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High-intensity functional training and muscle hypertrophy: a narrative review of training mechanisms and variables

Treinamento funcional de alta intensidade e hipertrofia muscular: uma revisão narrativa sobre mecanismos e variáveis do treinamento

Entrenamiento funcional de alta intensidad e hipertrofia muscular: una revisión narrativa sobre los mecanismos y las variables del entrenamiento

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Abstract:
This narrative review examined the relationship between high-intensity functional training (HIFT) and training variables traditionally associated with muscle hypertrophy. Literature on resistance training and HIFT was used to discuss mechanical tension, training volume, proximity to failure, recovery, density, and progressive overload. The central hypothesis is that improvements in strength, muscular endurance, cardiorespiratory capacity, and technical efficiency may enable increases in load, volume-load, and training density as sporting performance develops, even when these progressions are not specifically planned to induce hypertrophy. AMRAP, EMOM, For Time, and Chipper organize exercise tasks but are not independent hypertrophic mechanisms. Improvements in sporting performance may therefore increase exposure to potentially hypertrophic stimuli, without establishing the magnitude of actual muscle growth.

Keywords:
high-intensity functional training; muscle hypertrophy; progressive overload.

Resumo:
Esta revisão narrativa analisou a relação entre o treinamento funcional de alta intensidade (HIFT) e as variáveis tradicionalmente associadas à hipertrofia muscular. A partir da literatura sobre treinamento resistido e HIFT, discutiram-se tensão mecânica, volume, proximidade da falha, recuperação, densidade e sobrecarga progressiva. A hipótese central é que melhorias de força, resistência muscular, capacidade cardiorrespiratória e eficiência técnica podem permitir, ao longo da evolução esportiva, aumentos de carga, volume-carga e densidade, mesmo quando essas progressões não são planejadas especificamente para hipertrofia. Formatos como AMRAP, EMOM, For Time e Chipper organizam as tarefas, mas não constituem mecanismos hipertróficos independentes. Conclui-se que a evolução do desempenho pode ampliar a exposição a estímulos potencialmente hipertróficos, sem permitir inferir, por si só, a magnitude do crescimento muscular.

Palavras-chave:
treinamento funcional de alta intensidade; hipertrofia muscular; sobrecarga progressiva.

Resumen:
Esta revisión narrativa analizó la relación entre el entrenamiento funcional de alta intensidad (HIFT) y las variables tradicionalmente asociadas con la hipertrofia muscular. A partir de la literatura sobre entrenamiento de fuerza y HIFT, se discutieron la tensión mecánica, el volumen, la proximidad al fallo, la recuperación, la densidad y la sobrecarga progresiva. La hipótesis central es que las mejoras de fuerza, resistencia muscular, capacidad cardiorrespiratoria y eficiencia técnica pueden permitir, a lo largo de la evolución deportiva, aumentos de carga,

volumen-carga y densidad, incluso cuando estas progresiones no se planifican específicamente para la hipertrofia. Formatos como AMRAP, EMOM, For Time y Chipper organizan las tareas, pero no constituyen mecanismos hipertróficos independientes. Se concluye que la evolución del rendimiento puede ampliar la exposición a estímulos potencialmente hipertróficos, sin permitir inferir, por sí sola, la magnitud del crecimiento muscular.

Palabras clave:
entrenamiento funcional de alta intensidad; hipertrofia muscular; sobrecarga progresiva.

1. Introduction

High-intensity functional training is a modality that has attracted participants worldwide, becoming a widespread form of exercise among fitness enthusiasts. HIFT encompasses varied programs of functional movements performed at high intensity (FEITO et al., 2018).

Although high-intensity functional training was not developed specifically to promote muscle hypertrophy, many of its characteristics appear to involve variables frequently associated with the hypertrophic process in the scientific literature. AMRAP, For Time, and EMOM workouts may combine resistance exercises, work volume, and high levels of effort. Feito et al. (2018) and Claudino et al. (2018) describe the characteristics and effects of HIFT on different components of physical fitness. However, evidence concerning its specific effects on muscle hypertrophy remains limited.

Human skeletal muscle hypertrophy is defined as a morphological adaptation to training, characterized by an increase in muscle fiber cross-sectional area resulting from a positive balance between protein synthesis and breakdown (SCHOENFELD, 2010; PHILLIPS, 2014). Several stimuli may contribute to this process, including mechanical tension generated by muscle contraction, exercise-induced metabolic changes, and cellular mechanisms involved in anabolic signaling (SCHOENFELD, 2010; DAMAS; LIBARDI; UGRINOWITSCH, 2018).

