

Non-invasive brain stimulation for fine motor improvement after stroke: a meta-analysis

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Keywords:

fine motor rehabilitation, motor recovery, non-invasive brain stimulation, stroke, transcranial stimulation

Received 25 September 2017
Accepted 22 March 2018

European Journal of Neurology 2018, **25**: 1017–1026

doi:10.1111/ene.13643

Abstract

The aim of this study was to determine whether non-invasive brain stimulation (NIBS) techniques improve fine motor performance in stroke. We searched PubMed, EMBASE, Web of Science, SciELO and OpenGrey for randomized clinical trials on NIBS for fine motor performance in stroke patients and healthy participants. We computed Hedges' *g* for active and sham groups, pooled data as random-effects models and performed sensitivity analysis on chronicity, montage, frequency of stimulation and risk of bias. Twenty-nine studies (351 patients and 152 healthy subjects) were reviewed. Effect sizes in stroke populations for transcranial direct current stimulation and repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation were 0.31 [95% confidence interval (CI), 0.08–0.55; *P* = 0.010; Tau², 0.09; *I*², 34%; *Q*, 18.23; *P* = 0.110] and 0.46 (95% CI, 0.00–0.92; *P* = 0.05; Tau², 0.38; *I*², 67%; *Q*, 30.45; *P* = 0.007). The effect size of non-dominant healthy hemisphere transcranial direct current stimulation on non-dominant hand function was 1.25 (95% CI, 0.09–2.41; *P* = 0.04; Tau², 1.26; *I*², 93%; *Q*, 40.27; *P* < 0.001). Our results show that NIBS is associated with gains in fine motor performance in chronic stroke patients and healthy subjects. This supports the effects of NIBS on motor learning and encourages investigation to optimize their effects in clinical and research settings.

Introduction

Stroke accounted for 139 874 000 disability-adjusted life years in 2015 [1]. Most stroke patients experience long-term impairment and up to 80% have persistent and incapacitating upper-limb disability [2]. Recovery occurs in about 15–33% of patients, whereas 66% of patients can have no recovery, within the first 6 months post-stroke; recovery after this is minimal [3–11]. Stroke perturbs neuromuscular recruitment, timing, coordination and execution of vital motor tasks [12]. Fine motor ability is crucial for daily activities and for a person's

independence, functionality, quality of life and purpose [13]. Interventions for fine motor recovery are imperative but often limited [13,14]. Non-invasive brain stimulation (NIBS) has minimal side-effects and is proposed as a stand-alone or adjuvant treatment for improving dexterity [15,16]. However, most reviews assessing NIBS in stroke focus on gross motor skills and, thus, the therapeutic potential and magnitude of NIBS for fine motor improvement is not known [17–23]. Motivated by this gap, we performed a meta-analysis on NIBS technologies using outcomes that focus on fine motor function in stroke patients and healthy subjects.

Methods

The study's registration number is CRD42016043809 and analyzed data are available online (Appendix S1)

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[24]. Private health information was not used and the study was not interventional, therefore ethical approval was not required. See protocol for full search strategy [25] and Appendix S2 for a review of outcomes. Two blinded researchers screened records from extracted abstracts with Rayyan (Qatar Computing Research Institute [Data Analytics], Doha, Qatar) and then fully reviewed eligible articles. We focused on stroke patients and healthy subjects (as a proxy of lesioned cortex) [26]. Bias was assessed with the Cochrane Collaboration tool.

Random-effects models were assumed. Means and SD before and after treatment were used for Hedges' g . We created forest plots with RevMan 5.3 (The Nordic Cochrane Centre, The Cochrane Collaboration, Copenhagen, Denmark) and Stata 13 (StataCorp LP, College Station, TX, USA). Heterogeneity was assessed by Tau^2 , Cochrane Q and I^2 , meta-bias by Begg's funnel plots and sensitivity analysis studied chronicity, combined interventions, techniques and risk of bias (according to Cochrane). Authors were contacted when data were missing or unclear. We used WebPlotDigitizer 3.11 (Ankit Rohatgi, Austin, TX, USA) to extract data from graphs. We assumed baseline comparability if there were only post-treatment data, otherwise the study was excluded.

Results

The search results are summarized in Fig. 1. See Appendix S2 for excluded full texts and a summary of included studies.

We reviewed 29 studies with 351 stroke patients and 152 healthy subjects. The frequencies of outcomes used were Jebsen–Taylor Hand Function Test (38.8%), Purdue Pegboard Test (27.7%), Nine Hole Peg Test (13.9%) and Box Block Test (19.4%). Further characteristics are detailed in Tables 1 and 2.

The effect size (ES) was 0.36 in stroke patients [95% confidence interval (CI), 0.14–0.58; $P < 0.001$; Tau^2 , 0.17; I^2 , 50%; Q , 56.41; $P < 0.001$] and 0.74 in healthy participants (95% CI, 0.16–1.31; $P < 0.001$; Tau^2 , 0.59; I^2 , 82%; Q , 43.91; $P < 0.001$) (Fig. 2).

