Low-Intensity Shockwave Therapy Improves Hemodynamic Parameters in Patients With Vasculogenic Erectile Dysfunction: A Triplex Ultrasonography-Based Sham-Controlled Trial

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ABSTRACT

Background: Although several reports have documented the subjective improvement of erectile function after low-intensity extracorporeal shockwave therapy (LI-ESWT) in patients with vasculogenic erectile dysfunction (ED), objective assessment data of penile hemodynamics are lacking.

Aim: To assess penile hemodynamics before and 3 months after LI-ESWT in a group of patients with documented vasculogenic ED.

Methods: This was a double-blinded, randomized, sham-controlled trial. Forty-six patients with ED were randomized; 30 underwent LI-ESWT and 16 had a sham procedure in double-blinded fashion. All patients underwent penile triplex ultrasonography by the same investigator immediately before and 3 months after treatment. Patient demographics, International Index of Erectile Function erectile function domain (IIEF-ED) score, and minimal clinically important difference were assessed at baseline and 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12 months after treatment.

Outcomes: Changes in peak systolic velocity and resistance index as measured by triplex ultrasonography at baseline and 3 months after treatment were the main outcomes of the study. Secondary outcomes were changes in the IIEF-ED score from baseline to 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12 months after treatment and the percentage of patients reaching a minimal clinically important difference during the same period for the two groups.

Results: IIEF-ED minimal clinically important differences for the active vs sham group were observed for 56.7% vs 12.5% (P = .005) at 1 month, 56.7% vs 12.5% (P = .003) at 3 months, 63.3% vs 18.8% (P = .006) at 6 months, 66.7% vs 31.3% (P = .022) at 9 months, and 75% vs 25% (P = .008) at 12 months. Mean peak systolic velocity increased by 4.5 and 0.6 cm/s in the LI-ESWT and sham groups, respectively (P < .001).

Clinical Implications: Such results offer objective and subjective documentation of the value of this novel treatment modality for men with vasculogenic ED.

Strengths and Limitations: Strengths include the prospective, randomized, sham-controlled type of study and the assessment of penile hemodynamics. Limitations include the small sample and strict inclusion criteria that do not reflect everyday clinical practice.

Conclusion: The present study confirms the beneficial effect of LI-ESWT on penile hemodynamics and the beneficial effect of this treatment up to 12 months. Kalyvianakis D, Hatzichristou D. Low-Intensity Shockwave Therapy Improves Hemodynamic Parameters in Patients With Vasculogenic Erectile Dysfunction: A Triplex Ultrasonography-Based Sham-Controlled Trial. J Sex Med 2017;14:891–897.

INTRODUCTION

Several treatment effective options are available for vasculogenic erectile dysfunction (ED); phosphodiesterase type 5 (PDE5) inhibitors and intracavernosal injections are effective and safe vasodilating agents. The main disadvantage of currently available pharmacotherapy is the inability to alter the underlying predominant pathology in patients with vasculogenic ED (eg, cavernosal artery insufficiency). Furthermore, PDE5 inhibitors might be contraindicated or should be used with caution in some patients.

Low-intensity extracorporeal shockwave therapy (LI-ESWT) has shown encouraging results for patients with ischemic heart...
disease, chronic diabetic foot ulcers, or wound healing. Basic research has shown that low-intensity shockwaves act by provoking microtrauma in the endothelium of the helicine arteries, leading to the release of angiogenic factors, such as nitric oxide synthase and vascular endothelial growth factor, and endothelial cell proliferation factors, such as proliferating cell nuclear antigen.

Recent sham-controlled clinical trials have reported subjective improvement in erectile function and systemic endothelial function measured by nocturnal penile tumescence and flow-mediated dilatation, respectively. However, most of the published studies did not assess penile hemodynamics. The purpose of the study was to assess penile hemodynamics before and after LI-ESWT and subjective long-term improvement of erectile function.

