EFFECT OF NECK STABILIZATION EXERCISE AND TRANSCUTANEOUS ELECTRICAL NERVE STIMULATION (TENS) VERSES INTERMITTENT TRACTION AND NECK STABILIZATION EXERCISES IN PHYSIOTHERAPY STUDENTS: A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRAIL

[1]Dr.Dhanashree P. Shinde (PT), [2]Shraddha S. Chitale, [3]Dr.Chandra Iyer (PT)

[1]Associate Professor, [2]Intern, [3]Principal and Professor
[1]Department of Cardiovascular and Respiratory Physiotherapy,
[1]TMV's Jayantrao Tilak College of Physiotherapy, Pune, India

Abstract:

Background: Neck pain is a common musculoskeletal problem among physiotherapy students due to prolonged study hours, poor posture, and repetitive clinical activities. It can significantly affect functional ability and academic performance. Various physiotherapy interventions such as neck stabilization exercises, Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS), and intermittent traction are commonly used; however, their comparative effectiveness remains unclear.

Aim: To compare the effect of neck stabilization exercises with TENS versus intermittent traction with neck stabilization exercises on pain and functional disability among physiotherapy students.

Methodology: A randomized controlled trial was conducted on 72 physiotherapy students aged 18–25 years with neck pain. Participants were randomly allocated into two groups: Group A received neck stabilization exercises with TENS, and Group B received intermittent cervical traction with neck stabilization exercises. The intervention was carried out over a specified period. Pain intensity and functional disability were assessed using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS) and Neck Disability Index (NDI) respectively. Statistical analysis was performed using paired and unpaired t-tests, with $p < 0.05$ considered significant.

Results: Both groups showed statistically significant improvement in pain and disability ($p = 0.0001$). Group A showed greater reduction in VAS (mean difference 3.63) and NDI scores (mean difference 16.91) compared to Group B (VAS: 3.38; NDI: 16.58). However, intergroup comparison showed no statistically significant difference ($p = 0.54$).

Conclusion: Both treatment protocols were effective in reducing neck pain and disability among physiotherapy students. However, neck stabilization exercises combined with TENS demonstrated comparatively better clinical improvement and may be preferred for managing mechanical neck pain.

Keywords: Neck pain, Neck stabilization exercises, TENS, Intermittent traction, Physiotherapy students, VAS, NDI.

INTRODUCTION:

Neck pain is a common complaint among physiotherapy students, with a reported prevalence of 66-71%. Prolonged sitting, poor posture, and repetitive movements are common contributing factors to neck pain in this population[1] . Neck pain can significantly impact the academic and clinical performance of physiotherapy students, leading to decreased concentration, reduced participation in clinical activities, and decreased overall quality of life [(2,3)].

Effective management of neck pain is crucial to prevent long-term disability, improve quality of life, and optimize academic and clinical performance. Neck stabilization exercises, Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS), and Intermittent traction are commonly used interventions for managing neck pain [(4,5)]. However, there is limited research comparing the effectiveness of these interventions in managing neck pain among physiotherapy students.

This is a comprehensive comparison of the effectiveness of neck stabilization exercises, TENS, and Intermittent traction in managing neck pain among physiotherapy students. This study aims to address this knowledge gap by investigating the effectiveness of these interventions in reducing neck pain and improving neck function among physiotherapy students [4,5] Thus, in order to gain muscle strength, flexibility and endurance, and to restore injured tissues, and to contribute to ability to sustain normal life activities, exercise is one of the most frequently used in the rehabilitation of subjects with neck pain[1.]

Neck pain is a prevalent musculoskeletal disorder, affecting approximately two-thirds of the population at some point in their lives. It ranks as one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. Among specific populations, physiotherapy students are increasingly at risk due to academic workloads, prolonged study hours, extensive use of digital devices, and demanding clinical training. These factors contribute to poor posture, muscle imbalances, and sustained cervical loading, leading to the development of mechanical neck pain[2)].

Mechanical neck pain, also referred to as non-specific neck pain, is characterized by pain arising from the cervical spine and surrounding soft tissues without a specific underlying pathology. Symptoms typically include dull aching pain, limited cervical range of motion, muscle tightness, and occasionally referred pain to the upper limbs or shoulders. If not addressed appropriately, it can significantly affect the functional capacity, academic performance, and quality of life of physiotherapy students[1].

