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The Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis: A Theoretical Framework for the Therapeutic Role of Seawater Immersion in Multiple Sclerosis Symptom Modulation

Abdullah Faisal Albukhari
Faculty of Medicine, Rabigh, King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia
Email: *Aabdulqaderalbukhari@stu.kau.edu.sa*
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1482-4411

Abstract

Background:
Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a long-term autoimmune condition marked by the loss of myelin, neuroinflammation, and progressive neurological decline. Despite improvements in medical treatments, numerous patients still face challenges such as fatigue, spasticity, and restricted mobility. There is a growing interest in complementary rehabilitation approaches aimed at enhancing symptom management and elevating quality of life.

Objective:
This paper introduces the Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis, a conceptual framework proposing that immersion in natural seawater may influence MS symptoms through an interplay of physical, biochemical, and neuroimmunological processes.

Methods:
A comprehensive literature review was performed focusing on the pathophysiology of MS, aquatic therapy, how minerals can affect neural functions, and the biological impacts of seawater characteristics. This analysis led to the creation of a mechanistic model connecting seawater immersion to decreased neuroinflammation, better neuromuscular function, and improved overall outcomes.

Results:
Immersion in seawater may provide therapeutic benefits through mechanisms such as buoyancy-assisted unloading, hydrostatic pressure effects, thermal relaxation, and mineral-driven modulation of cytokines and neurotransmitters. Collectively, these factors could enhance fatigue levels, reduce spasticity, improve proprioception, and stabilize gait in individuals with MS.

Conclusion:
This hypothesis presents a biologically plausible framework that can be empirically tested in future studies. Rigorous clinical trials are essential to assess the effectiveness, safety, and feasibility of incorporating seawater-based rehabilitation as an innovative complementary treatment for MS.

Keywords: *Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis, Theoretical Framework, Therapeutic Role of Seawater, Sclerosis Symptom Modulation*

1. Introduction

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic autoimmune disorder marked by the loss of myelin and degeneration of axons within the central nervous system. Clinically, it presents a wide range of neurological symptoms such as muscle spasticity, persistent fatigue, mobility challenges, neuropathic pain, and cognitive impairments. These conditions often result in decreased independence, psychological distress, and a lower quality of life for those affected [1,2].

Current treatment approaches for MS mainly consist of disease-modifying therapies (DMTs), which aim to alter immune responses and slow disease progression. Nevertheless, these treatments frequently offer limited relief from symptoms, can have significant side effects, and impose considerable financial costs [3]. As a result, an increasing number of patients are exploring non-pharmacological rehabilitation methods that may enhance traditional care while improving functional outcomes and overall well-being [4].

Aquatic therapy has gained recognition as a beneficial supplementary approach in the rehabilitation of MS patients. Therapeutic environments created by water provide reduced gravitational strain, enhanced balance support, and resistance-based movements that are particularly advantageous for individuals with neuromuscular difficulties [5]. Research has shown that aquatic therapy can improve muscle strength and endurance, increase joint flexibility, and alleviate pain and fatigue among people with MS [6]. However, the potential benefits of immersion in natural seawater—distinct from conventional pool therapies—have not been thoroughly investigated scientifically despite its unique hydrostatic, thermal, and biochemical characteristics.

Natural seawater contains various minerals such as magnesium, calcium, potassium, and chloride that could impart additional therapeutic effects not found in freshwater or chlorinated pools. Furthermore, immersion in seawater may facilitate neuromuscular relaxation, enhance microcirculation, and influence inflammatory processes—all pertinent to MS symptomatology.

This paper aims to introduce a new theoretical framework—the Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis—which posits that immersion in seawater can positively affect MS symptoms through multiple mechanisms including neuroimmune modulation, sensorimotor facilitation, and physiological regulation mediated by minerals. This conceptual model combines insights from neurorehabilitation science with aquatic physiology and neuroimmunology while providing a basis for future empirical research.

