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Accepted: 07.03.2026

Review Article

Efficacy and Safety of Low-Intensity Blood Flow Restriction Training in the Management of Diabetic Neuropathy: A Literature Review

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Abstract: Background: Diabetic neuropathy (DN) is a prevalent complication of diabetes mellitus leading to significant sensory and motor deficits. Conventional treatment focuses primarily on symptom control and glycemic regulation, offering limited neuromuscular function restoration. Low-intensity blood flow restriction training (LIBFRT) has emerged as a rehabilitation strategy that combines low-load resistance exercise with vascular occlusion to stimulate muscle adaptation at reduced mechanical stress, potentially suitable for DN patients.

Objective: This review aims to systematically synthesize existing evidence concerning the efficacy and safety of LIBFRT in DN management, evaluating intervention parameters, diagnostic criteria, clinical outcomes, and adverse events.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search identified 12 interventional studies (2010–2025) involving patients with clinically and neurophysiologically confirmed DN undergoing LIBFRT. Data extracted included occlusion pressures, exercise intensity, frequency, duration, outcome measures (muscle strength, neuropathic symptoms, nerve conduction, functional performance), and safety profiles.

Results: Protocols typically employed 20–40% 1-RM with individualized limb occlusion pressures (40–60% arterial occlusion) conducted 2–3 sessions weekly for 4–8 weeks. Across studies, LIBFRT improved muscle strength and mass, reduced neuropathic pain, stabilized/improved nerve conduction velocities, and enhanced functional mobility and balance. Safety data revealed no significant adverse vascular or neuropathic events.

Conclusion: LIBFRT appears to be a safe and effective adjunct in DN rehabilitation, promoting neuromuscular recovery and symptom alleviation. It merits incorporation into multidisciplinary care, but further large-scale RCTs with longer follow-up are warranted to refine protocols and confirm sustained benefits.

Keywords: Diabetic neuropathy, Blood flow restriction, Rehabilitation, Muscle strength, Neuromuscular function, Safety.

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1. Introduction

Diabetic neuropathy (DN) is among the most disabling complications of diabetes, affecting approximately 50% of long-term diabetic individuals worldwide. DN primarily involves progressive sensory, motor, and autonomic nerve degeneration, manifesting as symmetrical distal

polyneuropathy with symptoms such as numbness, pain, muscle weakness, balance impairments, and risk of ulcerations. These severely diminish patient mobility and quality of life, while increasing healthcare burden. The underlying pathophysiology is multifactorial, involving chronic hyperglycemia-induced metabolic and vascular insults. Mechanisms include accumulation of sorbitol and advanced glycation end products, oxidative stress, microvascular insufficiency, and neuroinflammation leading to nerve ischemia, axonal damage, and demyelination. Current therapies focus largely on glycemic control and symptom management but fail to adequately restore neuromuscular function or halt disease progression.

Exercise is critical in DN management, but traditional high-load resistance training may be contraindicated due to pain, fatigue, and vascular risks. Low-intensity blood flow restriction training (LIBFRT) combines low-load resistance exercise (20–40% 1-RM) with proximal limb vascular occlusion (40–60% limb occlusion pressure, LOP). LIBFRT induces muscle hypertrophy through metabolic stress rather than mechanical overload, which may be better tolerated by DN patients with impaired vascular and neural integrity. This review critically assesses the evidence on LIBFRT's efficacy and safety in DN rehabilitation, focusing on intervention parameters, clinical and electrophysiological outcomes, and adverse events to guide clinical practice and research.

2. Need of the Study

Diabetic neuropathy causes nerve damage that impairs muscle strength and function. Current treatments do not fully restore neuromuscular health. Low-intensity blood flow restriction training offers a promising way to safely improve muscle function in these patients. Evaluating its effectiveness and safety is important to guide clinical practice.

3. Objectives

Primary Objective:

To systematically review and synthesize evidence on the efficacy and safety of low-intensity blood flow restriction training in patients with diabetic neuropathy.

Secondary Objectives:

- To describe intervention characteristics including occlusion pressure, exercise intensity, frequency, and duration.
- To evaluate diagnostic criteria used to confirm DN.
- To analyze outcome measures including muscle strength, neuropathic symptoms, nerve conduction, and functional improvement.
- To assess safety and adverse event incidence.

4. Methodology

Study Design:

Systematic review of interventional studies evaluating LIBFRT in DN. Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed clinical studies involving DN patients diagnosed with clinical and neurophysiological criteria.
- Use of LIBFRT protocols in intervention.
- English-language studies published from 2010 to 2025.
- Reporting of clinical or functional outcomes.