Conservative physiotherapy plays a central role in the management of mechanical neck pain. Commonly employed treatment approaches include: Electrotherapy modalities such as Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS), which works on the principle of gate control theory and endorphin release, providing non-invasive, drug-free pain relief [(3)]. Mechanical cervical traction, particularly intermittent traction, which aims to reduce intervertebral disc pressure, relieve nerve root compression, and improve spinal alignment. Therapeutic exercises, particularly neck stabilization exercises, focus on strengthening the deep cervical flexor and extensor muscles, improving neuromuscular control, and enhancing postural correction [(4,5)].

Neck stabilization exercises have gained prominence due to their role in correcting muscular imbalance and improving spinal stability. These exercises target deep neck flexors (longus capitis and longus coli) and extensors (semispinalis cervices, multifidus), which are often weakened or underused in individuals with neck pain. Strengthening these muscles enhances segmental stability, reduces pain recurrence, and improves overall cervical proprioception [(1,2)]. Given the physical and cognitive demands of physiotherapy education, managing neck pain effectively is crucial not only for the students' well-being but also for their ability to participate in clinical learning and professional development. The findings of this study could help formulate targeted physiotherapy protocols aimed at early intervention, prevention of chronicity, and promotion of healthy musculoskeletal habits in future healthcare professionals.

Neck pain is one of the most common musculoskeletal complaints among physiotherapy students due to prolonged studying, mobile use, and poor posture. Continuous static neck posture leads to muscle imbalance, reduced endurance of deep cervical flexors, and mechanical stress on cervical structures. This often results in pain, functional disability, reduced concentration, and decreased academic performance. Conservative physiotherapy management plays a major role in reducing pain and Neck stabilization exercises are designed to activate deep cervical flexor muscles and improve neuromuscular control. These exercises enhance cervical stability and reduce recurrence of mechanical neck pain. Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) is commonly used to reduce pain through gate control mechanism and endorphin release. Intermittent traction helps in decompression of cervical structures and reduces pressure on intervertebral discs and nerve roots. Both treatment approaches are widely used in clinical practice but their comparative effectiveness remains unclear in young adult Physiotherapy students are at higher risk due to academic workload and prolonged screen exposure. Early intervention can prevent chronic neck pain and long-term disability. Measuring pain and disability helps in evaluating treatment effectiveness. Neck Disability Index (NDI) and Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) are reliable outcome measures for assessment.

NEED OF THE STUDY:

Due to various posture attained and activities performed such as heavy physical work (lifting, handling of load, awkward positions, twisting, repetitive use of different joint movements, prolonged static position, long hours strenuous activities, lack of adequate breaks, bending, twisting, bending whole body while treating patients, long standing hours during practical sessions) these all activities can lead to musculoskeletal disorders in Physiotherapy students. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of neck stabilization exercises, TENS, and Intermittent traction in managing neck pain among physiotherapy students. The results will inform the development of evidence-based guidelines for the management of neck pain in this population, ultimately improving the academic and clinical performance of physiotherapy students.

Neck pain is highly prevalent among physiotherapy students due to prolonged study posture and clinical work. Improper ergonomics and mobile/laptop use increase cervical muscle imbalance and strain Chronic neck pain leads to reduced functional ability and academic performance. Neck stabilization exercises improve deep cervical muscle control and spinal stability. TENS is commonly used for pain relief but its functional effectiveness is unclear. Intermittent traction is frequently prescribed to reduce cervical compression. Limited evidence compares TENS + Neck stabilization exercises versus Intermittent traction + Neck stabilization exercises. Most studies focus on general population, not physiotherapy students specifically. Identifying the better combination treatment helps evidence-based physiotherapy practice. Early intervention may prevent progression to chronic cervical dysfunction.

This study will help in optimizing the clinical protocol selection in outpatient physiotherapy settings. This study aims to compare the effectiveness of neck stabilization exercises with Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) versus intermittent traction and neck stabilization exercises in managing neck pain among physiotherapy students. The need for this study arises from the limited evidence comparing these interventions.