The ES in the 18 transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) stroke comparisons was 0.31 (95% CI, 0.08–0.55; $P = 0.01$; Tau^2 , 0.09; I^2 , 34%; Q , 18.23; $P = 0.110$), whereas the ES for the 11 repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS) comparisons was 0.46 (95% CI, 0.00–0.92; $P = 0.05$; Tau^2 , 0.38; I^2 , 67%; Q , 30.45; $P = 0.007$). The ES of tDCS in healthy participants was 1.25 (95% CI, 0.09–2.41; $P = 0.04$; Tau^2 , 1.26; I^2 , 93%; Q , 40.27; $P < 0.001$), whereas that for rTMS was 0.33 (95% CI, –0.08 to 0.68; $P = 0.140$; Tau^2 , 0.00; I^2 , 0%; Q , 0.52; $P < 0.970$).

Sensitivity analysis in stroke

Transcranial direct current stimulation was significant in chronic stroke with an ES of 0.34 (95% CI, 0.04–0.63; $P = 0.02$; Tau^2 , 0.10; I^2 , 40%; Q , 18.23; $P < 0.008$). The ES of rTMS in chronic mild to moderate stroke was significant, i.e. 0.51 (95% CI, 0.12–0.91; $P = 0.01$; Tau^2 , 0.00; I^2 , 0%; Q , 0.30; $P = 1.00$). When tDCS was combined with an intervention the ES was 0.62 (95% CI, 0.07–1.16; $P = 0.05$; Tau^2 , 0.38; I^2 , 69%; Q , 22.28; $P < 0.002$). There were only two high-frequency rTMS comparisons, which limited analysis. Pooling of low-frequency rTMS studies did not reveal significant ESs. For studies with a high risk of bias the ES was 0.64 (95% CI, 0.01–1.18; $P = 0.02$; Tau^2 , 0.35; I^2 , 65%; Q , 19.77; $P < 0.006$), whereas for studies with a low risk of bias the ES was 0.08 (95% CI, –0.25 to 0.41; $P = 0.630$; Tau^2 , 0.00; I^2 , 0%; Q , 4.45; $P < 0.490$).

Sensitivity analysis in healthy participants

The ES of non-dominant hemisphere tDCS on non-dominant hand performance was 1.68 (95% CI, 0.67–2.70; $P = 0.001$; Tau^2 , 0.62; I^2 , 79%; Q , 9.40; $P < 0.009$). In rTMS, analysis of non-dominant hemisphere stimulation was positive but not significant. Bias was similar in healthy subjects and stroke patients (Tables 3 and 4).

Publication bias

Begg's funnel plot in stroke patients and healthy subjects was asymmetric, suggesting possible publication bias.

Discussion

There were moderate and significant improvements in dexterity after tDCS and rTMS in stroke patients, and improvements after tDCS combined with another intervention were large and significant. In healthy participants, there was a moderate ES for non-dominant hand dexterity improvement. Our positive results were mainly from chronic patients with mild to moderate impairment, aiming to increase excitability of the ipsilesional hypoactive cortex or to decrease contralateral hyperactivity [27]. Although other meta-analyses studied upper-limb movement after NIBS, they did not focus specifically on dexterity or used scales such as the Rankin Scale (which is criticized for being poorly defined and open to interpretation) [19–23,28,29]. Our review, however, focuses on outcomes that are specific to dexterity and are independent of

