**The effect of different training modes on skeletal muscle microvascular density and endothelial enzymes controlling NO availability**

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This review was presented at the symposium *Impact of physical activity, ageing, obesity and metabolic syndrome on muscle microvascular perfusion and endothelial metabolism,* which took place at Physiology 2014, London on 1st July 2014.

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**Abstract**

It is becoming increasingly apparent that a high vasodilator response of the skeletal muscle microvasculature to insulin and exercise is of critical importance for adequate muscle perfusion and long-term microvascular and muscle metabolic health. Previous research has shown that a sedentary lifestyle, obesity, and ageing lead to impairments in the vasodilator response, while a physically active lifestyle keeps both microvascular density and vasodilator response high. To investigate the molecular mechanisms behind these impairments and the benefits of exercise training interventions, our laboratory has recently developed quantitative immunofluorescence microscopy methods to measure protein content of eNOS and NAD(P)Hoxidase specifically in the endothelial layer of capillaries and arterioles of human skeletal muscle. As eNOS produces NO and NAD(P)Hoxidase superoxide anions (quenching NO) we propose that the eNOS/NAD(P)Hoxidase protein ratio is a marker of vasodilator capacity. The novel methods show that endurance training (ET) and high intensity interval training (HIT) generally regarded as a time efficient alternative to ET, increase eNOS protein content and the eNOS/NADP(H) oxidase protein ratio in previously sedentary lean and obese young men. Resistance exercise training had smaller but qualitatively similar effects. Western blot data of other laboratories suggest that endurance exercise training leads to similar changes in sedentary elderly men. Future research will be required to investigate the relative importance of other sources and tissues in the balance between NO and $O_2^-$ production seen by the vascular smooth muscle layer of terminal arterioles.

**Introduction**

The aim of this review is to discuss how exercise training influences the balance between eNOS and NAD(P)Hoxidase (NAD(P)Hox). It will also investigate whether a change in this balance, together with the well-known increase in capillary density, may play a significant role in the increases in insulin-mediated perfusion of skeletal muscle and, therefore, insulin sensitivity that is seen following training. The review will start with a brief outline of the role played by the skeletal muscle microvasculature in the mechanisms that lead to glucose uptake after meal ingestion, and then discuss the roles that eNOS, NAD(P)Hox and capillary density play in these mechanisms. The reader should be aware that this review starts from two premises. The first is that increases in insulin, resulting from meal ingestion and achieved during a hyperinsulinemic euglycemic clamp, lead to insulin-mediated activation of eNOS and subsequent increases in nitric oxide (NO) production in the terminal arterioles of human skeletal muscle.  This increase in NO production leads to vasodilatation of the common terminal arterioles, in previously unperfused microvascular units (MVUs) (Fig. 2 in Wagenmakers *et al.* (2015b)), and a coordinated increase in the blood supply to the capillaries served by this terminal arteriole.  The second premise is that this mechanism is impaired in obesity, sedentary elderly individuals, insulin resistant states and type 2 diabetes. For a complete and nuanced discussion of the experimental evidence in support of these premises the reader is referred to two of the other reviews from this symposium (Keske *et al.*, 2015; Wagenmakers *et al.*, 2015a), published in this issue of the Journal of Physiology, and earlier reviews of Barrett et al. (2009; 2011; 2014). However, to present a balanced argument the reader is also referred to the confounding model proposed by Professor Poole and colleagues, in which all capillaries in skeletal muscle are simultaneously perfused in resting and active muscle, but only over a fraction of their length, with longitudinal recruitment occurring following stimulation (Poole *et al.*, 2013; Poole, 2014). In writing this review the authors have chosen to prioritise research conducted in humans, with conclusions drawn from rodent or in vitro cell research used to fill in information that is currently absent from the published human literature.


**Vasodilator response of muscle microcirculation and metabolic health**

The skeletal muscle microcirculation is emerging as an important regulator of health and disease, because of its critical role in matching perfusion with metabolic demands of skeletal

muscle. Like skeletal muscle itself the microcirculation is highly responsive to changes in lifestyle with substantial improvements in microvascular structure and function occurring. Recent work has established the critical role that muscle perfusion plays in health and disease (Murdolo *et al.*, 2008), with an inability of perfusion to meet local metabolic demands emerging as a key factor in the development of skeletal muscle insulin resistance (Barrett *et al.*, 2011; Keske *et al.*, 2015), anabolic resistance leading to sarcopenia and frailty (Wagenmakers *et al.*, 2006; Mitchell *et al.*, 2013), and exercise intolerance (Frisbee *et al.*, 2011; Frisbee *et al.*, 2014).