Physiotherapy students are prone to neck pain due to prolonged study hours and poor posture. Evidence-based treatment protocols are necessary to optimize neck pain management in this population. Neck stabilization exercises and TENS are common interventions, but their combined effect is not well-established Intermittent traction is also widely used, but its effectiveness compared to TENS is unclear. This study will provide insights into the most effective treatment approach. The findings will inform physiotherapy practice and education. The study will contribute to the development of evidence-based guide.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The present study is a comparative study designed as a randomized controlled trial conducted among physiotherapy students with neck pain. The target population consisted of physiotherapy students aged between 18–25 years from physiotherapy colleges in Pune. Both male and female participants were included in the study, and those who were willing to participate and provided informed consent were considered eligible. A total sample size of 72 participants was selected using a simple random sampling method. The study was carried out over a duration of 6 months in physiotherapy colleges in Pune.

Participants with a history of recent neck surgery, recent neck trauma, neurological conditions such as neoplasm, and other medical conditions such as inflammatory arthritis were excluded from the study. Additionally, individuals with contraindications to traction and Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS), as well as those already undergoing physiotherapy treatment, were also excluded.

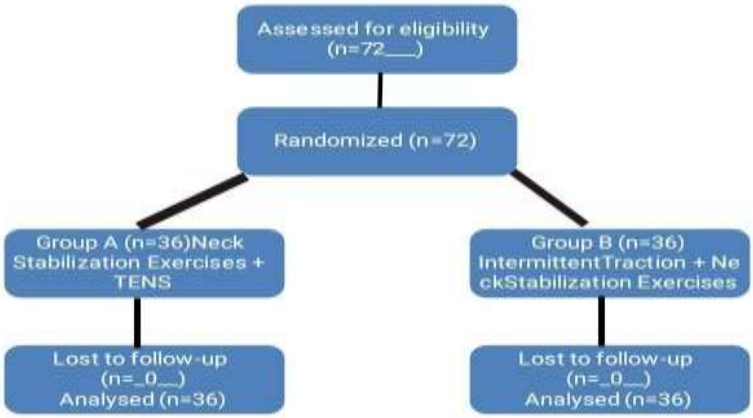
The materials used in the study included an intermittent cervical traction machine and a Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) machine. Consent forms were used to obtain informed consent, and data collection sheets along with a pen were used for recording the data.

PROCEDURE:

Firstly, permission was obtained from institutional ethical committee of Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, department of Physiotherapy and Ethical clearance was taken from institutional ethical committee of Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth College of Physiotherapy. The aims and objectives of the research were explained to the participants and those who fulfilling the inclusion criteria were included in the study and consent was obtained from the subjects by signing the consent form. The entire procedure was explained to the subjects. After filling out the consent form, the assessment proforma was completed, subjects were then assigned to: Group A -Tens and Neck stabilization exercises and Group B – Intermittent traction and Neck stabilization exercises. Baseline evaluation was performed using:

- Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) for pain.
- Neck Disability Index (NDI) for functional disability

Participants were randomly divided into two groups using simple random sampling method (Chit Method)



➢ **Group A – Neck Stabilization Exercises + TENS**

Position: Sitting or crook lying

Neck Stabilization Exercise Protocol: Participants were instructed to activate deep cervical flexor muscles (chin tuck exercise).

* Gentle cranio-cervical flexion (chin tuck) without lifting head

* Hold: 10 seconds

* Repetitions: 10 repetitions × 3 sets

* Rest: 30 seconds between sets

TENS Application:

* Mode: Conventional TENS

* Frequency: 80–100 Hz

* Pulse duration: 50–100 µs

* Intensity: Comfortable tingling sensation (sensory level)

* Electrode placement: Around painful cervical region (paraspinal muscles)

* Duration: 15 minutes.

Fig 1. Application of TENS

Fig 2. While Performing Neck Stabilization exercises

➢ **Group B – Intermittent Cervical Traction + Neck Stabilization Exercises**

Neck Stabilization Exercises: Participants were instructed to activate deep cervical flexor muscles (chin tuck exercise).