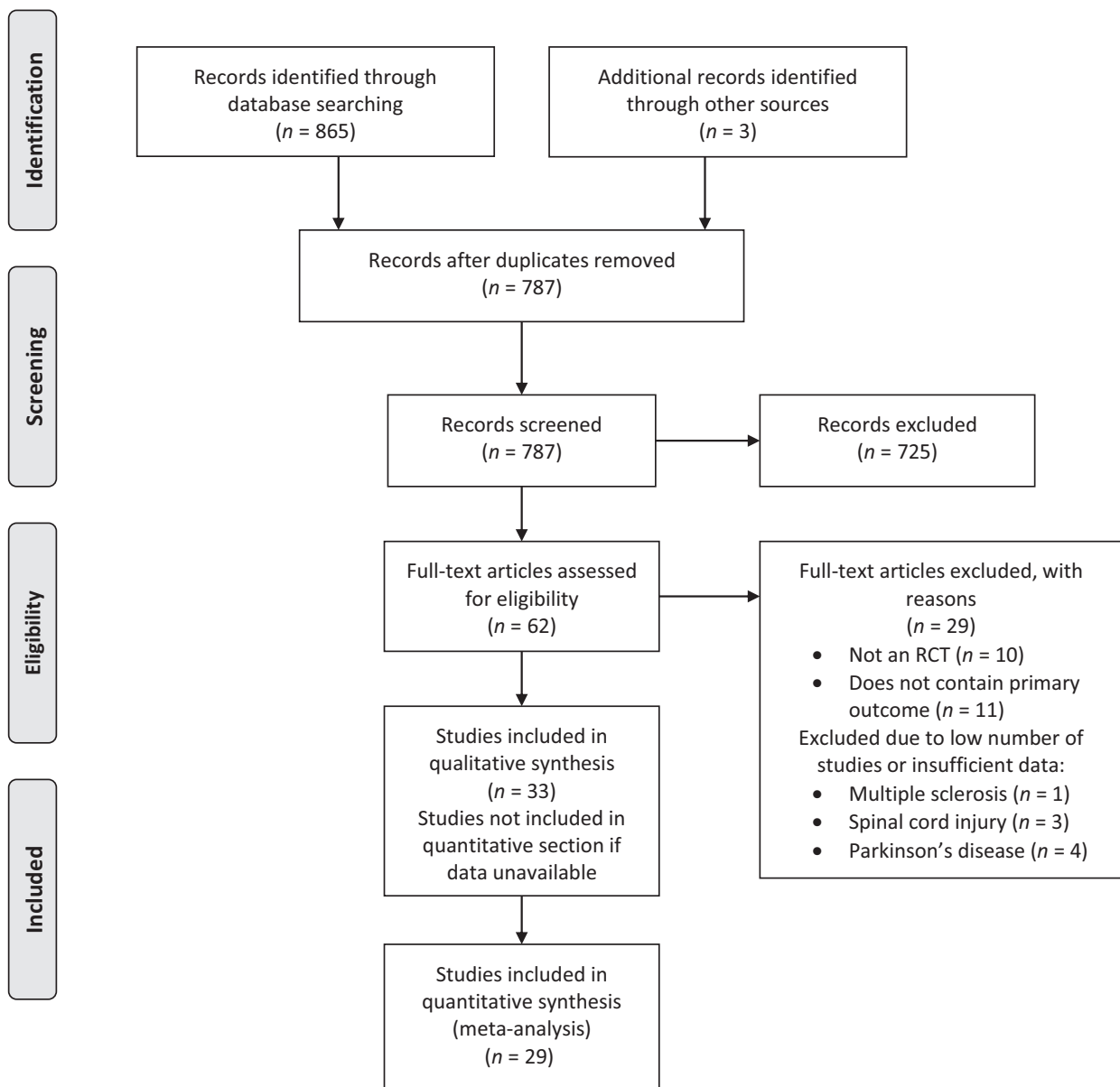


Figure 1 PRISMA 2009 flow diagram of study selection. RCT, randomized control trial.

the rater's interpretation. We discuss NIBS mechanisms that may benefit dexterity in stroke patients.

Neuronal network integrity and function are reliant on persistent sensory input and, when interrupted, the brain undergoes multiple processes to correct the disruption [30,31]. Neuroplasticity leads alterations that promote recovery of sensorimotor integration and output [32,33]. Reducing increased ipsilesional inhibitory tone may facilitate large-scale neuronal changes (e.g. release of growth factor), endogenous cell responses (e.g. neurogenesis) and neuronal remodeling (e.g. dendritic arborization) [34]. These phenomena underlie

mechanisms for non-specific long-term potentiation of motor learning and sensorimotor remapping in viable brain areas [34,35]. These neuroplastic mechanisms may reflect useful therapeutic NIBS avenues.

Neuroimaging, neurophysiologic and electrophysiologic studies demonstrate increased activation and structural integrity in ipsilesional motor networks [i.e. primary motor cortex (M1), premotor cortex (PMC) and supplementary motor area (SMA)] during task-related hand motor output in well-recovered chronic stroke patients, relative to the contralesional cortex and less recovered patients [27,36–41]. For example,

in a chronic stroke case of five low-frequency rTMS sessions over the contralesional M1, functional magnetic resonance imaging showed that rTMS treatment and clinical improvements correlated with diminished contralesional M1 hyperactivity in

the ipsilesional hand area [42]. A larger functional magnetic resonance imaging study demonstrated that ipsilesional M1 activation before rTMS predicted recovery of dexterity [43]. The functional integrity of the stimulated site was related to the motor network-