**Balance between NO production and NO quenching**

A defining feature of these impairments is an altered balance between the formation of nitric oxide (NO) and the quenching of NO by superoxide anions and other reactive oxygen species (ROS) (Fig. 1). NO is primarily synthesised through the conversion of L-Arginine to L-Citrulline by NO synthase (NOS) (Alderton *et al.*, 2001).  There are 3 isoforms of NOS (neuronal NOS (nNOS), endothelial NOS (eNOS) and inducible NOS (iNOS), with all 3 isoforms being expressed in skeletal muscle (Kobzik *et al.*, 1995). Experiments in isolated arteries and arterioles and cultured endothelial cells have shown that the primary source of endothelial NO synthesis is eNOS (McAllister & Laughlin, 2006). NO produced by the endothelium diffuses to the smooth muscle causing vasodilation, however, recent technical advances, allowing the sites of NO synthesis to be visualised, have suggested that as well as endothelial NO production NO synthesised in the vicinity of microvessels also influences smooth muscle NO exposure (Kavdia & Popel, 2004). Therefore, NO generated by nNOS in the muscle sarcolemma has taken on a more significant role in the regulation of skeletal muscle perfusion, in particular during exercise where specific inhibition of nNOS has been shown to reduce rat spinotrapezius blood flow during contraction (Copp *et al.*, 2011). Unlike skeletal muscle perfusion during exercise the significance of nNOS to insulin-mediated increases in microvascular blood flow are unknown, although insulin has been shown to activate nNOS in C2C12 myotubes and mouse skeletal muscle (Hinchee-Rodriguez *et al.*, 2013).

eNOS protein content and activity will together determine the total endothelial NO production.  Control of eNOS activation is complex with a number of posttranslational

modifications regulating its activation. As increases in insulin concentration and fluid shear stress lead to eNOS phosphorylation at ser$^{1177}$ (human enzyme), both *in vitro* in cultured endothelial cells (Rafikov *et al.*, 2011) and *in vivo* in the endothelium of human skeletal muscle (Cocks *et al.*, 2012), this is now regarded to be an important site for NO regulation. As well as NO formed by NOS there are a number of non-enzymatic sources of NO production that may contribute to smooth muscle NO exposure. These sources include NO generated from reduction of plasma nitrite (Lundberg *et al.*, 2011) and NO released from red blood cells, where it binds reversibly to haemoglobin (Baskurt *et al.*, 2011).

There are several sources of superoxide anions and ROS in skeletal muscle and its microvasculature that may influence NO availability through the scavenging of NO (Powers *et al.*, 2011; Li *et al.*, 2013). The primary location of ROS production affecting smooth muscle NO exposure is unknown, but it is likely that vascular and perivascular sources interact. There are a number of potential sources of ROS in the skeletal muscle and its vasculature (Jackson *et al.*, 2007), however NAD(P)Hox is assumed to be the major source of superoxide anion production and NO scavenging in skeletal muscle and vascular cells. For more detailed information on alternative sources see Gliemann et al. (2014).

**Mechanism leading to impaired insulin-mediated vasodilation of the skeletal muscle microvascuature in sedentary and obese state**

Impaired insulin-mediated glucose uptake is the condition where the role of microvascular NO bioavailability in disease progression is best defined (Barrett *et al.*, 2009; Keske *et al.*, 2015). Using the non-specific NOS inhibitor L-NAME Vincent et al. (2004) showed that the microvascular action of insulin is NO mediated in rat skeletal muscle. This study showed that the increase in microvascular blood volume observed following insulin administration was blocked by NOS inhibition and resulted in a reduced muscle glucose uptake. Subsequent studies have shown that increases in microvascular blood volume are impaired in obese men and women following a liquid meal, containing carbohydrate (320kcal), fat (72kcal) and protein (80kcal)(Keske *et al.*, 2009). The proposed mechanism was that reductions in in NO production in response to increases in plasma insulin and elevated superoxide ($O_2^-$) production leading to NO scavenging together reduce NO production in terminal arterioles of skeletal muscle (Wagenmakers *et al.*, 2006). This mechanism would not only explain the

impaired insulin-mediated increases in microvascular blood volume in skeletal muscle of sedentary and obese adults, but also make a major contribution to the insulin resistance seen in obesity (Sjöstrand *et al.*, 2002; Keske *et al.*, 2009) and type II diabetes (Gudbjornsdottir *et al.*, 2005; Clerk *et al.*, 2007).

**Additional mechanisms regulating insulin-mediated skeletal muscle capillary recruitment**

Although the studies mentioned above suggest that impairments in insulin-mediated NO production and  quenching of NO by superoxide anions contribute to the reduction in insulin-induced vasodilation and capillary recruitment, there, is evidence that  several other mechanisms contribute to the regulation of vasodilation in response to insulin. Although a detailed discussion of all of these mechanisms is beyond the scope of this review, the most important ones are described here. In addition to its ability to stimulate NO production insulin also stimulates expression of the potent vasoconstrictor endothelin 1 (ET1). ET1 expression opposes the vasodilator action of NO, and the balance between NO production and ET1 expression is key to insulin-mediated capillary recruitment (Ergul, 2011). ET1 mediates it's effects through two receptors ($ET_A$ and $ET_B$), with the ratio and location of these receptors determining the net response to ET1 expression.  $ET_A$ and $ET_B$ receptors found on smooth muscle are responsible for the vasoconstrictor and proliferative response to ET1, while $ET_B$ receptors located on endothelial cells mediate vasodilation via NO and prostacyclin (Ergul, 2011). Angiotensin II can interact with the insulin signalling pathway to regulate insulin sensitivity (Chai *et al.*, 2011). Angiotensin II has 2 receptors in the skeletal muscle microvasculature (type I (AT1R) and type II (AT2R)). Chai et al. (2011) have shown that $AT_2R$ blockade in rats, with a specific antagonist, abolished insulin-mediated increases in microvascular blood volume and decreased insulin-stimulated glucose disposal, while AT1R blockade increased muscle microvascular blood volume 2 to 3-fold. Finally, the arachidonic acid metabolite thromboxane $A_2$ is a vasoconstrictor and has also been proposed to contribute to impaired functional vasodilation in insulin resistance (Xiang *et al.*, 2008).