* Gentle cranio-cervical flexion (chin tuck) without lifting head

* Hold: 10 seconds

* Repetitions: 10 repetitions × 3 sets

* Rest: 30 seconds between sets

Intermittent Cervical Traction:

* Position: Supine lying

* Cervical flexion angle: 15–25°

* Traction mode: Intermittent

* Hold time: 10 seconds

* Rest time: 5 seconds

* Force: 10–15% of body weight (gradually increased as tolerated)

* Duration: 15 minutes

Post-Intervention Assessment

Immediately after completion of the intervention period, reassessment was performed using the same outcome measures:

* Visual Analogue Scale (VAS)

* Neck Disability Index (NDI)

Fig 3. While Performing Neck Stabilization

Fig 4. Application of Intermittent Traction

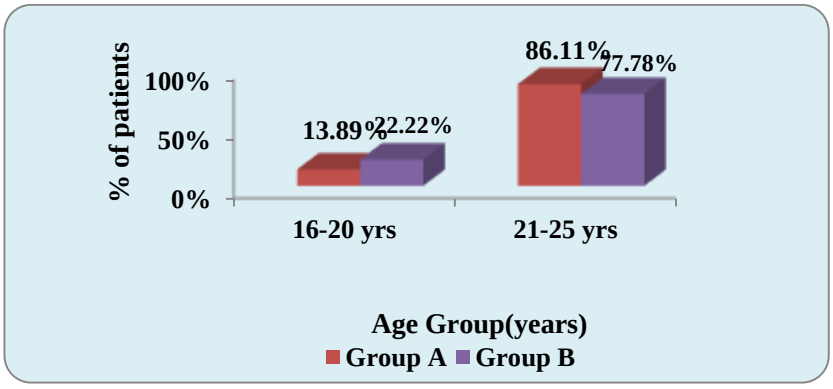
DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION:

Statistical analysis was done by using descriptive and inferential statistics using Descriptive and inferential statistics using students paired and unpaired t test software used in the analysis were SPSS 22.0 version and GraphPad Prism 7.0 version and $p<0.05$ is considered as level of significance

Table 1: Comparison of age in years in two groups

Age group in years	Group A	Group B
16-20 yrs	5(13.89%)	8(22.22%)
21-25 yrs	31(86.11%)	28(77.78%)
Total	36(100%)	36(100%)

Graph 1: Comparison of age in years in two groups

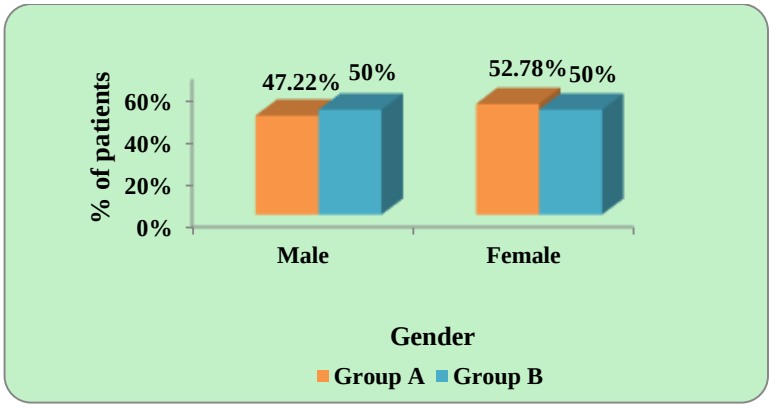


INTERPRETATION: 13.89% of the patients in group A and 22.22% in group B were in the age group of 16-20 years and 86.11% of the patients in group A and 77.78% in group B were in the age group of 21-25 years. Statistical analysis showed no significant difference between the groups ($t = 1.83$, $p = 0.071$; $p > 0.05$). Hence, the subjects in both groups were age-matched and age was not a confounding factor in the study.

Table 2: Distribution of patients according to gender in two groups

Gender	Group A	Group B
Male	17(47.22%)	18(50%)
Female	19(52.78%)	18(50%)
Total	36(100%)	36(100%)