Table 1 General description of stroke patient studies

Study	Total	Age (years)	Gender (male)	Time since stroke (months)	Severity	NIBS parameters
Au-Yeung <i>et al.</i> (2014)	10	62.60 (± 5.7)	10	8.30 (± 3.2)	Mild	(1) IL a-tDCS M1, (2) CL c-tDCS M1, (3) s-tDCS. 1 session \times 1 mA \times 20 min, 35 cm ² sponge
Boggio <i>et al.</i> (2007)	4	60.75 (± 13.14)	4	34.50 (± 27.74)	Mild	(1) s-tDCS, (2) IL a-tDCS M1, (3) CL c-tDCS M1. 4 sessions \times 1 mA \times 20 min \times 35 cm ² sponge
Bolognini <i>et al.</i> (2011)	14	46.71 (± 14.07)	5	35.21 (± 26.45)	Severe	(1) CIMT + IL a-tDCS, (2) CIMT + s-tDCS. 10 sessions \times 2 mA \times 40 min \times 35 cm ² sponge
Fusco <i>et al.</i> (2014)	16	60.40 (± 14.90)	9	1.70 (± 0.68)	Mild	(1) IL a-tDCS M1, (2) s-tDCS. Followed immediately by IDR. 10 sessions \times 1.5 mA \times 10 min, 35 cm ² sponge
Fusco <i>et al.</i> (2014) (Biomed)	11	58.36 (± 14.35)	5	0.50 (N.A.)	Severe	(1) CL c-tDCS M1, (2) s-tDCS. Followed by IDR. 1 session \times 1.5 mA \times 15 min, 35 cm ² sponge
Hummel <i>et al.</i> (2005)	6	62.20 (± 7.56)	4	43.30 (± 13.1)	Mild	(1) IL a-tDCS M1, (2) s-tDCS. 1 session \times 1 mA \times 20 min, 25 cm ² sponge
Kim <i>et al.</i> (2009)	10	62.80 (± 13.15)	3	1.60 (± 0.79)	Mild	(1) IL a-tDCS M1, (2) sham. 1 session \times 1 mA \times 20 min \times 25 cm ² sponge
Mahmoudi <i>et al.</i> (2011)	10	60.80 (± 14.11)	31	8.30 (± 5.45)	Mild to moderate	(1) BL-tDCS (IL anode and CL cathode M1), (2) IL a-tDCS M1, (3) CL c-tDCS M1, (4) IL a-tDCS M1 and cathode on contralateral deltoid, (5) s-tDCS. 1 session \times 1 mA \times 20 min \times 35 cm ² sponge
Mortensen <i>et al.</i> (2015)	16	63.10 (± 10.15)	7	30.20 (± 15.45)	Mild to moderate	(1) IL a-tDCS M1 or (2) s-tDCS. During OT. 5 sessions \times 1.5 mA \times 20 min \times 35 cm ² sponge
Sattler <i>et al.</i> (2015)	20	65.00 (± 11.00)	9	0.18 (± 0.11)	Mild	(1) IL a-tDCS + rPNS, (2) s-tDCS + rPNS. 5 sessions \times 1.2 mA \times 13 min, 35 cm ² sponge. OT (3–5 times/week) started independently of the tDCS sessions at Day 4 or Day 5 (30 min/session). After discharge, OT occurred 3–5 times/week (45–90 min/session) until end of follow-up
Straudi <i>et al.</i> (2016)	23	58.20 (± 14.40)	14	14.65 (± 13.05)	Severe	(1) BL-tDCS (IL anode and CL cathode M1) + RAT, (2) s-tDCS + RAT. 10 sessions \times 1 mA \times 30 min, 35 cm ² sponge
Wang <i>et al.</i> (2014)	9	52.90 (± 7.23)	12	7.26 (± 3.75)	Severe	(1) IL a-tDCS M1, (2) IL a-tDCS M1 + MP, (3) MP + s-tDCS. 1 session \times 1 mA \times 20 min \times 35 cm ² sponge
Avenanti <i>et al.</i> (2012)	30	62.97 (± 8.80)	7	31.46 (± 22.68)	Mild	(1) rTMS then PT, (2) PT then rTMS, (3) s-rTMS then PT. rTMS applied over CL M1 at 1 Hz \times 10 sessions \times 1500 p/s \times 90% RMT
Conforto <i>et al.</i> (2011)	30	55.75 (± 9.43)	16	0.92 (± 0.23)	Mild	(1) 1 Hz rTMS \times 1500 p/s \times 10 sessions over CL M1, (2) s-rTMS
Fregni <i>et al.</i> (2006)	15	56.00 (± 8.43)	18	44.94 (± 31.68)	Mild to moderate	(1) 1 Hz, 1200 p/s \times 100% RMT \times 5 days \times CL M1, (2) s-rTMS
Ji <i>et al.</i> (2014)	35	52.57 (± 7.90)	11	8.89 (± 2.21)	Mild to moderate	(1) rTMS + MT, (2) MT, (3) sham MT. 1 session \times 10 Hz \times 1500 p/s
Liepert <i>et al.</i> (2007)	12	63.00 (± 11.00)	11	0.24 (± 0.15)	Mild	(1) 1 Hz, 20 min, 1200 pulses, 90% RMT, CL M1, (2) s-rTMS. 1 session
Lüdemann-Podubecká <i>et al.</i> (2016)	10	71.90 (± 7.90)	8	1.00 (± 0.4)	Mild	(1) 1 session \times 1 Hz \times 900 p/s \times 110% RMT, CL PMd, (2) s-rTMS
Mansur <i>et al.</i> (2005)	10	53.30 (± 11.98)	6	Within 12 months (N.A.)	Mild to moderate	(1) M1 rTMS (real/sham), (2) PMd rTMS. 1 session \times 1 Hz \times 600 p/s \times 100% RMT