Furthermore, progression in high-intensity functional training may occur through increased work capacity, maintenance of loads under fatigue, a reduction in the time required to perform the same training volume, and an increase in total training volume. Among these possibilities, increased resistance training volume is supported in the literature as a variable associated with muscle hypertrophy (SCHOENFELD; OGBORN; KRIEGER, 2017); its application to different HIFT formats is an inference made in this review.

Thus, this narrative review will examine the selected literature for possible similarities between the overloads involved in the progression of high-intensity functional training in a sporting context and the variables associated with hypertrophic adaptations.

2. Methodology

This study is a narrative literature review. According to Gil (2019), literature reviews constitute an important methodological procedure for analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing knowledge produced on a given topic, enabling researchers to establish relationships between different scientific findings and develop discussions grounded in the available literature.

The research was conducted through a bibliographic survey of electronic databases available online, including PubMed and Google Scholar. Scientific articles, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, books, and technical documents were consulted concerning the mechanisms of muscle hypertrophy, resistance training variables, and the physiological characteristics of high-intensity functional training and High-Intensity Functional Training (HIFT).

The search terms used were “treinamento funcional de alta intensidade” (high-intensity functional training), “muscle hypertrophy”, “hypertrophy”, “high-intensity functional training”, “resistance training”, and “concurrent training”, in Portuguese and English. Publications from the last twenty years were prioritized, without excluding classic studies considered relevant to understanding the topics addressed.

Material was selected non-systematically, as is characteristic of narrative reviews, considering the scientific relevance of the publications to the study objectives. The selected works were analyzed descriptively and interpretively to identify possible relationships between variables traditionally associated with muscle hypertrophy and the characteristics of the training methods used in high-intensity functional training.

3. Development

3.1 Muscle hypertrophy

3.1.1 Concept of muscle hypertrophy

Muscle hypertrophy can be defined as an increase in muscle fiber size in response to mechanical and metabolic stimuli arising from physical training. This process occurs primarily through a positive balance between protein synthesis and breakdown, involving mechanotransduction mechanisms and cellular signaling cascades (SCHOENFELD, 2010; PHILLIPS, 2014).

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The scientific literature demonstrates that resistance training is one of the main strategies for promoting muscle hypertrophy and can induce neural and structural adaptations. Mechanical tension and metabolic stress have been proposed as mechanisms associated with the hypertrophic response (SCHOENFELD, 2010). Although muscle damage has historically been discussed in this context, it is not considered necessary to induce or enhance resistance training-induced hypertrophy (DAMAS; LIBARDI; UGRINOWITSCH, 2018).

Mechanical tension appears to represent the main stimulus for the hypertrophic process, activating intracellular signaling pathways associated with increased muscle protein synthesis. Metabolic stress may also contribute through metabolite accumulation and exercise-induced changes in the cellular environment (SCHOENFELD, 2010; PHILLIPS, 2014).

Muscle hypertrophy develops progressively over weeks of resistance training, becoming more evident as structural adaptations accumulate. Although strength gains may occur from the first sessions, especially in untrained individuals, these initial improvements are predominantly attributed to neural adaptations, which precede the more pronounced manifestation of muscle growth (SCHOENFELD, 2010; DAMAS et al., 2016).

In addition to training characteristics, factors such as sex, age, genetics, nutritional status, and training level may influence the magnitude of the hypertrophic response to resistance exercise (SCHOENFELD, 2010; PHILLIPS, 2014).

3.1.2 Strength training variables associated with muscle hypertrophy

Several strength training variables appear to influence the hypertrophic process. These include training volume, load intensity, proximity to concentric failure, weekly frequency, and training density.

Training volume

Training volume is frequently identified as one of the main variables associated with muscle hypertrophy and can be represented by the number of sets, repetitions, and total volume of work performed (KRIEGER, 2010; SCHOENFELD; OGBORN; KRIEGER, 2017).

When other training variables are controlled, weekly volume shows a positive relationship with muscle hypertrophy, with evidence of greater adaptations associated with higher volumes. However, the magnitude of this response may vary between individuals, making it impossible to establish a universal optimal volume or to assert that volumes above a

particular threshold necessarily compromise hypertrophic adaptations (SCHOENFELD; OGBORN; KRIEGER, 2017).