**Role of capillary density in meal induced muscle perfusion and nutrient uptake**

Apart from differences in NO bioavailability there are also substantial differences in capillary density between different populations. The latter will also have a significant impact on

insulin-mediated increases in perfusion of the skeletal muscle microvascular bed, as both variables contribute to the capillary surface area that is available for transport of glucose and insulin. Bonner et al (2013) have recently shown that capillary rarefaction directly contributes to skeletal muscle insulin resistance using a genetic reduction of capillary density in mice (skeletal and cardiac muscle VEGF deletion). Interestingly, it appears that reduced NO bioavailability also plays a critical role in capillary rarefaction, with Frisbee *et al.* (2005) showing that increasing NO bioavailability could significantly attenuate the capillary rarefaction seen in the obese insulin resistant state. In this study chronic administration of the antioxidant tempol increased microvascular density in obese Zucker rats, however, when tempol ingestion was combined with the NO synthase inhibitor L-NAME the beneficial effect was prevented, therefore suggesting that chronic reductions in NO bioavailability not oxidative stress per se contributed to microvascular rarefaction.

**Exercise training to improve insulin sensitivity**

Exercise training is known to be beneficial in the treatment and prevention of insulin resistance, due primarily to its effect on skeletal muscle insulin sensitivity (Hawley & Lessard, 2008). Traditional early research focussing on the skeletal muscle fibres has generated convincing evidence that this effect is at least partially mediated by mechanisms that operate in the skeletal muscle fibres (Hawley & Lessard, 2008). Briefly, studies have shown that training results in increased skeletal muscle GLUT4 content, elevation in the content and insulin-mediated activation of key intermediates in the insulin signalling cascade, up-regulation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK) and improvements in lipid turnover and utilisation, which, likely combine to cause the improvements in skeletal muscle insulin sensitivity seen following training (for a thorough review of this topic see Hawley and Lessard (2008)).

Given the important role that the skeletal muscle microvasculature plays in glucose uptake it would seem likely that training induced adaptations within the microvasculature will also contribute to the improvements in skeletal muscle insulin sensitivity seen with training. The remainder of this review will therefore focus on how exercise training can influence skeletal muscle microvascular NO bioavailability and capillary density, and how these changes may contribute to improved skeletal muscle insulin sensitivity following training. We will

therefore examine recent work from our own group and other laboratories into the effect of exercise training interventions on 1) microvascular vasodilator function and NO bioavailability, 2) the enzymes responsible for NO synthesis and quenching, and 3) capillary density and how the observed exercise training adaptations may influence insulin sensitivity and the future development of metabolic disease.

**Exercise training to improve microvascular function and NO bioavailability**

Due to ease of access and the availability of non-invasive techniques to study cutaneous (skin) microvascular perfusion, the skin has been used as a surrogate for skeletal muscle in humans (Meijer *et al.*, 2012).  As such, much of the knowledge on impairments in obesity and insulin resistance and also on exercise training effects has been obtained in the microcirculation of the skin.

Studies using laser Doppler flowmetry combined with heating and intradermal microdialysis of the NO synthase inhibitor L-NMMA have shown that endurance training is an effective method to improve cutaneous NO-mediated vasodilator function in high-risk prediabetic patients (polycystic ovary syndrome and nonalcoholic fatty liver disease) (Pugh *et al.*, 2013; Sprung *et al.*, 2013). However, there are no studies which directly measure insulin-mediated NO bioavailability or insulin-mediated increases in cutaneous capillary blood flow following training. Meijer et al. (2012) have shown that insulin-mediated capillary recruitment in skin parallels the insulin-mediated response of the skeletal muscle microvasculature, however, this conclusion has received criticism from Poole et al. (Poole *et al.*, 2013). In particular the authors of this review express concern as to whether the effect of training on the skin and skeletal muscle microvasculature may be different given the different roles that these microvascular beds play in the exercise response (temperature regulation versus delivery of oxygen and nutrients and removal of waste products).

Despite its clear importance only one study (Rattigan *et al.*, 2001) has investigated the effect of training on skeletal muscle capillary recruitment and glucose uptake. This was a short term (14 days) endurance training study in previously sedentary rats. The exercise training led to parallel increases,  during a hyperinsulinemic euglycemic clamp, in skeletal muscle microvascular perfusion (+62%; measured as hindleg 1-methylxanthine (1-MX) clearance)

and hindleg glucose uptake (+93%) (Rattigan *et al.*, 2001). This observation suggests that endurance exercise training improved delivery of insulin and glucose to skeletal muscle during the clamp, via a mechanism involving an increase in insulin-mediated dilation of terminal arterioles and increased NO bioavailability. However, studies using physiological measures of capillary recruitment do not provide information on whether increases in capillary density or NO production by eNOS or decreases in ROS production, leading to reduced NO quenching, are behind the increase in microvascular perfusion and hindleg glucose uptake.