(continued)

Table 1 (Continued)

Study	Total	Age (years)	Gender (male)	Time since stroke (months)	Severity	NIBS parameters
Matsuura <i>et al.</i> (2015)	20	73.45 (± 7.02)	3	0.32 (± 0.09)	Mild	(1) 5 sessions of rTMS \times 1 Hz \times 1200 p/s, CL M1, (2) s-rTMS
Malcolm <i>et al.</i> (2007)	19	67.00 (± 4.91)	11	46.20 (± 0.20)	Severe	(1) 10 sessions \times 20 Hz rTMS, 2000 p/s \times 90% RMT + CIMT, (2) s-rTMS + CIMT
Özkeskin <i>et al.</i> (2016)	21	60.12 (± 8.81)	14	34.95 (± 16.17)	Severe	(1) 10 days rTMS \times 1 Hz \times 1500 p/s, CL M1 + BHM, (2) s-rTMS + BHM
Total or average	351	60.45 (± 2.28)	218	16.44 (± 3.11)		

a-tDCS, anodal transcranial direct current stimulation; BHM, Brunnstrom hand manipulation; BL-tDCS, bilateral transcranial direct current stimulation; CIMT, constraint induced movement therapy; CL, contralesional; c-tDCS, cathodal transcranial direct current stimulation; IDR, inpatient daily rehabilitation; IL, ipsilesional; M1, primary motor cortex; MP, methylphenidate; MT, mirror therapy; N.A., not available; NIBS, non-invasive brain stimulation; OT, occupational therapy; PMd, dorsal premotor cortex; p/s, pulses/session; PT, physical therapy; RAT, robot-assisted therapy; RMT, resting motor threshold; rPNS, repeated peripheral nerve stimulation; rTMS, repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation; s-rTMS, sham repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation; s-tDCS, sham transcranial direct current stimulation; tDCS, transcranial direct current stimulation. Data are given as *n* and mean \pm SD.

Table 2 General description of healthy participant studies

Study	Total	Age (years)	Gender (male)	NIBS parameters
Marquez <i>et al.</i> (2015)	34	61 (± 12.20)	19	(1) 1 session a-tDCS, randomized to dominant or non-dominant hemisphere, (2) s-tDCS \times 1 mA \times 20 min, 35 cm ² sponge
Park <i>et al.</i> (2014)	15	23.2 (± 2.24)	7	(1) c-tDCS left M1 followed by 10 Hz rTMS right M1, (2) a-tDCS over left M1 followed by 10 Hz rTMS over right M1, (3) s-tDCS over left M1 followed by 10 Hz rTMS over right M1, (4) s-tDCS over left M1 followed by s-rTMS over right M1; rTMS parameters: 10 Hz, 1000 pulses/session at 90% RMT; tDCS parameters: 20 min \times 1 mA \times 35 cm ² sponge
Boggio <i>et al.</i> (2006)	8	22.8 (range, 22–26)	0	(1) a-tDCS on non-dominant M1, (2) a-tDCS on dominant M1. 1 session \times 1 mA \times 20 min \times 35 cm ² sponge
Butts <i>et al.</i> (2014)	26	44 (N.A.)	N.A.	tDCS + theta burst stimulation active or sham. Anode tDCS (20 min) over non-dominant M1 and cathode over dominant M1. 10 sessions \times 1 mA \times 20 min, 6.25 cm ² sponge. Prior to each tDCS session, priming with iTBS, 50 Hz over non-dominant M1, 12 000 pulses per session at 80% RMT
Kidgell <i>et al.</i> (2013)	11	29 (range, 22–36)	N.A.	(1) a-tDCS right M1, (2) BL-tDCS (anode right M1 and cathode right M1), (3) sham. 1 session \times 13 min \times 1 mA \times 25 cm ² sponge
Weiler <i>et al.</i> (2008)	28	21.9 (± 2.29)	28	(1) 1 session of 1 Hz rTMS over non-dominant M1. 300 pulses per session at 80% RMT, (2) sham
Jelic <i>et al.</i> (2015)	30	26 (± 3.00)	11	(1) 1 session, 50 Hz, 600 pulses/session, 80% RMT applied as either iTBS or cTBS
Total or average	152	33.95	65	

a-tDCS, anodal transcranial direct current stimulation; BL-tDCS bilateral transcranial direct current stimulation; c-tDCS, cathodal transcranial direct current stimulation; iTBS, intermittent theta burst stimulation; M1, primary motor cortex; N.A., not available; NIBS, non-invasive brain stimulation; RMT, resting motor threshold; rTMS, repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation; s-rTMS, sham repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation; s-tDCS, sham transcranial direct current stimulation; tDCS, transcranial direct current stimulation. Data are given as *n* and mean \pm SD.