Load intensity

Load intensity corresponds to the magnitude of the resistance used relative to an individual's maximum capacity, generally expressed as a percentage of one-repetition maximum (1RM). Although heavy loads require greater force production from the start of a set, studies demonstrate that light loads can also promote similar muscle hypertrophy when sets are performed to muscular failure (MORTON et al., 2016; SCHOENFELD et al., 2017).

One possible explanation for these results is related to progressive motor unit recruitment during exercise with light loads. As fatigue accumulates, additional motor units are increasingly needed to sustain force production, increasing the stimulus to the recruited muscle fibers. Thus, mechanical tension remains a fundamental component of hypertrophy, although the magnitude of the external load does not independently determine the hypertrophic response. This interpretation is a plausible mechanistic explanation, rather than a direct demonstration of the mechanisms responsible for the observed results.

Concentric failure

Proximity to concentric failure appears to increase the recruitment of high-threshold motor units, potentially increasing the hypertrophic stimulus through greater mechanical tension and metabolic stress (SCHOENFELD, 2010).

However, the literature demonstrates that reaching absolute concentric failure is not necessary for muscle hypertrophy, particularly when training is performed with adequate volume and intensity. Thus, training close to failure appears sufficient to promote high levels of muscle recruitment and hypertrophic adaptations (GRGIC et al., 2022).

Training density

Training density corresponds to the amount of work performed per unit of time and can be manipulated, among other strategies, by reducing rest intervals between sets and exercises (SINGER et al., 2024).

When sets, repetitions, load, and execution are maintained, performing the same work in less time represents progression in density and a greater performance demand. This change may modify accumulated fatigue and effort in subsequent sets, without necessarily increasing mechanical tension or the magnitude of hypertrophy.

The literature demonstrates that hypertrophic adaptations can occur with different rest intervals; however, the synthesis by Singer et al. (2024) suggests a small potential advantage for intervals longer than 60 seconds, with no appreciable differences between intervals exceeding 90 seconds. Therefore, density should be considered a variable for organizing overload, rather than an isolated indicator of a greater hypertrophic stimulus (SINGER et al., 2024).

Progressive overload

Progressive overload consists of gradually increasing training demands over time. Traditionally, this progression occurs through increases in load, volume, or number of repetitions (ACSM, 2009).

Changes in training density and in the ability to sustain work under fatigue may represent forms of performance progression. However, their specific contribution to hypertrophy cannot be assumed: very short intervals may reduce the load or work volume sustained in subsequent sets. Thus, density should be interpreted alongside load, volume, and recovery, rather than treated as an independent hypertrophic stimulus (ACSM, 2009; SINGER et al., 2024).

3.2 High-intensity functional training

3.2.1 Concept and characteristics of high-intensity functional training

High-Intensity Functional Training (HIFT) combines varied functional exercises, often performed at high intensity. Programs of this kind may include weightlifting, gymnastics, and metabolic conditioning exercises (FEITO et al., 2018).

The modality combines Olympic weightlifting, gymnastics, resistance training, and metabolic conditioning exercises, displaying characteristics of concurrent training (GLASSMAN, 2007; FEITO et al., 2018).

In the sporting context, competitive disciplines based on high-intensity functional exercises have come to incorporate structured physical preparation to develop specific performance capacities. Competitive practice can therefore be analyzed as a sport, rather than merely as a training session format.

Accordingly, training programming is now more organized, seeking to develop physical capacities in which athletes or groups of participants are deficient. Variables such as strength, muscular endurance, aerobic capacity, power, and specific skills have therefore come to be planned more systematically within the sport.

Furthermore, many current high-intensity functional training programs have begun to use specific strength, power, and muscular endurance blocks, with control of volume, intensity, density, and load progression. In many cases, traditional resistance training exercises, such as squats, deadlifts, bench presses, overhead presses, and rows, have been incorporated systematically into the modality's sporting preparation.

3.2.2 Training organization formats in HIFT

AMRAP

The AMRAP (As Many Rounds/Repetitions As Possible) format consists of performing as many repetitions or rounds as possible within a specified period.

Performance in AMRAP workouts may progress through increases in the number of rounds, sets, or repetitions completed within the allotted time, while maintaining loads and execution quality. When this progress increases the volume of resistance work relevant to the muscles involved, it may increase exposure to stimuli associated with hypertrophy. The AMRAP structure alone does not constitute evidence of a hypertrophic effect.

For Time

The For Time format is characterized by completing a predetermined task in the shortest possible time. Reducing the time required for the same external work represents an increase in density.