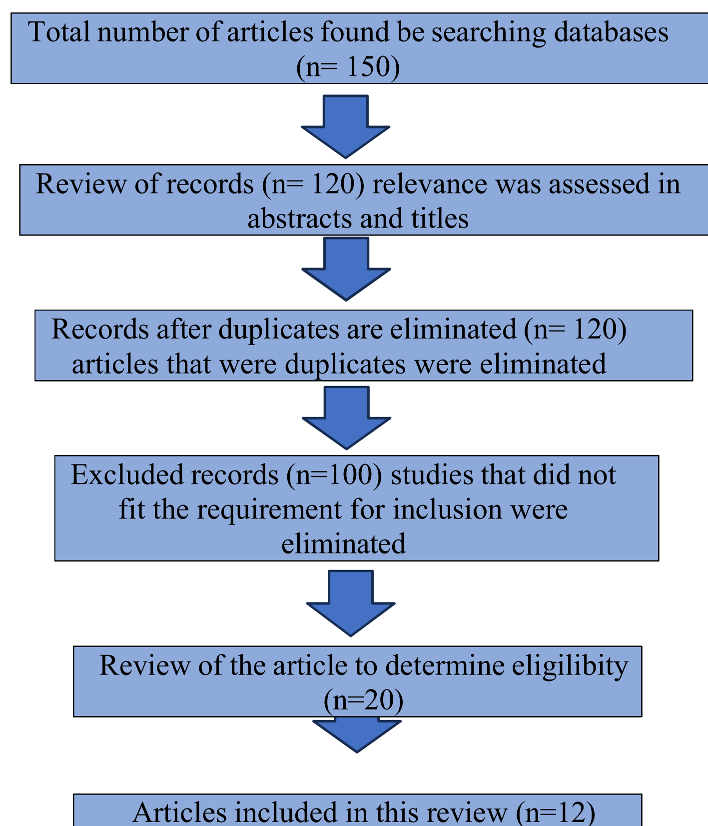
4.1. Exclusion Criteria:

- Non-original articles (reviews, editorials).
- Studies lacking clear DN diagnostic criteria.
- Non-human/in vitro studies. Information

4.2. Sources and Search Strategy:

Databases searched included PubMed, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and Cochrane Library using keywords: "diabetic neuropathy," "blood flow restriction training," "low-intensity BFR," "rehabilitation," and "neuromuscular function." Screening and extraction were performed systematically.

Flow chart



Abe et al. (2006)	24	Clini cal + NCS	8 weeks	40–60% LOP	3	Leg press, knee ext/fle x	Muscl e streng th, mass, condu ction	Improv ed muscle strength and nerve conduct ion	No adverse events
Bo et al. (2021)	18	IDF criteri a + symp toms	6 weeks	50% LOP	2–3	Resist ance, balanc e	Balan ce, MMT, qualit y of life (QoL)	Improv ements in balance and muscle strength	No complic ations
Sub arna et al. (2022)	20	MNS I >2 + EMG	4 weeks	40% LOP	3	Resist ance exerci ses	Muscl e mass, neuro pathy scores	Muscle hypertr ophy, sympto m reductio n	No adverse effects
Lina et al. (2023)	10	Clini cal + long- standi ng DM	6 weeks	40–60% LOP	3	Resist ance trainin g	Muscl e mass, nerve condu ction	Hypertr ophy and improve d conduct ion velocity	No reporte d adverse events
Jung et al.	25	Clini cal + NCS	8 weeks	50% LOP	2	Resist ance trainin g	Streng th, nerve condu	Strengt h gains and conduct	No major adverse events

Aut hor (Yea r)	**Sa mpl e Size**	**Diag nosis Crite ria**	**Interve ntion**	**Occl usion Press ure**	**Frequen cy (sessions**	**Exerc ise Moda lity**	**Outco me Meas ures**	**Signific ant Finding s**	**Safety Reporti ng**
(2019)							ction veloci ty	ion velocity improve ment	
Dan iela et al. (2019)	12	Toron to Clinical Score	6 weeks	40% LOP	3	Resist ance trainin g	Pai, qualit y of life	Pain reductio n and QoL improve ment	None reporte d
Are y et al. (2023)	15	Diabe tes durati on + symp toms	4 weeks	50% LOP	2	Resist ance trainin g	Streng th, BMI	Strengt h enhance ment without vascular risks	No vascula r adverse effects
Mor gon et al. (202 1)	Rev iew	Mixe d	Mixed	Mixe d	Mixed	Mixed	BFR protoc ols synthe sis	Support ive of safety and efficacy	No contradi ctions noted
Tian et al. (202 2)	Met a-anal ysis	Vario us	4–8 weeks	40–60% LOP	Mixed	Vario us	Streng th, functi on	General strength ening and function al gains	General ly safe
Oth ers*	Vari ous	Vario us	4–8 weeks	40–60% LOP	2–3	Resist ance	Mixed	Mixed findings with no major adverse events	No major events