shaping potential of rTMS [43]. Non-responders showed the opposite activation, where contralesional activity increased [43]. This relates to functional magnetic resonance imaging studies where ipsilesional rTMS/tDCS increased motor performance and connectivity and task-related activity in the M1, PMC and SMA [44,45]. This highlights the role of ipsilesional M1 inhibition and contralesional M1 hyperactivity in chronic stroke and how NIBS modulates

these maladaptive processes for clinical improvement. Neurophysiologic studies show that M1 anodal tDCS in chronic stroke increased mu desynchronization (a normal, physiologic attenuation of mu bands during movement) [46,47]. NIBS may facilitate recovery of normal neurophysiologic function in chronic stroke patients. These findings, in conjunction with ours, may support the neuroplastic and behavioral effects of NIBS in recovering fine hand function.

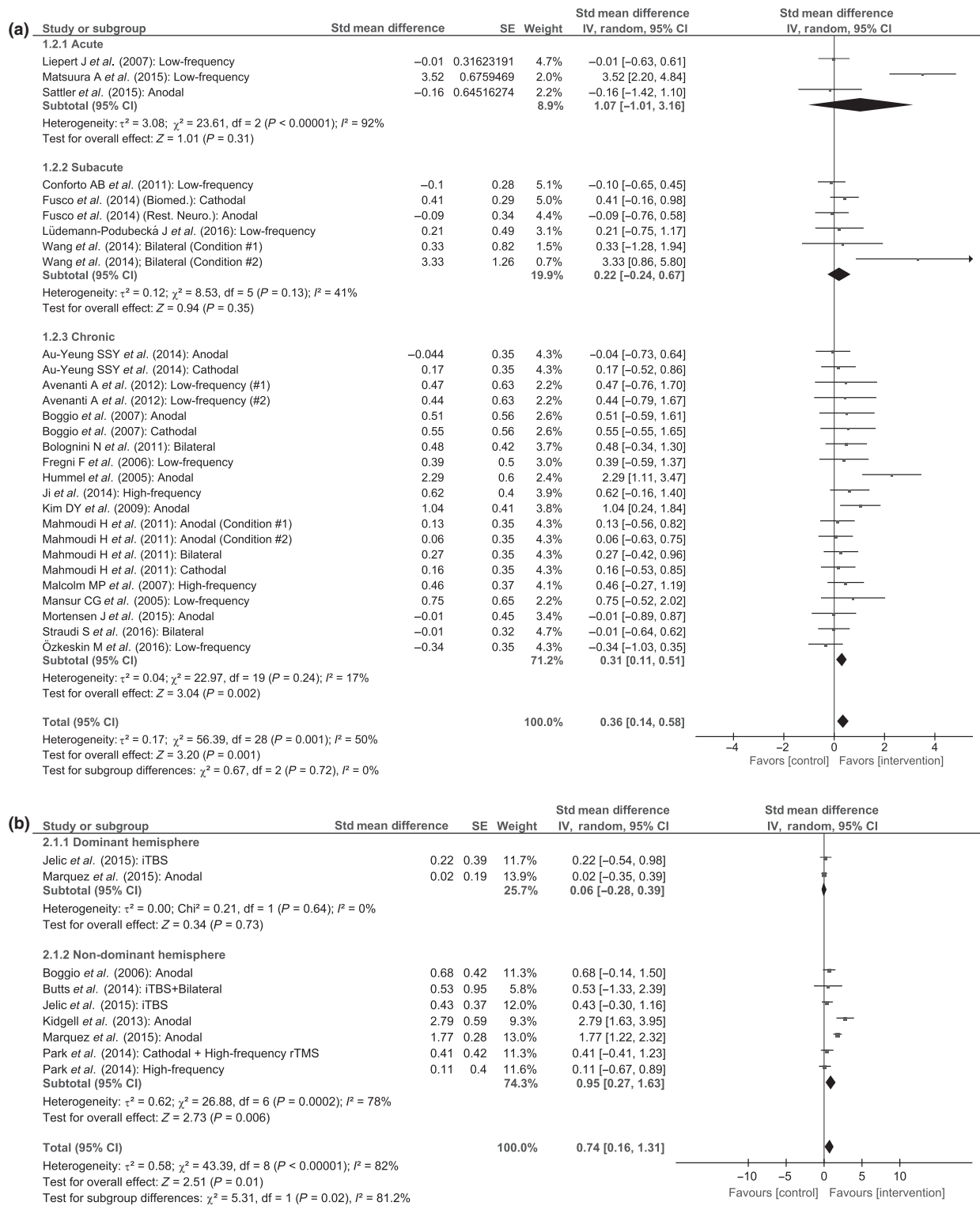


Figure 2 Forrest plot of Hedges' *g* for non-invasive brain stimulation paradigms. (a) Stroke patients; (b) healthy controls. CI, confidence interval; df, degrees of freedom; iTBS, intermittent theta burst stimulation; IV, inverse variance; rTMS, repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation; SE, standard error.