**Effect of endurance training on capillary density**

The potential of endurance training to increase skeletal muscle capillarization has been known for a long time with the first study in humans conducted by Andersen and Henriksson (1977). The study showed that capillary density was increased by 8wk of endurance training in previously sedentary males. This finding has been consistently replicated (Ingjer, 1979; Cocks *et al.*, 2013) and the mechanisms responsible for increases in capillary density have been reviewed in depth in a recent review (Hoier & Hellsten, 2014). However, much less is known about the efficiency of exercise training to increase capillary density in groups with an impaired muscle microvascular vasodilator response. As the ability of capillary shear stress to increase angiogenesis depends on its ability to activate eNOS and increase endothelial NO bioavailability (Hudlicka *et al.*, 2006), the authors of this review hypothesized that due to the elevated ROS production in sedentary obese, elderly individuals and metabolic syndrome patients (all pre-diabetic conditions) the exercise-induced mechanisms leading to angiogenesis would be impaired. However, a recent study from the author's laboratory showed that 4 weeks of endurance training was enough to increase capillary density in young obese males (Cocks *et al.*, 2015). These increases in capillary density will increase the surface area available for transport of insulin and glucose, and therefore are likely to contribute to the improvements in insulin sensitivity that were seen following training. Akerstrom *et al. (2014)* have recently confirmed the importance of increased capillary density as a mechanism that contributes to increases in insulin sensitivity. In this study, conducted in rats, skeletal muscle specific increases in capillary density were induced by prolonged (21 days) ingestion of the α1-adrenergic receptor agonist Prazosin. The resultant elevation in skeletal muscle capillary density was associated

with a 30% increase in insulin-mediated skeletal muscle glucose disposal, without concomitant improvements in skeletal muscle insulin signalling.

**Methods to measure the response of microvascular enzymes in skeletal muscle to training**

As discussed above a number of cellular locations contribute to the production of NO and quenching of NO by ROS and, therefore, have an impact on the amount of NO seen by the vascular smooth muscle. Therefore, the authors feel that it is essential that the methods used to measure the protein content of the responsible enzymes are able to investigate the localisation of these enzymes. To gain a full understanding of the effect of training on NO bioavailability the training induced changes in the relevant enzymes should be studied in the skeletal muscle sarcolemma, arterioles and capillaries. Although useful to provide an overview of the changes brought about by training traditional methods using tissue homogenization (followed by Western blots) do not allow for this type of analysis, and cannot provide information on the different vascular sources of NO and ROS production which will affect smooth muscle NO availability. In addition, as exercise training interventions lead to increases in capillary density (Andersen & Henriksson, 1977; Ingjer, 1979; Cocks *et al.*, 2013), analytical methods using tissue homogenates cannot differentiate between an increase in eNOS content of the endothelial layer and an increase in total eNOS content of the homogenate brought about by an increase in microvascular density. Due to these technical limitations of Western blots when applied to whole tissue homogenates, the authors laboratory has developed quantitative immunofluorescence microscopy methods to specifically measure enzyme content and phosphorylation state of enzymes present in the endothelial layer of skeletal muscle microvessels (Cocks *et al.*, 2012) (Fig. 2). This technique has recently been advanced to allow for the differentiation of terminal arterioles and capillaries (Cocks, 2013b; Cocks *et al.*, 2015).

**Effect of endurance training on endothelial enzymes controlling NO bioavailability**

Using quantitative immunofluorescence the authors have shown that endurance training increases mixed microvascular (terminal arterioles and capillaries) eNOS content in lean sedentary individuals (Cocks *et al.*, 2013) (Fig. 3). Work from the authors also shows that endurance training increases eNOS content specifically in the terminal arterioles (identified with anti-alpha smooth muscle actin) and capillaries of obese males (Cocks *et al.*, 2015). The

increase in eNOS content in both of these studies is associated with improved insulin sensitivity following training. It has recently been observed that an experimental increase in endothelial eNOS content (in vivo administration of bera-prost sodium, a prostaglandin I2 analogue that stimulates eNOS mRNA expression and protein synthesis rate) led to significant insulin-mediated increases in *in vivo* skeletal muscle capillary recruitment, insulin transport into skeletal muscle interstitium and skeletal muscle glucose uptake in several insulin resistant mouse models (Kubota *et al.*, 2011). As such, it is hypothesised that the increase in eNOS content following training contributes to the improved insulin sensitivity following training, through elevated NO production in response to insulin improving capillary recruitment and therefore the delivery of insulin and glucose to the skeletal muscle. Using western blotting in whole muscle homogenates McConnel et al. (2007) have also shown that nNOS protein content is increased by 10 days of intensive endurance training. Although insulin sensitivity was not measured in this study, elevated skeletal muscle nNOS content may contribute to the increase in insulin-mediated smooth muscle NO availability and therefore improve insulin sensitivity.

The authors have previously also shown that 6 weeks of endurance training significantly reduces basal and exercise stimulated eNOS ser$^{1177}$ phosphorylation in the endothelium of the muscle microvasculature in previously sedentary men (Cocks *et al.*, 2013) (Fig. 3). This finding is supported by the work of Gliemann *et al*. (2013) in aged men, where eNOS ser$^{1177}$ phosphorylation was also reduced following 8 weeks of endurance training, measured in whole muscle homogenates via western blotting. This decrease in eNOS phosphorylation has previously been attributed to a reduction in the shear stress stimulus by Cocks et al. (2013), as an increase in capillary density with training could distribute the blood flow over more capillaries both at rest and during 1 h of endurance exercise at 65% of the pre-training VO$_{2peak}$. The authors have more recently shown that eNOS ser$^{1177}$ phosphorylation is increased under resting conditions in young obese men following training (Cocks *et al.*, 2015), although this increase was abolished when normalised to the increase in eNOS content. Although the programme was shorter (4 weeks versus 6 weeks) and the increase in capillary density was lower (19% versus 32%) the increase in capillary density was still significant. All the training studies discussed have only measured basal eNOS ser$^{1177}$, implying that future studies should measure the effect of training on insulin-mediated eNOS

phosphorylation to investigate whether increases in the ability of insulin to activate eNOS via ser[1177] contribute to the improved insulin sensitivity following training. The regulation of eNOS activation is complex involving a number of molecular events (for a complete review see Fleming (2010)), and multiple phosphorylation sites (not just ser[1177]). However, to the author's knowledge none of these additional mechanisms have been investigated in human muscle in response to a meal, exercise or before and after training. To fully elucidate the effects of training on NO production effort should be made to investigate these other mechanisms underlying eNOS activation.