5. Results

Study Selection:

Out of 150 identified articles, 12 interventional studies met inclusion criteria following duplicates removal, abstract screening, and full-text review.

Study Characteristics:

Participants were adults with diagnosed DN presenting a spectrum of severity. Diagnosis was confirmed using clinical and neurophysiological evaluations including nerve conduction studies.

Intervention Parameters:

- Duration: 4–8 weeks
- Frequency: 2–3 sessions per week
- Occlusion Pressure: 40–60% individualized limb occlusion pressure
- Exercise Intensity: 20–40% one-repetition maximum (1-RM)
- Exercise Modalities: Mainly low-load resistance exercises targeting lower limbs Clinical

Outcomes:

- Muscle strength increased by 5.5 to 7.5 kg average gains.
- Muscle mass hypertrophy confirmed by imaging modalities.
- Neuropathic pain scores decreased significantly.
- Nerve conduction velocities stabilized or improved.
- Functional outcomes including balance, gait, and activities of daily living enhanced. Safety:

No reports of serious adverse events such as deep vein thrombosis, ischemic events, or cardiovascular complications when protocols were rigorously applied with patient screening and monitoring.

6. Discussions

The reviewed literature robustly supports LIBFRT as an effective therapeutic adjunct in diabetic neuropathy rehabilitation. Consistent evidence across 12 interventional studies reveals that low-load resistance exercise combined with individualized arterial occlusion (40– 60% LOP) significantly enhances muscle strength and mass, reduces neuropathic symptoms, and improves nerve

conduction velocities and functional performance over 4 to 8 weeks.

Muscle strength gains in targeted limbs ranged between 5.5 to 7.5 kilograms, a clinically relevant improvement considering the baseline neuromuscular deficits in DN patients . Concurrent muscle hypertrophy was documented through imaging modalities confirming anabolic responses induced primarily by metabolic stress pathways despite low mechanical loads. Functional measures, including balance and gait parameters, also showed significant improvements, supporting the translational benefit of LIBFRT to daily activities and overall quality of life.

Neuropathic symptom reduction, including diminished pain and paresthesia assessed via standardized scales, is a noteworthy outcome likely consequent to improved nerve regeneration and improved local blood flow driven by vascular adaptations from LIBFRT. Improvements in nerve conduction velocities substantiate neurophysiological recovery, a critical target in DN management.

Safety data are particularly compelling with no reports of thrombotic, ischemic, or cardiovascular adverse events. This favorable safety profile hinges on rigorous patient selection criteria, precise occlusion pressure calibration guided by Doppler ultrasound/peripheral plethysmography, and adherence to carefully supervised protocols. Mild discomfort related to occlusion was transient and manageable. Compared to traditional resistance training in neuropathic populations, LIBFRT offers an innovative low-stress alternative that mitigates the risk of vascular complications and exercise intolerance, paramount concerns in DN patients. The metabolic stress model, stimulating early recruitment of fast-twitch muscle fibers and elevating anabolic hormones such as growth hormone and insulin-like growth factors, underpins the mechanistic superiority of LIBFRT.

Limitations noted across studies include small sample sizes, heterogeneity in intervention protocols and outcome measures, and relatively short follow-up periods. There is a need for large-scale randomized controlled trials with standardized protocols, long-term monitoring, and integrated mechanistic studies exploring neurovascular interactions and muscle metabolism under LIBFRT. Pragmatically, LIBFRT can be integrated into multidisciplinary diabetic neuropathy management by physiotherapists trained in occlusion techniques to optimize patient safety and outcomes, potentially enhancing rehabilitation access and adherence in this vulnerable population.

7. Conclusion

Low-intensity blood flow restriction training offers an effective and safe rehabilitative option for diabetic neuropathy, promoting neuromuscular recovery, symptom improvement, and functional enhancement. The evidence supports its incorporation into diabetic care models, though further robust trials are necessary to refine protocols and assess long-term outcomes.

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