METHODS

We recruited men who a history of vasculogenic ED for at least 6 months. Diagnosis was based on sexual and medical history, clinical examination, and laboratory test results. Eligible subjects were at least 18 years old, had ED for at least 6 months, and were at least partial responders to PDE5 inhibitors (able to penetrate at least half the time while taking a PDE5 inhibitor). For inclusion in the study, after a 4-week washout period, the baseline International Index of Erectile Function erectile function domain (IIEF-EF) score had to be at least 6 (mild to moderate ED) to 21 (moderate and severe ED). Patients with no ED or with mild ED were excluded. All subjects had been in a stable heterosexual relationship with the same partner for more than 3 months. The exclusion criteria were radical prostatectomy; psychogenic ED; penile anatomic abnormalities; neurogenic ED; hormonal abnormalities; antiandrogen therapy; history of heart attack, stroke, or life-threatening arrhythmia within 6 months before enrollment in the study; and recovery from any cancer within the past 5 years. All patients accepted and signed the informed consent form for the study, which was approved by the institutional review board.

Study Sample

Sample size calculation was based on a difference of at least 3.5 in changes from baseline to month 12 in IIEF-EF score between the study groups, with 80% power and 5% statistical significance. The calculation assumes a common SD of the change of 3.5 and a ratio of 2:1 between the groups. A two-group t-test with a 0.05 two-sided significance level would have 80% power to detect the difference of at least 3.5 in IIEF-EF score between groups when the sample sizes were 15 for the sham group and 30 for the active treatment group.

Study Protocol

The study consisted of the following phases. The screening phase included a 4-week run-in phase of using PDE5 inhibitors to identify at least partial response to PDE5 inhibitors. Subjects who met the inclusion criteria underwent a 4-week PDE5 inhibitor washout period and completed the IIEF questionnaire, and data were selected by a research assistant. At the end of the washout phase, eligible patients underwent triplex ultrasonography of the cavernosal arteries by the same investigator to assess penile hemodynamics. All patients were blindly randomized to one of two active treatment groups or to a sham control group. The groups were marked as A, B, and C, two of which indicated active treatment groups and one of which indicated a sham control group. The treatment protocol was applied by two investigators in double-blinded fashion and included biweekly treatment sessions at the first, second, third, seventh, eighth, and ninth weeks after the washout period, for a total of 12 treatments (sessions). All patients underwent penile triplex ultrasonography by the same investigator at baseline and 3 months after treatment. Side effect profile was assessed at every visit during the treatment period, and the IIEF score was assessed before and at 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12 months after treatment (Figure 1).

Blinding and Randomization

Study procedures were identical for the active treatment and sham control groups, but the sham treatment was conducted using a distinctively designed shockwave applicator. The sham shockwave applicator contained an element that blocked delivery of shockwaves. The two types of shockwave applicator (active and sham) looked identical. All patients were blindly randomized using specific computer software into one of two active treatment groups or into a sham control group in a 2:1 ratio, respectively.

LI-ESWT Methodology

We applied a standard commercial gel normally used for sonography on the subject’s penis and on the membrane of the shockwave applicator. The treatment included a standard protocol of 300 shocks to each treatment location (three locations on the penile shaft and two locations on the penile crura for a total of 1,500 shocks) using a specialized focused shockwave probe (Omnispec ED1000, Medispec Ltd, Yehud, Israel) as described in previous studies. The treatment was performed at an energy intensity of 0.09 mJ/mm²; the energy level was automatically predetermined by the device. The treatment was performed at an energy intensity of 0.09 mJ/mm² and frequency of 160 pulses/min. Each treatment session lasted approximately 20 minutes without local or systemic analgesia.

Penile Triplex Ultrasonography Protocol

Penile triplex ultrasonography was performed (BK Flex Focus 400, BK Ultrasound, Peabody, MA, USA) to assess penile hemodynamics at baseline and 3 months after the final LI-ESWT treatment. The test was performed as follows: 0.5 mL of vasoactive agent (tri-mix solution) was injected into the corpus cavernosum and the time of injection was recorded. Then, the ultrasound B-mode probe was placed on the left and right
cavernous arteries. By shifting to Doppler mode, focusing the
cursor, and adapting a right angle at 60°/C14, the systolic and end-
diastolic velocities (centimeters per second) were determined.
Doppler angle was not changed during the evaluation. An eval-
uation of peak systolic velocity (PSV) to end-diastolic velocity
flow with automatic calculation of the resistance index
(RI) at various time points was followed for up to 30 minutes.
Flow measurements were performed at 5, 10, 15, and 20 mi-
utes, reserving a measurement at 30 minutes for patients who
did not achieve adequate penile hardness or a purely erectile
response; in such cases, re-dosing with 0.5 mL of tri-mix solution
was followed and all measurements were repeated. The highest
values achieved were reported.