The authors and other groups have also begun to investigate the effect of training on NAD(P)Hox, in particular NOX2 which is the catalytic subunit of NAD(P)Hox. In lean sedentary individuals the authors have shown that endothelial specific NOX2 content was unchanged by training (Fig. 3), although there was a trend for increased sarcolemma-associated NOX2 content. A significant increase in NOX2 content has however been observed in an aged group following training, using western blotting in whole muscle homogenates (Gliemann *et al.*, 2013). As such, NOX2 may represent an enzyme for which quantitative immunofluorescence microscopy methods that quantify enzymes in the endothelial layer of the muscle microvasculature and the sarcolemma are particularly important, given that the endothelial cell volume is only a fraction of the skeletal muscle fibre volume (Barrett & Liu, 2013). Unlike training in young sedentary or aged individuals endurance training has been shown to reduce endothelial specific NOX2 content in obese individuals, without changing sarcolemma-associated NOX2 content (Cocks et al 2015). As there was an increase in eNOS content in this group this led to an improved balance in the eNOS/NOX2 protein ratio which should increase NO bioavailability due to increased NO production and reduced NO scavenging by $O_2^-$-anions. The above discussion focuses on the content of NOX2. However, in addition to the content of the subunits that form NAD(P)Hox, activation of the complex should also be considered if the effect of training on $O_2^-$ production is to be fully understood.

In addition to reducing ROS production training may also upregulate endogenous antioxidant systems increasing the removal of ROS. Pierce et al. (2011) showed that

endothelial cell manganese SOD and endothelium bound extracellular SOD were both higher in older exercising men than sedentary controls.

**Other vasoactive mechanisms that operate in the muscle microvasculature**

As discussed above a number of other enzymes may also contribute to the exercise training induced improvements in skeletal muscle endothelial function and capillary recruitment. However, the effect of training on these systems has received far less attention. A recent study using Western blot methodology applied to muscle extracts has shown that training does not alter the protein content of thromboxane synthase and ET 1, but does increase ET receptor A in aged men (Gliemann *et al.*, 2013).

**High Intensity Interval Training a time-efficient alternative mode of exercise training**

Although a number of studies have shown beneficial effects of supervised endurance based training programmes, the long term feasibility of such programmes, particularly in obesity and type II diabetes, has been questioned (Marwick *et al.*, 2009). It is for this reason that the development of alternative practical models of training are essential. Recently sprint interval training (SIT), which is the most intense mode of high intensity interval training (HIT), has received much attention as an alternative training strategy, due to its ability to mirror or even surpass the effects of traditional endurance training in a fraction of the time (Gibala *et al.*, 2012). Given that the most commonly cited barrier to physical activity is lack of time, it is thought that SIT may represent an exercise training mode that is more attractive to exercise naive individuals and, therefore, may increase sport and exercise participation. Most of the current research into SIT has focussed on the molecular and metabolic adaptations in skeletal muscle fibres. However, two recent studies by the authors (Cocks *et al.*, 2013; Cocks *et al.*, 2015) have shown that SIT also represents an effective training method to improve skeletal muscle microvascular density and the endothelial eNOS/NAD(P)Hox protein ratio. Cocks *et al*. (2013) showed that 6 weeks of SIT led to a significantly greater increase in eNOS content than endurance training in young sedentary males, and Cocks *et al*. (2015) observed similar increases in eNOS content in the endothelial layer of terminal arterioles and capillaries after 4 weeks of constant workload SIT compared to endurance training in young sedentary obese males. Hoier et al. (2013) have also shown eNOS content to be increased following 4 weeks of HIT in healthy young males, using tissue

homogenates and western blotting. Cocks et al. (2015) have also shown that endothelial NOX2 content is reduced by SIT to a similar extent as endurance training in young obese males. In conjunction with these enzyme changes SIT was also as effective as endurance training at increasing capillary density (Cocks et al., 2013; Cocks *et al*. 2015). Jensen et al. (2004) have also demonstrated that HIT leads to increases in capillary density, with a similar increase occurring around type I and type II muscle fibres. Unlike these studies Hoier et al. (2013) did not observe an increase in capillary density in healthy young men following 4 weeks of HIT. However, this HIT training period was preceded by a 4 week endurance training preconditioning period (resulting in a 17% increase in capillary density), and the authors hypothesised that the lack of continued capillary growth may result from phasic growth of capillaries in response to training. Interestingly, this study also investigated the angiogenic response to an acute bout of HIT and endurance training following the preconditioning period. It was observed that HIT led to lower interstitial VEGF-A levels and less stimulus for endothelial cell proliferation than endurance training, leading to the conclusion that HIT leads to a weaker angiogenic stimulus than endurance training.

