

# Do Sensor-Based Interventions Differ from Traditional Physical Therapies in Improving Older Adults' Balance?

Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting 2023, Vol. 67(1) 7–13  
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DOI: 10.1177/21695067231192520  
journals.sagepub.com/home/pro



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## Abstract

Interventions using sensor technologies have the potential to facilitate balance improvement in clinical practice and, to some extent, are recommended as an alternative to traditional physical therapies. However, whether sensor-based technologies differ from traditional physical therapies in improving older adults' balance remains unclear. Our systematic review identified 25 randomized controlled trials for the meta-analysis. The findings showed that sensor-based interventions performed better than traditional physical therapies in improving balance performance (mean difference = -0.448s,  $p < 0.001$ ). In subgroup analyses by dividing sensors into three categories (i.e., optical, perception, and wearable sensors), interventions using optical sensors were more effective than traditional physical therapies (mean difference = -0.681s,  $p < 0.001$ ); while no significant differences were found for the interventions using perception sensors (mean difference = -0.226 s,  $p = 0.106$ ) and wearable sensors (mean difference = -0.490s,  $p < 0.328$ ) as compared to traditional physical therapies.

## Keywords

sensor-based intervention, traditional physical therapies, balance, older adults, meta-analysis

## Introduction

Over the past few decades, human life expectancy has increased dramatically due to tremendous advances in technology and healthcare. Approximately one-sixth of the global population will be over 60 by 2025 (Chen et al., 2022). This rapid growth of the aging population inevitably increases the risk of individual healthcare and their economic burden. For example, one in three older adults over 65 falls at least once a year, contributing to 55.8% of accidental deaths in older adults (Osoba et al., 2019). Thirty percent of falls are accompanied by various injuries that impair older adults' physical health and mobility independence (Barker et al., 2015). These fall-related consequences significantly reduce the confidence and life quality of older adults. Moreover, according to the statistics, the costs of fall-related injuries ranked fifth in individual medical expenses (Haddad et al., 2019).

Balance deteriorates along with aging and has been increasingly highlighted as a significant fall risk factor (Soh et al., 2021). Many therapies to improve balance performance have been proposed in rehabilitation and clinical practice to prevent falls. Traditional physical therapy interventions, such as Pilates exercise, high-intensity strength training, and Otago exercise, are commonly used by physiotherapists to improve balance impairment and have proven

effective (Merchant et al., 2021). However, the global shortage of professional therapists and devices severely limits older adults' access to timely and essential medical support, especially during pandemics. In recent years, with the rapid development of sensor technology and novel advances in analytical algorithms, sensor-based interventions that combine sensor technologies and physical therapies have been proposed to improve older adults' balance in the home environment (Unbehau et al., 2018). For example, exergaming and virtual reality have been widely adopted in balance exercise and training programs (Truijen et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Although the effectiveness of sensor-based interventions and traditional physical therapies have been validated separately in previous research, few studies

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**Table 1.** The search terms.

AND	(wearable* OR sensor* OR acceler* OR gyro* OR magnetometer* OR camera* OR track* OR exergam* OR virtual reality OR VR OR augmented reality OR AR) (balanc* OR postur* OR gait OR walk* OR mobility) (old* OR elder* OR senior* OR aged OR geriatr* OR gerontol*) (train* OR program* OR exercise* OR intervention*) (random* OR randomized controlled trial* OR RCT*)
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have systematically compared these two types of interventions on older adults' balance performance and further specify the type of sensors.

Therefore, we tried to fill this research gap by providing a comprehensive and reliable assessment of the performance of sensor-based interventions and traditional physical therapies in balance improvement. We also further sub-grouped the sensors to explore specific sensors' effectiveness. Thus, we conducted a meta-analysis study, which pooled results from multiple previous studies. The method can provide a more precise estimate of the effectiveness difference between sensor-based interventions and traditional physical therapy interventions. Specifically, we utilized the Timed Up and Go Test (TUG) for evaluating old adults' balance (Akin et al., 2021). Moreover, based on a previous study (Chen et al., 2022), we categorized the sensors into optical sensors (i.e., normally including Kinect, infrared sensors, and cameras), perception sensors (i.e., referring to the Wii balance board and force platforms), and wearable sensors (i.e., related to accelerometers, gyroscopes, and inertial sensors).