Progress in For Time workouts may involve maintaining loads and repetitions while reducing execution time, characterizing increased density as a form of overload. It may also occur through the use of heavier loads in equivalent tasks. The possible relationship with

hypertrophy depends on muscular effort, volume, and mechanical tension, rather than on the stopwatch or format itself.

EMOM

EMOM (Every Minute On the Minute) consists of performing a particular exercise or sequence of movements every minute. In this model, the participant must complete the prescribed work within the allotted minute, using the remaining time for recovery before the next set begins.

Progression within an EMOM may occur through increases in load, repetitions per minute, number of sets, or minutes sustained, depending on the workout structure. These changes may modify resistance overload and, when they produce sufficient volume and muscular effort, provide plausible pathways for hypertrophic adaptations.

Reducing the time available for recovery may also increase training density and demand; however, greater fatigue should not automatically be equated with a greater hypertrophic stimulus.

Chipper

Chippers generally involve a high volume of repetitions distributed across different exercises performed continuously.

Progress in a Chipper may be expressed through increased loads, increased work volume, or completion of an equivalent task in less time. These are distinct progressions: the first two may directly modify exposure to resistance work; the last represents increased density as a form of overload.

Therefore, the focus of this review is not the Chipper format itself, but the training variables that can be progressively manipulated during its execution and preparation.

3.3 Relationship between high-intensity functional training and muscle hypertrophy

This discussion establishes mechanistic relationships between stimuli present in high-intensity functional training and mechanisms associated with muscle hypertrophy described in resistance training research. It does not seek to infer that the modality's methods are superior or that every session necessarily results in hypertrophy. Plausibility depends on load, local

muscular effort, the volume actually performed, stimulus progression, and recovery. Proximity to failure may form part of this set of stimuli, although reaching failure is not a prerequisite for hypertrophy (GRGIC et al., 2022).

The central point of this review is that a participant's development in high-intensity functional training may require manipulation of variables also studied in resistance training: increases in load, volume of sets and repetitions, muscular effort, and, under certain conditions, density. Resistance exercises with adequate mechanical tension and volume constitute a mechanistically plausible pathway for hypertrophic adaptations (SCHOENFELD, 2010; GRGIC et al., 2022). Thus, the analysis considers the stimuli actually performed, without automatically attributing a hypertrophic effect to the modality.

Structures such as AMRAP, EMOM, For Time, and Chipper serve as contexts for organizing and assessing performance, rather than as independent hypertrophic agents. As athletes develop, they may complete more sets or repetitions, use heavier loads, or sustain more resistance work; these changes bring the discussion closer to variables traditionally associated with hypertrophy. Schoenfeld, Ogborn, and Krieger (2017) support the relationship between weekly resistance training volume and hypertrophy, but did not directly investigate progression in these high-intensity functional training formats.

Progressively increasing the loads used in exercises may raise force production demands and muscular mechanical tension, while adding sets and repetitions may increase training volume. Furthermore, improvements in physical capacity and sporting performance may enable participants to perform greater work volumes, use heavier loads, and sustain the same external work over shorter periods, increasing density and constituting different forms of progressive overload. These adaptations may occur as a consequence of development in the sport, even when muscle hypertrophy is not the main objective. Performance progression may therefore provide greater exposure to stimuli traditionally associated with hypertrophic adaptations, although it cannot be guaranteed that the magnitude of these stimuli is sufficient to produce muscle hypertrophy (ACSM, 2009).

Load progression in multi-joint exercises, such as squats and lifts, is a particularly relevant example: when range of motion and execution are maintained, heavier loads may increase force production demands. Mechanical tension is a central mechanism in the discussion of muscle hypertrophy, although the response also depends on volume, effort, and recovery (SCHOENFELD, 2010; PHILLIPS, 2014).

Bodyweight exercises, such as pistol squats and handstand push-ups, may present substantial relative strength challenges. Their possible contribution to hypertrophy depends on

the tension actually imposed on the muscles, effort, and training progression. Evidence of hypertrophy with different load intensities in resistance training lends plausibility to this interpretation, but does not directly demonstrate the hypertrophic effects of these specific movements (SCHOENFELD et al., 2017).

On the other hand, some limitations should also be considered. High stimulus variability, a lack of systematic control of volume and load progression, and the simultaneous presence of aerobic and metabolic components may hinder the quantification and optimization of hypertrophic stimuli. This interpretation derives from the importance assigned to controlling resistance training variables in the literature, rather than from direct evidence that HIFT is inferior to traditional programs (SCHOENFELD; OGBORN; KRIEGER, 2017).