These studies add to the growing body of literature, showing that SIT and other forms of HIT are a time efficient alternative to endurance training, as advised by the WHO, to achieve many of the beneficial  molecular and metabolic adaptations in skeletal muscle (similar increases in insulin sensitivity (Cocks *et al.*, 2013), aerobic capacity (Rakobowchuk *et al.*, 2008), mitochondrial biogenesis and mitochondrial enzyme activity (Burgomaster *et al.*, 2008), fat oxidation during exercise (Burgomaster *et al.*, 2008) and  intramuscular triglyceride storage and utilisation during exercise  (Shepherd *et al.*, 2013)(for a comprehensive review see Gibala *et al.* (2012)) and its microvasculature seen following endurance training. However, future studies need to focus on the development of practical forms of HIT that can feasibly be adopted by a wide range of populations.

**Additional benefits of resistance training**
Resistance training is encouraged in elderly individuals and those with obesity, metabolic syndrome and type II diabetes because of its unique ability to maintain/ increase muscle mass and strength, variables that are strongly related to the promotion and maintenance of independence and health (Haskell *et al.*, 2007).  Resistance training (RT) is also known to

improve insulin sensitivity (Miller *et al.*, 1994; Ibanez *et al.*, 2005), and as such forms a fundamental component of the American College of Sports Medicine guidelines for physical activity and public health (Haskell *et al.*, 2007). The benefits of RT on insulin sensitivity have previously been attributed to the increases in muscle mass (Szczypaczewska *et al.*, 1989; Miller *et al.*, 1994) and improvements in elements of the insulin signalling cascade within the skeletal muscle (Holten *et al.*, 2004), with little known about the potential contributions of the vasculature. A number of studies have investigated angiogenesis following RT (Hather *et al.*, 1991; McCall *et al.*, 1996; Green *et al.*, 1999; Cocks *et al.*, 2014). The results of these studies suggest that RT does not increase capillary density, but can increase capillary to fibre ratio in proportion to fibre growth. Therefore, RT does stimulate angiogenesis, but this is to prevent an increase in the oxygen diffusion distance resulting from the increase in fibre size caused by RT. However, it is unlikely that this will affect insulin sensitivity as capillary density and capillary to fibre perimeter exchange are not changed by RT (Cocks *et al.*, 2014). The latter is a valuable measure of microvascular density which provides more information on the capacity for transport of substances that rely on receptor or transporter-mediated processes (i.e. insulin and glucose). A recent study by the authors has also shown that, unlike endurance training and SIT, RT does not induce significant increases in endothelial specific eNOS content (although a trend for an increase was present $P = 0.091$), in previously sedentary men (Cocks *et al.*, 2014). Putting these microvascular effects together with the lack of change in endothelial dependent dilation of conduit arteries seen following RT (Rakobowchuk *et al.*, 2005) it would appear that, in previously sedentary individuals, RT's positive effects on insulin sensitivity are not mediated by haemodynamic adaptations. Future work should focus on the effect of RT in at risk groups, where microvascular adaptations may become apparent. However, given the debilitating effects of sarcopenia on independence in both elderly and obese individuals the unique benefits of resistance training on muscle mass and strength should not be overlooked. As such, the authors suggest that the combination of endurance training or SIT with RT may lead to optimal metabolic, performance and health benefits, with ET or SIT providing a powerful means to increase capillary density, microvascular NO bioavailability and aerobic exercise capacity (endurance) and RT being the most efficient means to increase muscle mass and strength. The complimentary effects of these training modes would then maximise the effect of

training on insulin sensitivity and glucose uptake, while promoting mobility and independence through increases in muscle mass.

**Conclusion**

Analytical methods developed in our laboratory together with Western blot data generated by other laboratories suggest that endurance training and SIT increase capillary density and the eNOS/NAD(P)Hoxidase protein ratio. Our assumption is that the eNOS/NAD(P)Hoxidase protein ratio within the endothelium of terminal arterioles is a marker of the vasodilator capacity of these vessels within skeletal muscle and that this molecular adaptation is likely to improve skeletal muscle microvascular perfusion in response to insulin. The latter mechanism then is also likely to contribute to the well-known benefits of training on insulin sensitivity. To validate the assumption that an increase in eNOS/NAD(P)Hoxidase protein ratio is a marker of the vasodilator capacity of the skeletal muscle terminal arterioles, future training studies in healthy individuals and insulin resistant states should 1) make parallel measurements of the insulin induced vasodilator response, eNOS and NADPHox protein content and activation status, and muscle glucose uptake and 2) measure the protein and activity status of eNOS, nNOS, NOX isomers and other sources of ROS production not only in the endothelial layer of terminal arteries and capillaries, but also in vascular smooth muscle and the muscle fibres.

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**Additional Information**

**Competing Interests**

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest.

**Funding**

**Figure Legends**

**Figure 1. The balance between nitric oxide (NO) production and NO scavenging in the skeletal muscle microvasculature impacts human metabolic health.**

Highly trained individuals have an optimal balance between eNOS and NAD(P)Hox protein content and activity in the skeletal muscle microvasculature, and combine high physical activity levels with a high exercise tolerance, high anabolic response to resistance exercise, and the highest reported levels of insulin sensitivity and glucose tolerance. In sedentary individuals this balance is less favourable and we hypothesize that it is because of this adaptation that the sedentary state comes with a high risk for the development of obesity, metabolic syndrome and type 2 diabetes, conditions in which a low NO bioavailability leads to severe impairments in insulin sensitivity, glucose tolerance, anabolic resistance, and exercise tolerance. Exercise training interventions of 4-6 weeks in sedentary individuals with and without obesity have led to an improved balance between eNOS and NAD(P)H ox protein content.