## Methods

### Search and Selection Strategy

This review study was registered on the PROSPERO platform (No.: CRD42022362817) and performed following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Guidelines (Higgins et al., 2019). We initially screened six electronic databases for relevant articles from 1970 to 2022, including Academic Search Premier, Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature-Complete, Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials, MEDLINE, PubMed, and Web of Science. Table 1 presents the search terms we used in this study.

We included the studies meeting the following criteria: 1) randomized controlled trials (RCTs); 2) with interventions of sensor technologies and traditional physical therapies; 3) with outcomes for balance evaluation; 4) with older adults over an average age of 60 years; 5) published in peer-reviewed journals; 6) written in English. We excluded review articles, case studies, commentary letters, and studies with only qualitative analyses. We first identified the relevant articles by screening the titles and abstracts, then reviewed the full text of eligible articles for the final decision, and assessed the reference list of included articles to determine

any missed articles. Two authors (Q.M. and J.Z.) examined the articles independently, and any discrepancies in the selection process were discussed with the third author (H.W.).

### Data Analysis

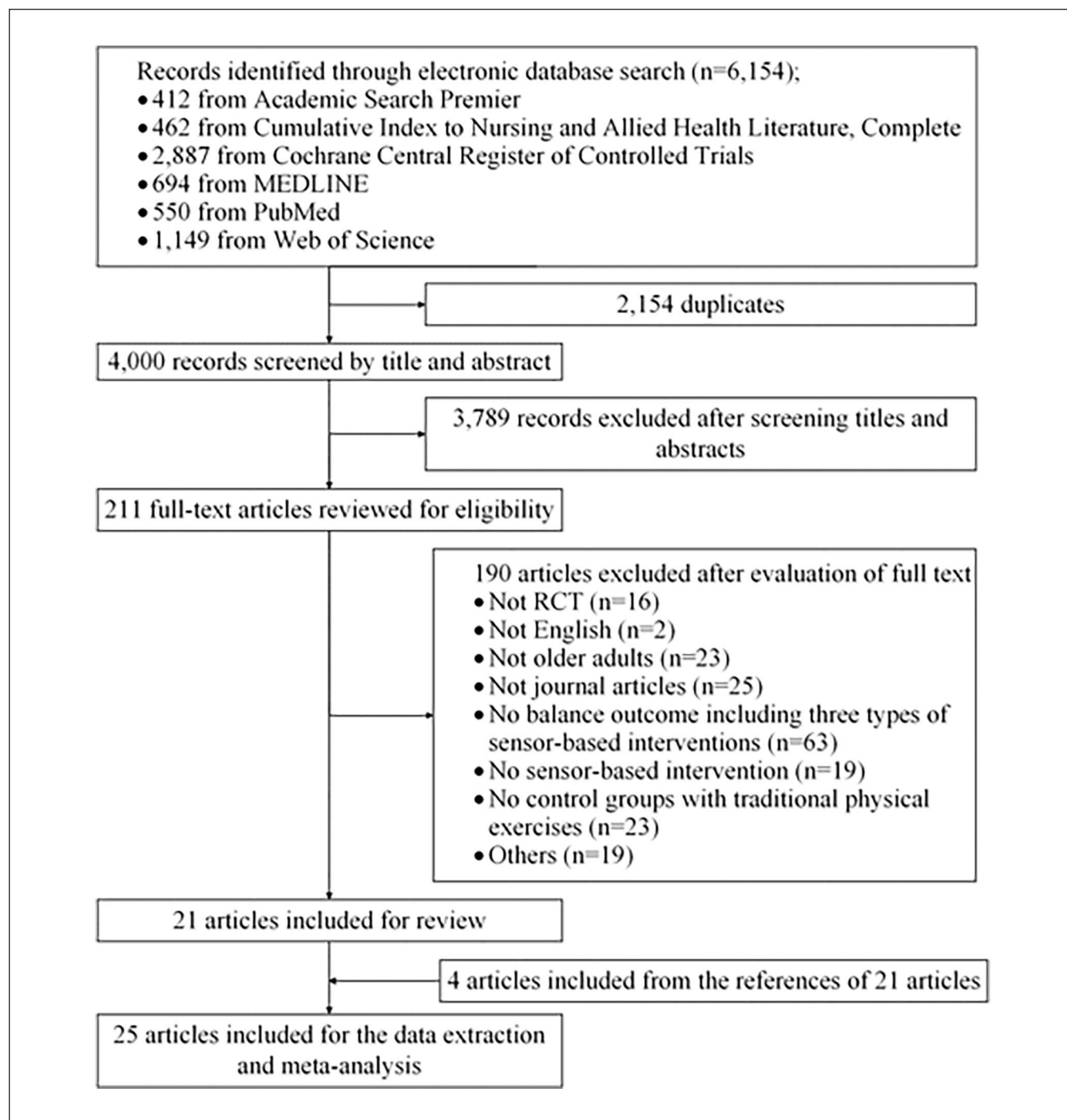
We extracted study characteristics, intervention strategies, and post-intervention data of outcomes from the included articles for our meta-analysis. We first considered all articles with sensor-based interventions and traditional physical therapies to perform a meta-analysis to obtain a global comparative result. Then, we divided the sensor technologies into three categories, including optical sensors (e.g., visually tracking full-body movement), perception sensors (e.g., measuring the pressure center of the feet), and wearable sensors (e.g., tracking part-body motion). A subgroup meta-analysis was performed for each of the three sensor categories.