Furthermore, in many situations, fatigue accumulated during workouts may compromise the maintenance of mechanical tension throughout sets and sessions. A lack of more precise control over variables such as rest intervals, proximity to muscular failure, and the magnitude of mechanical tension applied in each exercise may also hinder optimization of the hypertrophic stimulus (SCHOENFELD, 2010).

Studies on high-intensity functional training report different physical fitness and body composition outcomes, but the available evidence does not consistently establish increased muscle mass or hypertrophy as a directly demonstrated effect of the modality. Research gaps remain regarding studies that assess muscle hypertrophy as the primary outcome (CLAUDINO et al., 2018; FEITO et al., 2018).

Progression in density is an important expression of performance progression in high-intensity functional training. As participants develop their physical and technical capacities, they become able to overcome limitations that previously slowed execution, allowing more work to be performed in the same time interval. In formats such as AMRAP, this development may result in increased numbers of sets and repetitions of resistance exercises, even when absolute loads remain unchanged, increasing volume-load and muscular exposure to work under mechanical tension. Greater work accumulation may also increase muscle fatigue and metabolic stress, favoring conditions in which some repetitions are performed close to muscular failure. Thus, adaptations initially related to sporting performance may provide stimuli potentially favorable to hypertrophy, although the magnitude of these muscular adaptations cannot be determined solely from performance progression. This is a mechanistic interpretation made in this review, rather than a causal effect directly demonstrated in AMRAP studies.

4. Conclusion

Performance progression in high-intensity functional training may involve manipulation of variables recognized as relevant to muscle hypertrophy, particularly load, resistance work volume, and effort intensity. Density may also progress as a form of overload, without its isolated increase guaranteeing greater hypertrophy. This review is grounded in the physiological mechanisms of muscle hypertrophy, considering that adaptations depend on the characteristics of the applied stimuli, rather than exclusively on the training modality.

Furthermore, the modality includes elements potentially favorable to muscle hypertrophy, including exercises with high levels of mechanical tension, substantial metabolic stress demands, and high muscular demands across different movement patterns. Multi-joint exercises with heavy loads and gymnastic movements requiring high levels of strength may provide mechanical stimuli compatible with mechanisms associated with muscle hypertrophy.

Development within the modality frequently occurs through progressions related to classical resistance training variables, such as increased volume of sets and repetitions, improved training density, and increased load lifted for the same number of repetitions, enhancing work capacity. Furthermore, increased maximal strength may raise the mechanical tension produced even at the submaximal relative loads used during workouts.

However, the method does not generally appear to provide systematic control of classical variables associated with muscle hypertrophy, such as structured load progression, precise weekly volume control, and adequate monitoring of mechanical tension. In many cases, particularly during the first months of practice, the technical complexity of the exercises and central fatigue may limit the maintenance of mechanical tension throughout sessions.

Another important point is that variables such as volume, density, and mechanical tension are not always introduced systematically within the modality, primarily because the central objective of high-intensity functional training is the development of general physical fitness, seeking to enable individuals to respond to different physiological demands without exclusive specialization in a single physical capacity. Nevertheless, this limitation can be partially reduced when programming is specifically directed toward hypertrophic adaptations, both in high-intensity functional training boxes and in the preparation of competitive athletes.

Thus, performance progression in high-intensity functional training may display characteristics compatible with mechanisms and variables associated with muscle hypertrophy. However, this progression is not always planned for hypertrophic purposes and may occur as a consequence of training-induced adaptations. The development of strength, muscular

endurance, cardiorespiratory capacity, and technical efficiency may enable participants to use heavier loads, perform greater work volumes, and increase session density. When accompanied by adequate mechanical tension and training volume, these changes may increase exposure to potentially hypertrophic stimuli. Therefore, although hypertrophy is not necessarily the modality's central objective, its practice may provide favorable conditions for muscular development, without performance improvement alone allowing the magnitude of the resulting hypertrophic adaptations to be determined.

Despite the limitations presented, high-intensity functional training combines resistance exercises and stimuli potentially compatible with mechanisms associated with muscle hypertrophy. However, the available reviews do not support the conclusion that the modality consistently promotes increased muscle mass as a specific outcome (CLAUDINO et al., 2018; FEITO et al., 2018).

Finally, further studies are needed to investigate specifically the effects of high-intensity functional training on muscle hypertrophy and the training variables involved in this process.

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