Table 3 Transcranial direct current stimulation sensitivity analysis

Description	Hedges' <i>g</i> (95% CI)	<i>P</i>	Tau ² , <i>I</i> ² and Cochrane <i>Q</i> (<i>P</i>)	No. of comparisons
All stroke	0.31 (0.08 to 0.55)	0.010	0.09, 34%, 18.23 (<i>P</i> = 0.110)	18
Acute ^a				1
Subacute	0.46 (−0.33 to 1.24)	0.250	0.33, 59%, 7.25 (<i>P</i> = 0.060)	4
Chronic	0.34 (0.04 to 0.63)	0.020	0.10, 40%, 18.23 (<i>P</i> = 0.080)	13
Anodal	0.34 (−0.88 to 0.76)	0.110	0.22, 56%, 18.36 (<i>P</i> = 0.020)	9
Cathodal	0.29 (−0.05 to 0.64)	0.100	0.00, 0%, 0.65 (<i>P</i> = 0.890)	4
Bilateral	0.38 (−0.18 to 0.95)	0.180	0.16, 42%, 6.94 (<i>P</i> = 0.140)	5
Anodal + cathodal	0.33 (0.04 to 0.63)	0.030	0.11, 41%, 18.59 (<i>P</i> = 0.070)	13
Anodal + bilateral	0.38 (0.04 to 0.73)	0.030	0.19, 52%, 24.88 (<i>P</i> = 0.020)	14
Cathodal + bilateral	0.29 (0.03 to 0.55)	0.030	0.00, 0%, 7.59 (<i>P</i> = 0.470)	9
At rest	0.17 (−0.09 to 0.43)	0.190	0.00, 0%, 1.46 (<i>P</i> = 0.990)	10
Combined with an intervention	0.62 (0.07 to 1.16)	0.050	0.38, 69%, 22.28 (<i>P</i> = 0.002)	8
Low risk of bias	0.16 (−0.08 to 0.40)	0.190	0.00, 0%, 3.80 (<i>P</i> = 0.920)	10
High risk of bias	0.64 (−0.01 to 1.18)	0.020	0.35, 65%, 19.77 (<i>P</i> = 0.006)	8
All healthy (non-dominant hemisphere stimulation) ^b	1.25 (0.09 to 2.41)	0.04	1.26, 93%, 40.27 (<i>P</i> < 0.001)	4
Dominant hand ^a				1
Non-dominant hand	1.68 (0.67 to 2.70)	0.001	0.62, 79%, 9.40 (<i>P</i> = 0.009)	3
Low risk of bias	0.81 (−0.36 to 1.99)	0.170	0.98, 93%, 0.98 (<i>P</i> < 0.001)	3
High risk of bias	2.79 (1.64 to 3.95)	0.00001	Not applicable	1

Kidgel *et al.* (2013) bilateral montage was not included in calculations as the montage was contrary to the interhemispheric balance model; ^aNot enough data to calculate an effect size; ^bNot enough data to study the effects of non-invasive brain stimulation on the dominant hemisphere in healthy subjects; CI, confidence interval.

Table 4 Repeated transcranial magnetic stimulation sensitivity analysis

Description	Hedges' <i>g</i> (95% CI)	<i>P</i>	Tau ² , <i>I</i> ² and Cochrane <i>Q</i> (<i>P</i>)	No. of comparisons
All stroke	0.46 (0.00 to 0.92)	0.050	0.38, 67%, 30.45 (<i>P</i> < 0.001)	11
Acute	1.7 (−1.75 to 5.16)	0.330	5.94, 96%, 18.23 (<i>P</i> = 0.080)	2
Subacute	−0.02 (−0.50 to 0.46)	0.930	0.00, 0%, 0.30 (<i>P</i> = 0.59)	2
Chronic	0.30 (−0.04 to 0.64)	0.090	0.00, 0%, 4.88 (<i>P</i> = 0.580)	7
Chronic (excluding severely impaired subjects)	0.51 (0.12 to 0.91)	0.010	0.00, 0%, 0.30 (<i>P</i> = 1.000)	6
Low frequency	0.47 (−0.30 to 1.04)	0.520	0.52, 73%, 29.25 (<i>P</i> < 0.001)	9
High frequency	0.53 (0.00 to 1.06)	0.050	0.00, 0%, 0.09 (<i>P</i> < 0.001)	2
At rest	0.67 (−0.15 to 1.48)	0.340	0.80, 81%, 26.11 (<i>P</i> < 0.001)	6
Combined with an intervention	0.24 (−0.11 to 0.59)	0.180	0.00, 0%, 4.29 (<i>P</i> = 0.180)	5
Low risk of bias	0.08 (−0.25 to 0.41)	0.630	0.00, 0%, 4.45 (<i>P</i> = 0.490)	6
High risk of bias	0.92 (−0.06 to 1.89)	0.070	0.99, 82%, 22.65 (<i>P</i> < 0.001)	5
All healthy (non-dominant hemisphere stimulation) ^a	0.30 (−0.08 to 0.68)	0.120	0.00, 0%, 0.52 (<i>P</i> = 0.970)	9
Dominant hand ^b				1
Non-dominant hand ^c	0.33 (−0.08 to 0.68)	0.140	0.00, 0%, 0.52 (<i>P</i> = 0.970)	3