Graph 2: Distribution of patients according to gender in two groups

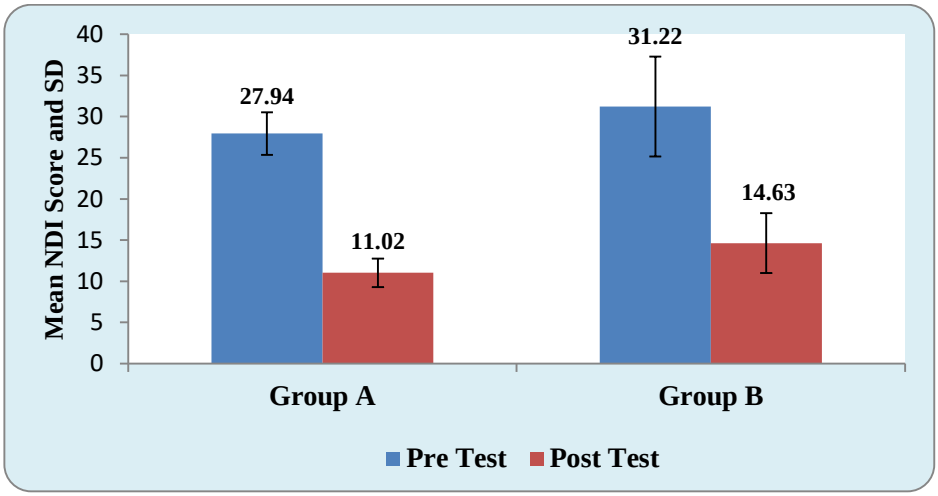


INTERPRETATION: Both groups had almost equal gender distribution. In Group A, females (52.78%) were slightly more than males (47.22%). In Group B, males and females were equally distributed (50% each). This shows no significant gender bias between the two groups. Therefore, gender is unlikely to influence the treatment outcomes, and the groups are comparable at baseline.

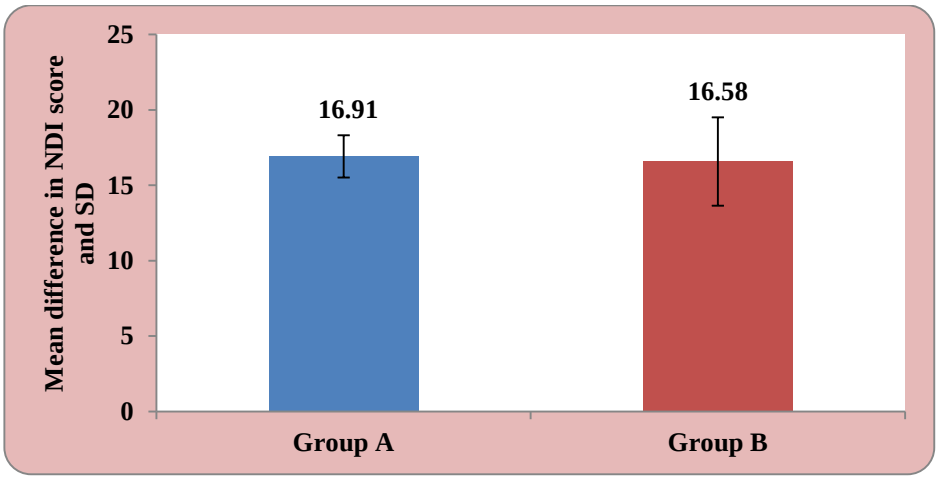
Table 3: Comparison of NDI Score in two groups

Group	Pre Test	Post Test	Mean Difference	Student's paired t test(t-value)
Group A	27.94±2.59	11.02±1.74	16.91±1.40	72.42,p=0.0001,S
Group B	31.22±6.06	14.63±3.64	16.58±2.93	33.94,p=0.0001,S
Comparison of mean difference in two groups (Student's unpaired t test)			0.61 P=0.54,NS	

Graph 3.1: Comparison of NDI Score in two groups



Graph 3.2: Comparison of mean difference in NDI Score in two groups.