**Figure 2. Image analysis for quantitative immunofluorescence.**

The skeletal muscle microvascular endothelium is identified using the endothelial marker UEA-I Lectin FITC conjugated (A). Using this endothelial image an endothelial mask is created using image analysis software (Image Pro Plus 5.1) (B). The endothelial enzyme being investigated is then identified using an appropriate validated antibody (in this case eNOS) (C). The endothelial outline is then transferred to the corresponding endothelial enzyme image. The fluorescence intensity of the endothelial image is then quantified within the endothelial outline. E and F. Terminal arterioles are differentiated from capillaries; an arteriole is marked with an arrow. E. Anti-alpha smooth muscle actin is used as an identifier of terminal arterioles; F. The endothelium of capillaries and terminal arterioles is marked with UEA-I Lectin FITC conjugated.

**Figure 3. Effects of endurance training on eNOS and NOX2 content and eNOS ser[1177] phosphorylation in lean sedentary individuals.**

A, C, E. Representative widefield microscopy images of skeletal muscle pre (a, b) and post (c, d) endurance training. a, c The skeletal muscle microvascular endothelium was revealed using Ulex Europaeus-FITC conjugated lectin (green). A; b, d Skeletal muscle eNOS

expression (red). C; a, b Skeletal muscle eNOS ser$^{1177}$ phosphorylation (red). E; a, b Skeletal muscle NOX2 expression (red). Bar represents 20μm. B, D, F. Mean fluorescence intensity is summarized. The mean level of eNOS, eNOS ser$^{1177}$ or NOX2 pre training was assigned a value of 1, and the relative intensity post training was calculated. Data are means ± SEM for 8 (eNOS) or 7 (eNOS ser$^{1177}$ and NOX2) participants   * $P < 0.05$, significant main effect of training. Adapted with permission from Cocks *et al*. (2013a).
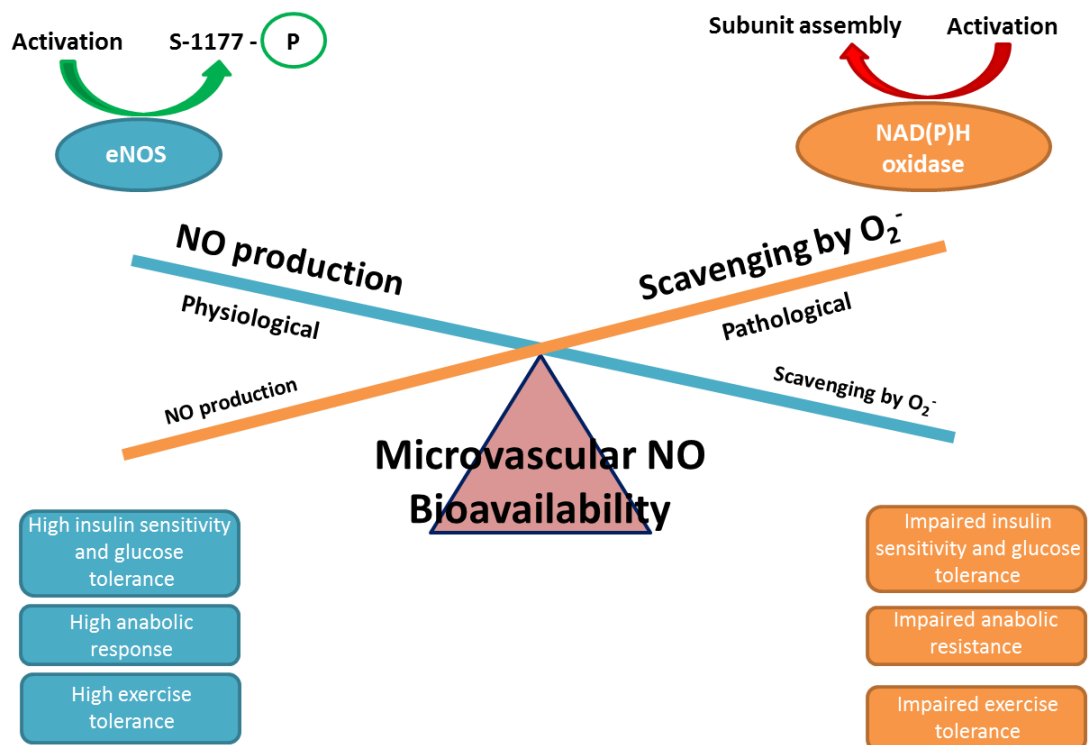


