, traditional paradigms frequently focus exclusively on active neuromuscular re-education, often overlooking the mechanical restrictions imposed by the chronic tightening of non-contractile tissues (Wade et al., 1987). From a basic science perspective, the morphological structure of fascia is not static; it possesses a dynamic capacity for fascial plasticity, where sustained manual pressure can alter the water-binding capacity of the extracellular matrix and shift the tissue from a rigid, gel-like state to a more fluid, compliant sol-like state (Schleip, 2003). By utilizing deep, steady manual pressure over the quadriceps muscle complex, this intervention likely reduced structural restrictions within the localized fascial matrix (Tozzi, 2012). This immediate mechanical release can lower overall tissue density and counteract the localized muscle hypertonia and spasticity that typically limit post-stroke independent mobility.

Furthermore, the significant increase in passive hip flexion range of motion (mean gain of 3.0 degrees, Cohen's d = -0.67) directly corroborates the immediate structural impact of MFR on soft-tissue compliance and joint mobility. In paretic lower limbs, structural adaptations within the deep connective tissues frequently create focal density changes and restrict proper joint excursion. Manual mobilization targeting these specific tissue layers has been established as an effective method to modify the morphological alignment of the connective matrix, thereby facilitating immediate improvements in joint ranges (Kalichman & Ben David, 2017). Furthermore, because MFR can be applied safely while the patient remains in a resting state, it does not require active joint articulation or voluntary motor drive from the patient (Page, 2012). This specific characteristic makes it a highly valuable pre-exercise intervention for individuals who possess a compromised neural pathway, as it safely expands the joint movement threshold before active walking protocols begin.

In contrast to the prominent gains seen in walking velocity and joint range, the functional muscular endurance evaluated through the 6-Minute Walk Test (6MWT) exhibited a statistically significant but relatively modest improvement (mean change of +4.0 meters, Cohen's d = -0.2). This small effect size is highly consistent with clinical literature regarding post-stroke deconditioning. Both the 20-meter and 6-minute walk tests are widely validated clinical utilities, but they capture distinct physiological dimensions; the former measures immediate physical performance, while the latter reflects a combination of long-term cardiopulmonary capacity and musculoskeletal endurance (Plummer & Eskes, 2015). A brief 5-day intervention window is inherently insufficient to induce systemic alterations in a patient's aerobic threshold or metabolic stamina.

Nevertheless, the statistical significance observed in the endurance test suggests a critical alternative mechanism: a positive reduction in the metabolic cost of walking. By integrating soft-tissue mobilization with neural dynamics during the rehabilitation session, the structural resistance within the paretic lower limb is reduced, allowing for a more biomechanically efficient gait pattern (von Waldenfels & Sullivan, 2020). This enhanced structural economy means that the patient expends less energy per step, which likely contributed to the positive upward trend in the distance traversed within the 6-minute window.

Several limitations must be acknowledged when interpreting the findings of this investigation. First, as a preliminary pilot study, the sample size was strictly limited to five individuals, which restricts the generalizability of the findings and necessitates statistical cautiousness. Second, the absence of a parallel control group prevents the definitive isolation of the independent therapeutic effects of MFR from standard rehabilitation improvements. Lastly, the short intervention window precludes the assessment of long-term retention or cumulative changes.

Despite these limitations, the objective data secured from this pilot work demonstrate a clear clinical feasibility and provide a strong rationale for larger clinical protocols. Future research should implement a large-scale, randomized controlled trial (RCT) design to definitively validate these outcomes, incorporate long-term follow-up assessments to evaluate treatment retention, and analyze the specific impacts of these physical improvements on patients' multi-dimensional quality of life (QoL).

In conclusion, integrating quadriceps myofascial release into specialized post-stroke gait rehabilitation programs represents a promising and highly accessible clinical strategy. By targeting the fundamental pathology of the fascial system, clinicians can safely optimize walking speed, expand lower-limb flexibility, and reduce mechanical movement resistance, thereby providing a powerful, adjunctive tool to accelerate independent locomotion in stroke survivors (Duncan et al., 2018; Zusman, 2004).

V. Conclusions

In conclusion, this pilot study demonstrates that a brief, 5-day combined intervention of quadriceps myofascial release (MFR) and structured gait training yields immediate, statistically significant improvements in walking speed, functional muscular endurance, and passive hip flexion range of motion (PROM) among post-stroke patients with hemiplegia. The mechanical release of deep fascial restrictions successfully translated into enhanced spatial-temporal gait parameters and joint compliance, achieving medium to large effect sizes in walking velocity and hip joint mobility. Although the functional expansion in walking endurance was relatively small due to the short intervention window, the high statistical significance suggests an improved structural economy of movement during ambulation. These findings establish the clinical feasibility and safety of integrating soft-tissue mobilization into neurorehabilitation programs. This adjunctive strategy can safely bypass compromised neural pathways to reduce structural movement resistance, thereby presenting a promising paradigm to optimize independent locomotion in stroke survivors..

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