We employed the mean differences in balance outcomes and 95% confidence interval (CI) to examine the effect size of each trial. The inconsistency test ( $I^2$ ) was used to evaluate the heterogeneity of the studies. If the  $I^2$  value was less than 40%, a fixed-effect model was utilized to pool the effect size; otherwise, we used a random-effect model (Deeks et al., 2019). The publication bias was assessed through Egger's regression tests (Egger et al., 1997). All meta-analyses were conducted by Comprehensive Meta-Analysis 3.0 (Biostat, Inc., Tampa, FL, USA). All significance levels were predetermined at  $p < 0.05$ .

Two authors (Q.M. and J.Z.) independently assessed the bias risks of the included articles using the revised Cochrane Risk-of-Bias tool (Higgins et al., 2016). Based on the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development, and Evaluation system (Guyatt et al., 2008), we identified the quality of evidence as high, moderate, low, or very low.

## Results

A total of 6,154 articles were initially obtained from the six selected databases. After removing 2,154 duplicates, we screened the titles and abstracts of 4,000 potential articles, 211 of which were included based on the inclusion criteria. We included 21 articles after reviewing the full text of the 211 relevant articles. Four more articles were added from the reference list of the included 21 articles. Thus, 25 articles were finally considered and included in this study and subsequent analysis (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The flow of the literature search and selection process.

A total of 1,625 participants were tested in the included studies, with 750 participants in sensor-based intervention groups and 875 in traditional physical therapy groups. The mean age of participants ranged from 61.1 years to 81.5 years in sensor-based intervention groups and from 61.9 years to 81.6 years in traditional physical therapy groups. Among the included 25 studies, 11 studies tested optical sensors (Chen et al., 2020; Chow & Mann, 2015; Hagedorn & Holm, 2010; Htut et al., 2018; Ku et al., 2019; Lee, 2020; Moreira et al., 2021; Park et al., 2017; Sadeghi et al., 2021; Shih et al., 2016; Yeşilyaprak et al., 2016), 11 studies examined perception sensors (Alagumoorthi et al., 2022; Cho et al., 2012; Choi et al., 2017; Hou & Li, 2022; Khushnood et al., 2021; Kwok & Pua, 2016; Liao et al., 2015; Padala et al., 2012; Park et al., 2015; Pluchino et al., 2012; Singh et al., 2012), and 3 studies used wearable sensors (Bao et al., 2018; Bao et al., 2022; Yoon & Son, 2020). It was worth noting that there were two trials in each of two included studies (Choi et al., 2017; Pluchino et al., 2012). The periods (mean  $\pm$  SD) of the sensor-based interventions examined in the 25 included studies were:  $45.80 \pm 16.18$  minutes per session,  $3.32 \pm 1.52$  sessions per week, and  $7.44 \pm 2.97$  weeks.