Main Outcome Measures
Changes in PSV and RI as measured by triplex ultrasonogra-
phy at baseline and 3 month after treatment were the main
outcomes of the study. The IIEF-EF score was used to evaluate
erectile function. Improvement in IIEF-EF score from baseline to
12-month follow-up; the minimal clinically important difference
in IIEF-EF score; and a change in IIEF-EF score equal to or
greater than 2, 5, and 7 points for mild, moderate, and severe
ED, respectively, were measured.12

Statistical Analysis
Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0 (IBM
Corp, Armonk, NY, USA). Normality of measurements for PSV,
RI, and IIEF-EF score was tested using the Shapiro-Wilk test to
establish that normality was not violated in most cases. Para-
metric tests and models were used for analyses of the data. Study
parameters were summarized in tables by treatment and pre-
sent as mean ± SD, median ± range, or frequency (percentage)
according to the distribution of the parameter. Comparative
analysis of baseline characteristics was applied using the two-
sample t-test or median test for quantitative parameters and
the χ² test for categorical parameters. The repeated measures
general linear model was applied for analyzing the difference in
IIEF-EF scores and changes from baseline between treatments.
Changes from baseline in PSV and RI were analyzed within each
treatment using paired-samples t-test. The level of significance
for all analyses was set at 5%.

RESULTS
Fifty-nine patients were screened; 46 who met the inclusion
criteria were randomized into groups. All 46 patients completed
the study; the sham control group and the active treatment group
consisted of 16 and 30 randomly assigned patients, respectively.
Table 1 presents the baseline characteristics of the two study
groups.

IIEF-EF Score Changes
At baseline and 1, 3, 6, 9, and 12 months after the last
treatment, the IIEF-EF scores in the active treated group were
13.8 ± 3.6, 18.46 ± 3.6, 18.46 ± 3.5, 19.0 ± 3.3, 18.63 ± 3.0
and 19.1 ± 2.8, respectively. The IIEF-EF scores in the sham
group were 14.6 ± 3.4, 16.43 ± 3.5, 15.93 ± 3.6, 16.12 ± 2.6,
16.00 ± 3.0, and 16.00 ± 2.8 (Figure 2). One patient achieved
an IIEF-EF score of 26 (no ED). We tested whether there were
significant differences among the six repeated measurements of
IIEF-EF score over time. The model showed no differ-
ence for the pretreatment measurement between the two groups
(P = .475). In addition, the difference in the mean IIEF-EF
score the first month after treatment showed a tendency to-
ward significance (P = .072) but became significant between the
two groups after month 3 (P = .02), whereas after months 6, 9,
and 12 months the differences were highly statistically signi-
cant (P < .01 for all comparisons).

A minimal clinically important difference of the IIEF-EF score
for the active treatment vs sham group was 56.7% vs 12.5%
Table 1. Baseline characteristics of study population at randomization (no phosphodiesterase type 5 inhibitor use)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sham</th>
<th>Treatment</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men, n</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>.52†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (y), median (range)</td>
<td>55.1 (38–72)</td>
<td>53.0 (31–72)</td>
<td>.99‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ED (y), median (range)</td>
<td>5.5 (1–15)</td>
<td>5.5 (1–20)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concomitant condition, %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiovascular risk factors*</td>
<td>56.3</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>.69§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes mellitus</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>26.7</td>
<td>.45§</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIEF-EF domain score, mean ± SD</td>
<td>14.6 ± 3.4</td>
<td>13.8 ± 3.6</td>
<td>.47†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EHSG score, mean ± SD</td>
<td>2.75 ± 0.45</td>
<td>2.95 ± 0.41</td>
<td>.70†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PSV (cm/s), mean ± SD</td>
<td>30.7 ± 3.55</td>
<td>31.1 ± 3.23</td>
<td>.70†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDV (cm/s), mean ± SD</td>
<td>5.95 ± 1.87</td>
<td>5.86 ± 1.65</td>
<td>.86‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI, mean ± SD</td>
<td>0.81 ± 0.07</td>
<td>0.80 ± 0.05</td>
<td>.53‡</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ED = erectile dysfunction; EDV = end-diastolic velocity; EHSG = Erection Hardness Grading Scale; IIEF-EF = International Index of Erectile Function erectile function domain; PSV = peak systolic velocity; RI = resistance index.