2. Pathophysiology of Multiple Sclerosis

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is primarily a long-term, immune-mediated disorder characterized by the demyelination of the central nervous system (CNS). This condition is propelled by the infiltration of autoreactive lymphocytes that specifically attack myelin sheaths and oligodendrocytes, resulting in axonal degeneration and subsequent neurological impairment [7]. In the initial stages of MS, significant events include the disruption of the blood-brain

barrier (BBB), infiltration by CD4+ and CD8+ T cells, as well as the activation of resident microglia and astrocytes [8].

A critical feature in the pathogenesis of MS is ongoing neuroinflammation, which is influenced by increased levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α). These cytokines play a role in promoting demyelination, causing apoptosis in oligodendrocytes, and sustaining chronic glial cell activation [9]. Additionally, oxidative stress alongside mitochondrial dysfunction exacerbates neuronal damage and hinders remyelination processes [10].

The progressive deterioration of myelin and axonal integrity results in disrupted connectivity within neural networks, leading to various neurological deficits. Such impairments may manifest as muscle spasticity, instability during walking, fatigue, neuropathic pain, visual issues, and cognitive challenges [11]. Abnormalities in muscle tone—especially spasticity and hyperreflexia—are linked to changes in corticospinal pathways and spinal interneuron circuits due to demyelination [12]. Furthermore, central fatigue—which differs from peripheral muscle fatigue—is common and arises from several factors including dysregulation of neuroimmune signaling, impaired synaptic transmission, and dysfunctions within the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis [13].

Overall, the intricate pathophysiology of MS encompasses both immune-mediated inflammation as well as neurodegenerative processes. This complexity underscores the necessity for comprehensive treatment strategies that address both inflammatory agents and neuromuscular functionality.

3. Therapeutic Properties of Seawater Immersion

3.1 Physical Properties

Immersion in seawater creates a distinctive physical setting that may yield considerable therapeutic advantages for individuals with neurological conditions like multiple sclerosis (MS). The buoyancy provided by the water diminishes the gravitational burden on the musculoskeletal system, making movement easier and requiring less energy while reducing joint stress [14]. This characteristic is particularly beneficial for MS patients who struggle with muscle weakness, instability in gait, and spasticity.

Additionally, the hydrostatic pressure from seawater promotes venous and lymphatic return, which can alleviate peripheral edema and enhance circulation. It applies consistent pressure across the body, thereby improving proprioceptive feedback—an essential aspect for those facing sensory and motor challenges [15]. The interplay of these factors may lead to better neuromuscular control, improved posture, and enhanced endurance during rehabilitation activities.

3.2 Thermal and Sensory Stimulation

In natural environments, seawater typically has a moderated temperature, especially in temperate regions, providing a gentle warmth that can relax overactive muscles, ease spasticity, and diminish pain perception by influencing thermoreceptors and nociceptive pathways [16].

Moreover, immersion in natural aquatic surroundings offers multisensory experiences—visual (the ocean horizon), auditory (sounds of waves), tactile (variations in temperature and pressure), and vestibular (effects of buoyancy and water movement). This rich sensory input may facilitate neuroplastic changes and enhance sensorimotor integration, which are critical objectives in neurorehabilitation for patients with MS [17].

3.3 Mineral Composition

Seawater significantly contrasts with freshwater or chlorinated swimming pools due to its elevated mineral content, particularly magnesium, chloride, potassium, calcium, and bromide ions. Magnesium is notably significant because of its role in promoting neuromuscular relaxation as well as its functions related to NMDA receptor antagonism and anti-inflammatory properties [18]. Research indicates that magnesium can influence synaptic transmission positively while mitigating excitotoxicity—a process associated with the neurodegenerative aspects of MS. Additionally, it reduces levels of TNF-α and IL-1β—key cytokines involved in neuroinflammation linked to MS [19]. Although still a topic of debate, transdermal absorption of magnesium through the skin during seawater immersion may offer localized or systemic physiological benefits that could enhance strategies for managing MS symptoms [20].