As shown in Figure 2-a, a significant difference existed between the sensor-based intervention groups and the traditional physical therapies groups ( $I^2 < 0.001\%$ , mean difference (MD) = -0.448s, 95% CI = -0.641 to -0.255,  $p < 0.001$ ). Our subgroup analysis showed a significant difference between the sensor-based intervention groups with optical sensors and the traditional physical therapies groups ( $I^2 = 5.700\%$ , MD = -0.681 s, 95% CI = -0.964 to -0.399,  $p < 0.001$ ) (See Figure 2-b). However, no significant difference existed between the traditional physical therapy groups and the sensor-based intervention groups with wearable sensors ( $I^2 < 0.001\%$ , MD = -0.490 s, 95% CI = -1.474 to 0.493,  $p = 0.328$ ) (See Figure 2-c) or perception sensors ( $I^2 < 0.001\%$ , MD = -0.226 s, 95% CI = -0.499 to 0.048,  $p = 0.106$ ) (See Figure 2-d).

Only one of the 25 included studies had a high risk of bias (Hagedorn & Holm, 2010). The evidence quality for the effects on TUG test scores was assessed as high for perception sensors vs. traditional physical therapies, moderate for optical sensors vs. traditional physical therapies, moderate for wearable sensors vs. traditional physical therapies, and moderate for all sensors vs. traditional physical therapies. The result of Egger's regression tests showed no publication bias in the included articles ( $p = 0.003$ ).

## Discussion

Sensor-based interventions performed better than traditional physical therapies in improving older adults' TUG balance