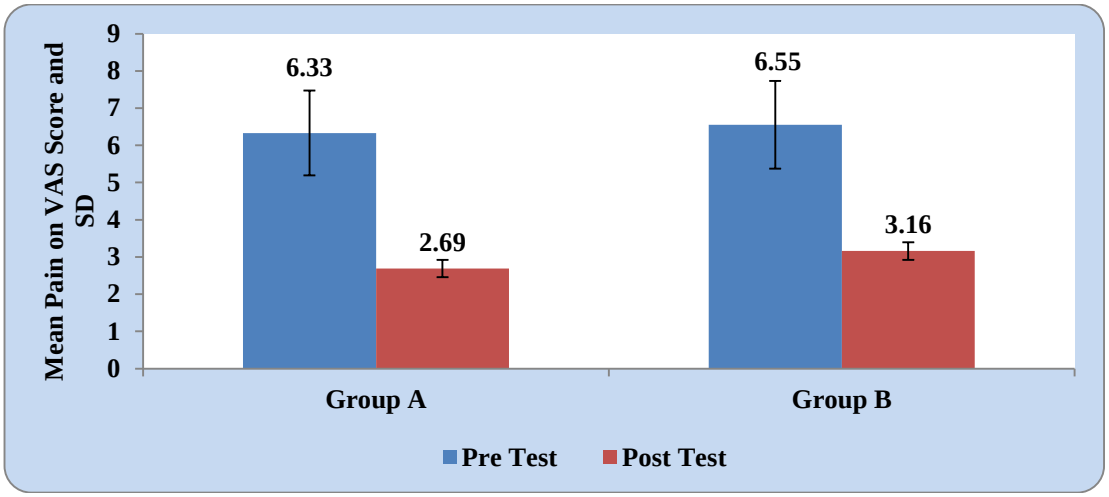


INTERPRETATION: Both Group A and Group B showed a statistically significant reduction in Neck Disability Index (NDI) scores after treatment (p=0.0001), indicating improved functional ability. Group A improved from 27.94 to 11.02, while Group B improved from 31.22 to 14.63. Although Group A showed a slightly greater mean difference (16.91) than Group B (16.58), the inter-group comparison was not statistically significant (p=0.54). Therefore, both treatment protocols were equally effective in reducing neck disability among physiotherapy students.

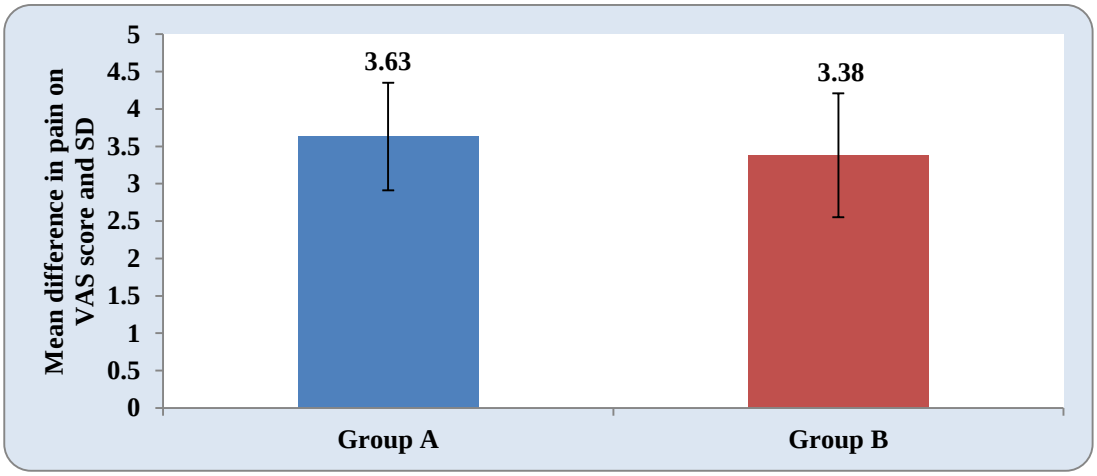
Table 4: Comparison of pain on VAS Score in two groups

Group	Pre Test	Post Test	Mean Difference	Student's paired t test(t-value)
Group A	6.33±1.14	2.69±1.06	3.63±0.72	30.19,p=0.0001,S
Group B	6.55±1.18	3.16±1.18	3.38±0.83	24.27,p=0.0001,S
Comparison of mean difference in two groups (Student's unpaired t test)			0.61 P=0.54,NS	

Graph 4.1: Comparison of pain on VAS Score in two groups



Graph 4.2: Comparison of mean difference in pain on VAS Score in two groups



INTERPRETATION -Mean pain on VAS score in group A at pre-treatment was 6.33±1.14 and in post-test it was 2.69±1.06. By using Student's paired t test statistically significant difference was found in pain on VAS in group A at pre- and post-treatment (t=30.19, p=0.0001). Mean pain on VAS score in group B at pre-treatment was 6.55±1.18 and in post-test it was 3.16±1.18. By using Student's paired t test statistically significant difference was found in pain on VAS in group B at pre and post treatment (t=24.27, p=0.0001). On comparing mean difference in pain on VAS score in two groups statistically no significant difference was found in two groups (t=0.61, p=0.54).