**Figure 1.**

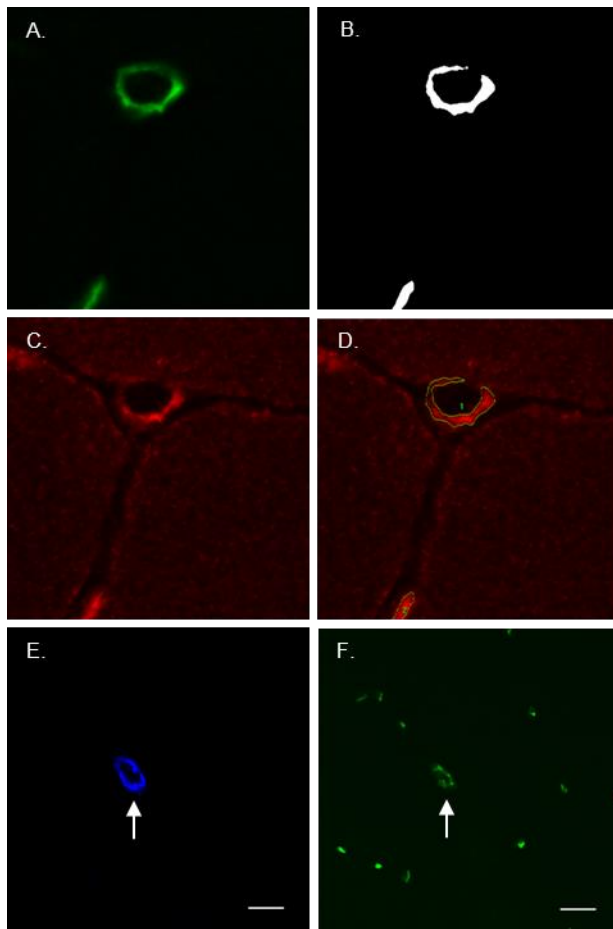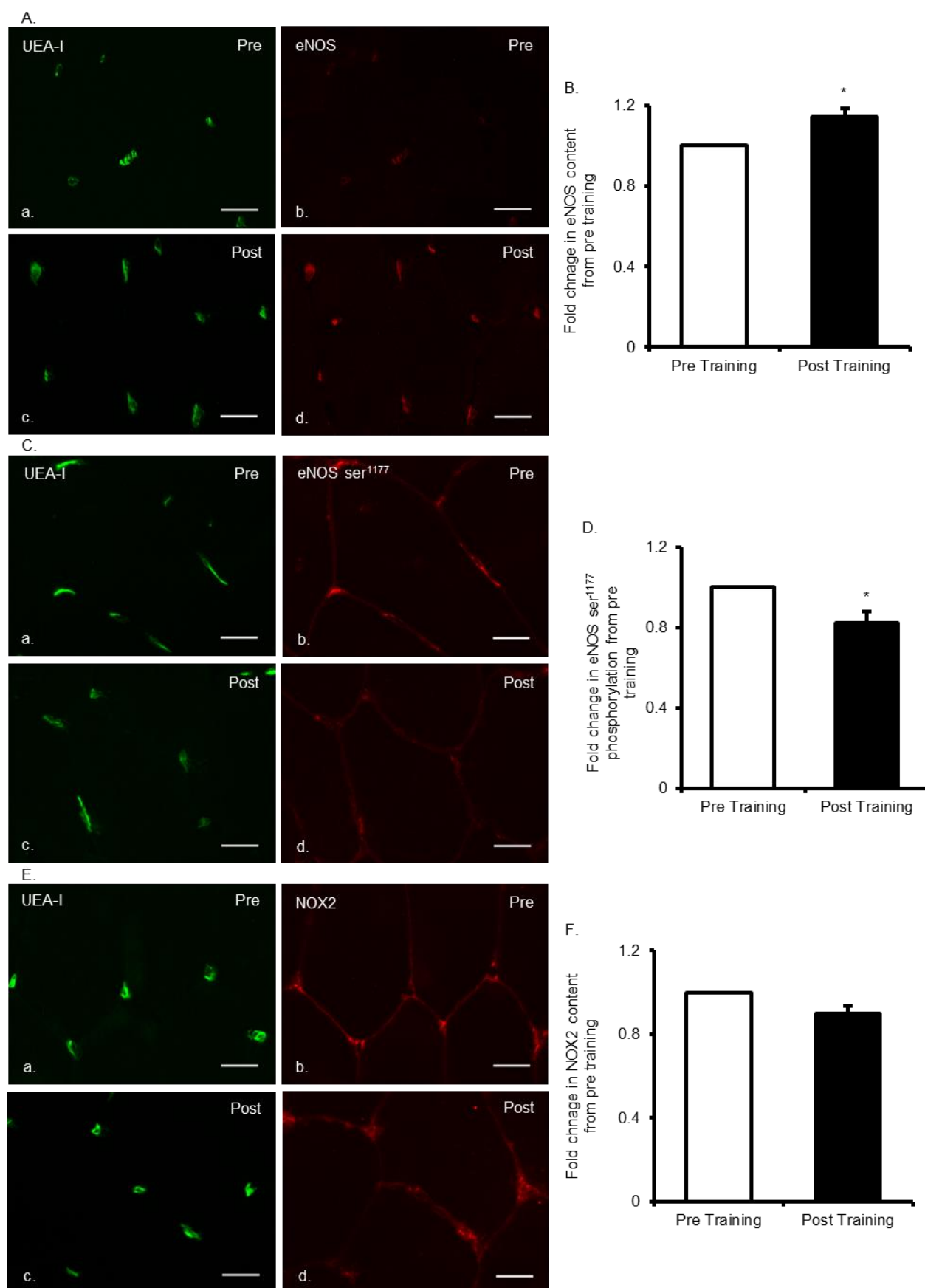**Figure 2.**

**Figure 3.**

**Figure 3.**