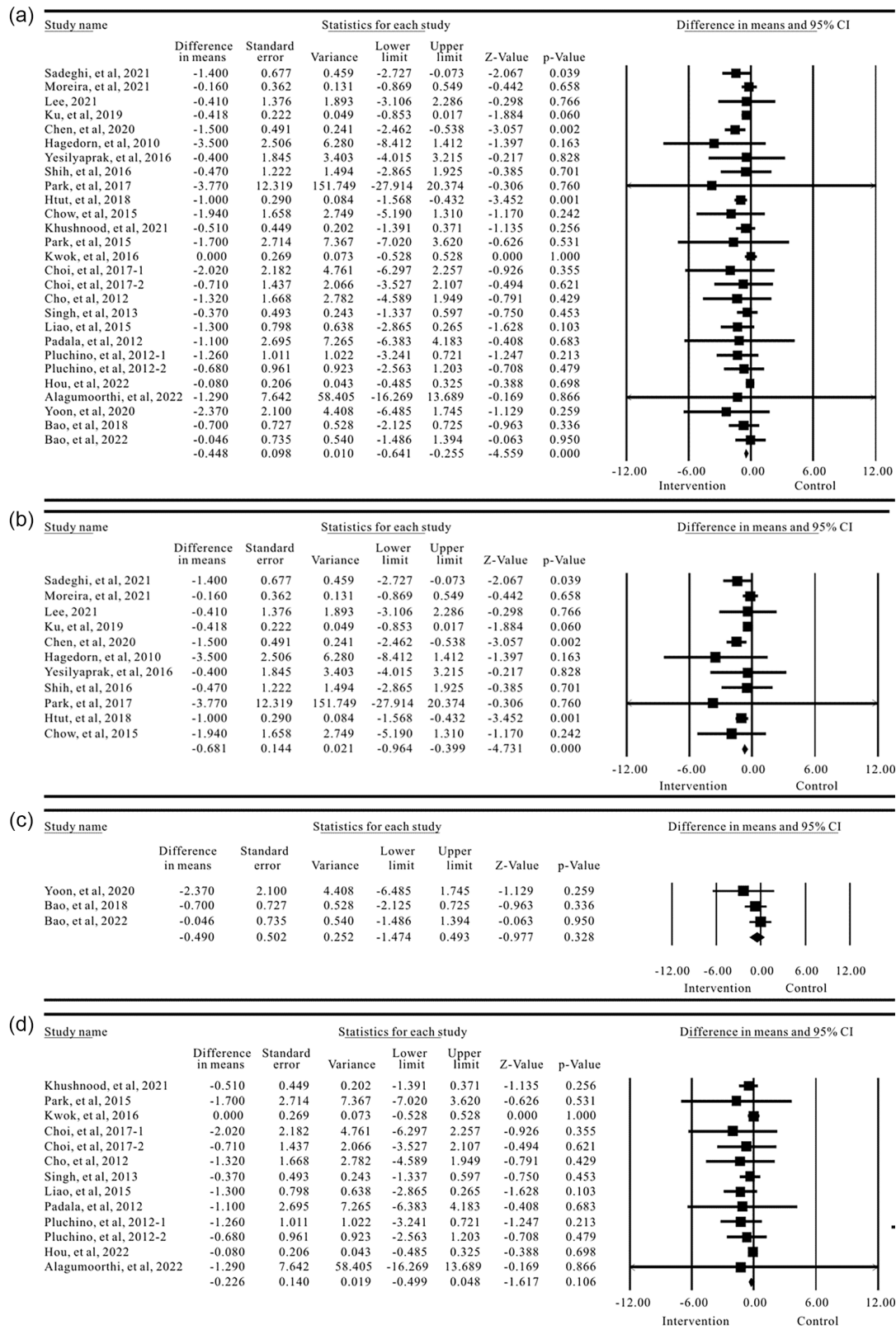
performance. Interestingly, optical sensors showed significant improvement compared to traditional physical therapies in the sub-analyses, consistent with previous studies (Liu et al., 2022); whereas perception and wearable sensors revealed no effectiveness difference with traditional physical therapies. One possible reason for the conflicting results is that the optical sensors allow the users to move in a large space and try different training activities; while the perception sensor generally has a fixed space for movement and thus limits the user's activity. Besides, in the 25 included articles, optical sensors provided whole body's motion feedback while most wearable sensors captured upper-body's motion. The movement signals from the lower trunk are more useful and informative than signals from the upper trunk in improving balance (Halická et al., 2014). Therefore, interventions using optical sensors performed better than the other two sensors. Furthermore, interventions using optical sensors have some limitations. First, optical sensors were suggested for users without neurological impairment due to the complex operation and setting. Perception sensors, such as the Wii balance board, have proven to be better than some optical sensors (Kinect) in enhancing functional improvements among people with Parkinson's diseases (Marotta et al., 2022). Second, the optical sensors may raise privacy issues compared to other two types of sensors. Therefore, we recommend more research to explore the optimal sensor technology for balance training in older adults with specific diseases.

The practitioners should be cautious when applying our findings due to some limitations. First, we included a general population of older adults without specifying their health status. The effectiveness of sensor-based interventions and traditional physical therapies may or may not differ after subgrouping participants' diseases (e.g., hypertension, diabetes, and stroke). Second, this study only used the TUG test result to assess balance performance due to the limited trials. More RCTs with multiple outcomes should be conducted to fully compare the effectiveness of sensor-based interventions and traditional physical therapies in balance improvement.

## Conclusion

The present meta-analyse study showed that sensor-based interventions, particularly optical sensors, performed better than traditional physical therapies in balance improvement among older adults. However, no significant differences were found between traditional physical therapies and perception or wearable sensors. Practitioners and future studies are strongly suggested to explore optical sensors' potential impact and application for balance training and rehabilitation among older adults.





**Figure 2.** Forest plots for the effects of sensor-based intervention groups, i.e., (a) all sensor technologies, (b) optical sensors, (c) wearable sensors, and (d) perception sensors, on TUG as compared with traditional physical therapy groups.

## Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Shenzhen-Hong Kong-Macao Science and Technology Project Fund [no. SGDX20210823103403028], Health and Medical Research Fund [20211201], and Joint Postdoc Scheme with Non-local Institutions at Hong Kong Polytechnic University [P0042959].

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