RESULTS:

Both Group A and Group B showed statistically significant improvement in outcome measures after intervention ($p < 0.05$).Paired t-test analysis revealed a significant reduction in pain and disability scores within both groups .Inter-group comparison using unpaired t-test demonstrated greater improvement in Group A compared to Group B .The calculated p-value for inter-group comparison was less than 0.05, indicating statistical significance .Hence, the intervention used in Group A was found to be more effective than that in Group B

DISCUSSION:

The present study was conducted to compare the effectiveness of neck stabilization exercises with TENS and intermittent traction with TENS in reducing neck pain and disability among physiotherapy students. Pain intensity was measured using the VAS and functional disability using the NDI. Participants were divided into two groups receiving different physiotherapy interventions. Both groups showed improvement after the treatment program. However, the neck stabilization exercise with TENS group demonstrated greater improvement than the traction with TENS group. Statistical analysis showed significant reduction in pain and disability ($p < 0.05$). This indicates that active stabilization exercises are more effective than passive traction therapy. Mechanism of Neck Stabilization Exercises. Neck stabilization exercises activate deep cervical flexor and extensor muscles. These muscles are responsible for segmental spinal stability. Physiotherapy students often develop forward head posture due to prolonged studying and mobile use. Forward head posture increases mechanical load on cervical structures. Stabilization exercises restore normal cervical alignment. Improved alignment reduces stress on ligaments and facet joints. Muscle endurance increases with repeated activation. Improved endurance reduces fatigue-related pain. Neuromuscular control improves during functional activities. Co-ordination between superficial and deep muscles becomes better. Reduction in abnormal movement patterns occurs. Therefore, pain decreases significantly.

Role of TENS: TENS provides analgesia through gate control theory. It stimulates A-beta sensory fibers. Pain signal transmission to brain is reduced. Endorphin release also contributes to pain relief. TENS allows patients to perform exercises comfortably. Combination of TENS with exercises enhances treatment outcome. Why Stabilization + TENS Was More Effective Exercises address the root cause of neck pain (muscle imbalance). Improves strength and endurance. Improves posture correction. Enhances joint stability. Prevents recurrent micro-strain. Provides long-term benefits rather than temporary relief. Active therapy produces functional improvement. Therefore disability reduction was greater.

Mechanism of Traction + TENS

Traction separates vertebral bodies. Reduces nerve root compression. Decreases muscle spasm. Improves circulation around cervical structures. Provides short-term symptom relief. Mainly acts as passive therapy. Does not significantly improve muscle strength or endurance. Does not correct faulty posture permanently. Hence improvement was smaller compared to stabilization exercises.

Functional Relevance Physiotherapy students perform patient handling and demonstrations. Poor neck stability predisposes them to chronic neck pain. Stabilization exercises improve working posture. Reduces risk of occupational musculoskeletal disorders. Improves functional capacity in academic and clinical work. Deep cervical muscles become more efficient. Load sharing across cervical spine improves. Pain perception reduces over time. Functional disability decrease

Clinical Significance:

Both treatments effective for pain relief. Stabilization exercises provide long-term correction. Traction provides temporary relief. Combination with TENS enhances analgesic effect.

Practical Importance:

Exercises are easy to perform. Require minimal equipment. Suitable for home program. Useful for preventive ergonomics training. Helpful for students with prolonged sitting habits. In addition to the observed improvements, the results of this study highlight the importance of addressing biomechanical dysfunction early in young adults. Physiotherapy students represent a population that is highly exposed to sustained cervical flexion postures during academic activities such as studying, documentation, and mobile usage. Over time, these sustained postures lead to adaptive shortening of anterior structures and weakening of deep stabilizers, thereby perpetuating pain cycles. The superior outcomes in the stabilization group may also be explained by improved cervical proprioception. Deep cervical muscles contain a high density of muscle spindles, which play a key role in joint position sense. Activation and retraining of these muscles enhance cervical kinesthetic awareness, thereby improving postural correction subconsciously during daily tasks. Moreover, stabilization exercises promote spinal load redistribution. When deep stabilizers function effectively, compressive forces are evenly distributed across vertebral segments. This prevents overloading of facet joints and intervertebral discs, reducing nociceptive input from these structures. Exercise-based interventions also stimulate local circulation and metabolic exchange within cervical musculature. Improved blood flow helps in removal of inflammatory mediators and reduces ischemic pain associated with sustained muscle contraction. Another contributing factor is the psychological benefit of active therapy. Active participation increases confidence, reduces fear-avoidance behavior, and promotes positive health beliefs. This biopsychosocial effect may have contributed to greater reduction in disability scores in the stabilization group. In contrast, traction primarily produces mechanical elongation of soft tissues and temporary decompression. While beneficial in acute radicular symptoms, its effect diminishes once the mechanical force is withdrawn. Without concurrent strengthening, structural correction cannot be maintained.