4. Theoretical Framework: The Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis

We introduce an innovative conceptual model known as the **Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis**. This framework seeks to unite the physical, neuroimmune, and neurofunctional impacts of seawater immersion on symptoms associated with multiple sclerosis (MS). It is grounded in the recognized advantages of aquatic therapy for MS, enhanced by the distinct mineral content and thermal characteristics found in natural seawater settings.

Stepwise Mechanistic Model:

Seawater Immersion

Engaging in warm, mineral-dense seawater provides buoyancy, hydrostatic pressure, and a range of sensory experiences. These factors alleviate gravitational strain on the body while delivering crucial proprioceptive feedback necessary for neuromuscular regulation [14–17].

Physiological Effects

The presence of magnesium in seawater may play a role in modulating NMDA receptors, enhancing GABAergic activity, and curbing pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α and IL-6—key elements involved in the development of MS [18–20]. This sequence of events

promotes neuromuscular relaxation, aids venous circulation, and diminishes neuroinflammatory responses.

Neurological Modulation

The anti-inflammatory properties along with sensory-regulatory influences could alter the central nervous system's microenvironment. This alteration may lead to decreases in spasticity, fatigue, and central sensitization. These pathways are particularly relevant to pain and neurodegeneration connected with MS [21].

Clinical Outcomes

Together, these mechanisms might result in enhanced motor coordination, better pain management, improved mobility, and an overall increase in quality of life—areas that frequently show resistance to standard pharmacological treatments. This theoretical framework is consistent with emerging neurobiological models that connect inflammation, neuromuscular impairment, and central fatigue within MS to broader multisystem regulatory processes [21].This theoretical cascade is visually summarized in Figure 1, which illustrates the proposed Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis, outlining the stepwise relationship between seawater immersion and symptom modulation in MS through anti-inflammatory, neuromuscular, and functional pathways.

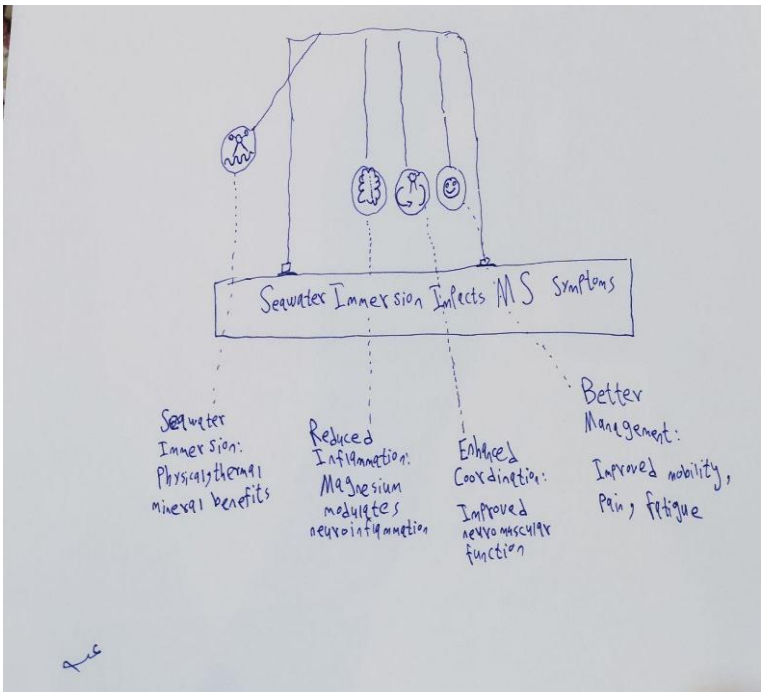

Figure 1 Proposed conceptual framework illustrating the hypothesized therapeutic effects of seawater immersion in individuals with multiple sclerosis (MS). The sequence begins with immersion in natural seawater, which provides thermal, hydrostatic, and mineral-based stimuli. This initiates a cascade of physiological responses—including reduced neuroinflammation and improved neuromuscular coordination—that may lead to enhanced mobility, pain relief, reduced

fatigue, and improved quality of life. This hypothesis integrates physical rehabilitation principles with emerging insights from neuroimmunology and environmental therapy.

5. Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis presents a valuable opportunity to integrate natural aquatic environments into structured rehabilitation programs for individuals with multiple sclerosis (MS), especially in coastal areas where natural seawater is accessible. Although aquatic therapy has already demonstrated advantages in enhancing balance, reducing fatigue, and alleviating spasticity among MS patients, the distinct biochemical properties of seawater—enriched with magnesium, bromide, and various trace minerals—could further enhance therapeutic benefits. Incorporating seawater immersion within neurorehabilitation facilities could provide a cost-efficient and low-risk complement to current physical therapy methods. For instance, a standardized six-week protocol involving immersion in warm seawater could be evaluated in clinical trials to determine its impact on functional mobility, pain levels, and fatigue assessments, accompanied by controlled tracking of biomarkers.

Recommendations for Pilot Clinical Studies:

Design: Pre-post intervention studies or randomized controlled trials (RCTs).

Population: Patients with Relapsing-Remitting MS (RRMS) or Secondary Progressive MS (SPMS) exhibiting moderate disability (EDSS 3–6).

Intervention: Immersion in warm seawater at temperatures between 34°C to 36°C for durations of 30–45 minutes, three times per week over a period of four to six weeks.

Outcomes:

- **Primary:** Alterations in the Modified Ashworth Scale (for spasticity), Fatigue Severity Scale, and Timed 25-Foot Walk Test.
- **Secondary:** Serum concentrations of IL-6, TNF-α, CRP, and magnesium; gait stability monitored through wearable sensors.

Additionally, integrating digital gait analysis along with neuroinflammatory markers would facilitate comprehensive monitoring of treatment responses, aligning with contemporary precision rehabilitation frameworks.

It is essential to meticulously control or stratify confounding variables such as concurrent medications, dietary magnesium intake, psychological stressors, and sleep quality within study designs to ensure the validity of the data collected.

6. Limitations

Although the Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis presents an intriguing mechanistic framework, several limitations warrant consideration prior to its clinical application.

Firstly, there have been no randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that have specifically investigated the therapeutic impact of natural seawater immersion on symptoms associated with multiple sclerosis (MS). Most existing research on aquatic therapy utilizes chlorinated pools, which complicates the ability to isolate the specific biochemical and mineral-related effects that seawater might provide.

Secondly, any potential advantages from seawater immersion could be influenced by non-specific factors such as buoyancy, warmth, and interaction with therapists—elements commonly found in traditional hydrotherapy environments. Hence, it is imperative to conduct well-controlled comparative studies to accurately distinguish outcomes attributable solely to seawater from those resulting from general aquatic interventions.

Thirdly, variability among individuals with MS—particularly concerning disease subtype, sensitivity to heat, and neurological baseline—may result in differing responses to seawater immersion. Future research must take these variables into account for effective stratification.

Lastly, practical challenges such as obtaining clean and warm seawater as well as standardizing immersion protocols (including temperature, depth, and duration) may hinder the applicability and reproducibility of findings.

7. Conclusion

Immersion in seawater represents a biologically credible and theoretically sound supplementary approach for managing symptoms associated with multiple sclerosis. Its distinctive features, including physical support, thermal attributes, and mineral composition, may provide a range of benefits—from decreased neuroinflammation to enhanced neuromuscular coordination. The Seawater Neurorehabilitation Hypothesis offers an innovative and testable framework that synthesizes current insights from neuroimmunology, rehabilitation science, and environmental therapy. Although it shows potential, this model is still theoretical and requires validation through comprehensive and controlled clinical trials. Should its effectiveness be established, seawater-based therapies could enhance existing neurorehabilitation practices, particularly in coastal regions, potentially improving the quality of life for those affected by MS.

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