^aNot enough data to study the effects of non-invasive brain stimulation on the dominant hemisphere in healthy subjects; ^bNot enough data to calculate an effect size. ^cWe only included parameters that enhance cortical excitability of the non-dominant hemisphere. CI, confidence interval.

Non-invasive brain stimulation with other interventions

We demonstrated large ESs when tDCS was combined with other interventions. Alterations to brain network connectivity on its own do not lead to motor recovery and require appropriate behavioral and contextual stimulation [48]. As tDCS induces a non-specific effect, it is critical to combine it with interventions that make it specific. For example, Bolognini *et al.* used constrained induced movement therapy with anodal, ipsilesional tDCS, whereas another study

relied on tDCS to return the interhemispheric balance during robot-assisted therapy [49,50]. Simultaneous NIBS may strengthen glutamate receptor learning-dependent activity, selectively boosting training-dependent activation of specific neural networks and promoting motor learning consolidation [51]. Another study combined tDCS with methylphenidate, which has cortical excitability properties with reorganization and improvement of motor function in stroke [52]. These authors showed that tDCS with methylphenidate produced greater effects than either alone [52].

Recovery versus compensation

There is an optimal post-stroke recovery period, which is non-linear and logarithmic [53]. Upper-limb movement mostly recovers in the first 8 weeks after stroke and then plateaus [53–55]. Improvement in dexterity after this could be due to the recovery of motor patterns present before the event or compensatory patterns of remaining motor elements [56]. The outcomes reviewed do not give insight into the quality of recovery but rely on execution (e.g. time to completion). This limits our interpretation of recovery versus compensation. The large ES observed in the non-dominant hand of healthy subjects may support recovery.

The non-dominant healthy motor cortex has less cortical activity during non-dominant hand movement relative to the dominant cortex (i.e. it models a lesioned cortex) [26]. Improvement of motor performance exclusively in the non-dominant hand following non-dominant NIBS can be indicative of motor learning secondary to neuromodulation.

Limitations

Despite obtaining moderate, significant, homogenous ESs across tDCS and rTMS, multiple parameters are heterogeneous, as expected, which reduces the precision of the results [15,16,51,57,58]. Combining ESs of different NIBS techniques may be non-pragmatic as these technologies function differently and we therefore consider them separately in our analysis. We did not study quality of life, thus limiting our understanding of positive changes in patients' functionality. Also, our findings do not consider interindividual variability.

Conclusions

Our results are encouraging as they show that NIBS (eventually combined with other behavioral interventions) is able to promote improvement of dexterity in chronic stroke stages, probably through motor learning mechanisms. We also observed that a large number of studies were unclear in their reporting of multiple components on systematic error, e.g. random sequence generation and allocation concealment were hardly ever reported clearly. In addition, a substantial number of studies were deemed as being at high risk of bias for personnel blinding. As technology advances, devices/techniques to compensate for limited blinding have become available, which may be a solution for this. Finally, given the lack of consensus on best practice in clinical settings, we hope that our findings can be applied in the treatment of chronic stroke patients with mild to moderate fine motor disability and encourage

future research to optimize NIBS interventions and to find reliable biomarkers to develop tailored brain stimulation for motor recovery interventions.

Acknowledgements

This work was conducted with support from Harvard Catalyst/The Harvard Clinical and Translational Science Center and financial contributions from Harvard University and its affiliated academic healthcare centers. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of Harvard and its affiliations. A.T. was supported by a Wallonie–Brussel scholarship, the Belgian–American Educational Foundation and Leon Fredericq Foundation. F.F. was supported by 1R01HD082302-01A1 and 1R21HD79048-01A1.

Disclosure of conflicts of interest

The authors declare no financial or other conflicts of interest.

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix S1. Data repository statement.

Appendix S2. Review of included and excluded studies.

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