*Including at least one of the following: hypertension, metabolic syndrome, obesity, smoking, and hypercholesterolemia.

†By median test.
‡By Student t-test.
§By χ² test.

(P = .005) at 1 month, 56.7% vs 12.5% (P = .003) at 3 months, 63.3% vs 18.8% (P = .006) at 6 months, 66.7% vs 31.3% (P = .022) at 9 months, and 75% vs 25% (P = .008) at 12 months (Figure 3).

Penile Hemodynamics Changes

Penile triplex ultrasonographic measurements were used as an objective method to assess penile hemodynamics before and 3 months after treatment. The mean change of PSV was 4.5 and 0.6 for the treatment and sham-control groups, respectively, from baseline to 3 months after the last treatment (Table 2). The mean change of the RI was 0.04 and −0.01 for the treatment and placebo groups, respectively, from baseline to 3 months after treatment. We tested whether there was a significant difference between baseline and post-treatment PSV and RI. P values were greater than .05 for the sham control group and less than 0.001 for the active group. Individual plots describing maximal PSV at baseline and at 3-month follow-up clearly showed an

Figure 2. Twelve-month FU of International Index of Erectile Function erectile function score. All analyses were done using Student t-test. FU = follow-up; M = month. Figure 2 is available online at www.jsm.jsexmed.org.
Nevertheless, in all published data. The present results were consistent with those of previous studies for changes in IIEF-EF score. An important finding of our study is that IIEF score and PSV increased significantly at 3 months in a linear fashion. Patients with no improvement in IIEF score had no improvement in PSV. The increase in IIEF-ED score remained statistically significant even at 12-month follow-up in the active treatment group, clearly showing the long-term benefit of LI-ESWT.

The concept of improving endothelial function and neovascularization using low-intensity shockwave energy is not new. Well-established therapeutic protocols have been established in cardiology and diabetology to exploit this application. In sexual medicine, the application of LI-SWT is a novelty and emerged by the unmet need for a non-pharmaceutical therapy that could be used to supplement existing modalities. Unfortunately, existing treatments for ED offer only temporary symptomatic relief and none are curative. Targeting the etiology of ED is an extremely demanding clinical feat that appears to be served satisfactorily by LI-ESWT. In particular, clinical researchers have shown an overall improvement in IIEF score and a very high rate of conversion of non-responders to PDE5 inhibitors after application of LI-ESWT. Although the exact mode of action of LI-ESWT is not known, it appears to be mediated by a local induction of neoangiogenesis and endothelial repair by stimulating the expression of angiogenesis-related growth factors (nitric oxide synthase and vascular endothelial growth factor) and endothelial cell proliferation factors (proliferating cell nuclear antigen). Further basic research is urgently needed to gain insight into the mechanism of action of LI-ESWT on cavernosal structures.

Table 2. Change from baseline in PSV and RI at 3-Month FU

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sham group</th>
<th>P value</th>
<th>Active group</th>
<th>P value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PSV (cm/s)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>30.7 ± 3.55</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>31.1 ± 3.23</td>
<td>.&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-mo FU</td>
<td>31.1 ± 3.50</td>
<td></td>
<td>35.5 ± 3.60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
<td>.&lt;.001*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>0.81 ± 0.07</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.80 ± 0.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-mo FU</td>
<td>0.80 ± 0.05</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.84 ± 0.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FU = follow-up; PSV = peak systolic velocity; RI = resistance index.

*By paired-samples t-test.
CONCLUSIONS

The present study demonstrated the beneficial effect of LI-ESWT on penile hemodynamics. Also, the study confirmed previous findings that application of LI-ESWT to the penile shaft is safe and effective for the treatment of vasculogenic ED.

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REFERENCES