The findings of this study align with contemporary rehabilitation principles that emphasize active over passive management in non-specific mechanical neck pain. Current physiotherapy trends advocate motor control training and endurance-based exercises as first-line management strategies. It is also important to note that early intervention with stabilization exercises may prevent transition from acute to chronic neck pain. Chronicity is often associated with persistent muscle inhibition and altered motor patterns. Timely correction reduces long-term healthcare burden. From an educational standpoint, incorporating posture correction and stabilization training into physiotherapy curriculum may act as a preventive strategy. Regular screening and ergonomic counseling can further enhance musculoskeletal health among students.The statistically significant improvement seen in both VAS and NDI indicates that pain reduction translated into functional improvement. This demonstrates that reduction in symptoms was clinically meaningful and not merely subjective comfort. Overall, the study reinforces that combining electrotherapy for short-term analgesia with active stabilization for long-term correction provides a comprehensive rehabilitation approach. Thus, neck stabilization exercises with TENS can be recommended as an effective, economical, and sustainable treatment protocol for physiotherapy students experiencing mechanical neck pain.

CONCLUSION:

The present study concludes that both treatment protocols were effective in reducing neck pain and functional disability among physiotherapy students. However, neck stabilization exercises combined with TENS demonstrated significantly greater improvement compared to intermittent traction with TENS. The results suggest that active stabilization exercises provide better postural correction, muscle endurance, and long-term functional benefits. In contrast, traction mainly offered short-term symptomatic relief. Therefore, stabilization exercises with TENS should be preferred as the primary physiotherapy intervention for mechanical neck pain. This approach can also help in prevention of recurrent neck problems in students with prolonged study postures.

CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- Neck stabilization exercises with TENS can be used as a primary treatment for mechanical neck pain in students.
- Helps improve posture, muscle endurance, and functional performance during prolonged study activities.
- Provides longer-lasting relief compared to passive modalities alone.
- Can be easily implemented in outpatient physiotherapy and college health programs.

- Useful as a preventive strategy for recurrent neck pain in individuals with poor sitting posture.
- Encourages active patient participation, improving treatment adherence and outcomes.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- Small sample size limited generalization of results.
- Participants were only physiotherapy students, not the general population.
- Short intervention period with no long-term follow-up.
- Daily posture habits and home exercise compliance were not controlled.
- Only subjective measures (VAS, NDI) were used; no objective muscle assessment**.**

FUTURE SCOPE OF THE STUDY:

- Conduct studies with larger sample size and diverse occupational groups.
- Include long-term follow-up to evaluate recurrence and lasting effects.
- Add objective outcome measures such as muscle strength and endurance testing.
- Compare stabilization exercises with other physiotherapy interventions.
- Evaluate the role of ergonomic correction and posture education programs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT:

The success and result of this project required a lot of guidance, I am extremely privileged to have got this all along the completion of my project. I owe my deepest gratitude to my project guide Dr. Dhanashree P. Shinde (PT), who took keen interest on our project work and guided me along, till the completion by providing all the necessary information throughout numerous consultations. I will forever be grateful for the knowledge and skills I gained working under you. I respect and thank our Principal Dr. Chandra Iyer, who gave me the opportunity to do this wonderful project on the topic "Effect of Neck Stabilization Exercise and Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation (TENS) verses Intermittent Traction and Neck Stabilization Exercises in Physiotherapy students: A Randomized Controlled Trail". I am thankful and fortunate enough to get constant encouragement, support and guidance from all teaching staff at TMV's Jayantrao Tilak College of Physiotherapy, Pune, which helped me in successfully completing my project work.

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