

Physical, cognitive and emotional outcomes in older adults exercisers: A systematic review

MIGUEL ÁNGEL ARAQUE-MARTÍNEZ¹, EVA MARÍA ARTÉS-RODRÍGUEZ², PEDRO JESÚS RUIZ-MONTERO³ ✉, ANTONIO JESÚS CASIMIRO-ANDÚJAR¹

¹Department of Education, Faculty of Education Sciences, University of Almería, Almería, Spain

²Department of Mathematics, Faculty of Economics and Business Sciences, University of Almería, Almería, Spain

³Department of Physical Education and Sport, Faculty of Education and Sport Sciences, University of Granada, Melilla, Spain

ABSTRACT

Background: This systematic review provides an overview about those papers with a specific physical exercise intervention aimed to improve physical, cognitive and/or emotional outcomes in healthy older people aged 60 or over. Studies with no intervention whose sample were active healthy older adults were also included. **Methodology:** An exhaustive literature search was done through two databases, including studies from January 2000 to December 2020. The present systematic review was registered in an international database of prospectively systematic reviews in health and social care named PROSPERO with the registry number CRD42020223081. **Results:** Of the 2148 identified records, 69 met the inclusion criteria and were selected. Results from the review showed a wide variety of older adults and lengths of the interventions, from five weeks (the shortest one) to five years. Aerobic exercise, either isolated or combined with strength performance, was also the most common type of exercise recognized in this systematic review. **Conclusions:** Findings also suggest that the number of studies with all, physical, cognitive and emotional outcomes have been increasing during recent years in healthy older adults.

Keywords: Physical activity; Ageing; Review process; Cognition; Emotion.

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✉ **Corresponding author.** Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación y del Deporte, Campus de Melilla, Calle Santander, nº1. 52006, Melilla, España. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9349-2478>

E-mail: pedrorumo@ugr.es

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INTRODUCTION

The number of people aged 65 or over in 2050 will be doubled in comparison to the current one, from 703 million people at the moment to a future figure of 1.5 billion. In fact, life expectancy is also increasing, from 72.6 years in 2019 to a probable figure of 77.1 years in 2050 (United Nations, 2020).

According to the American College of Sport Medicine –ACSM– (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2009), ageing is associated with some physiologic changes that modify physical and mental health among other factors. In addition, becoming older has some effects on individuals, such as an acceleration in the decline of aerobic capacity and strength (Fleg et al., 2005), memory deterioration (Peters, 2006), decline of motivation and increase of negative emotions (Carstensen and Mikels, 2005) or an increment on the prevalence of cognitive impairment and dementia (Yuan et al., 2016).

The role of physical activity (PA) is gaining attention in this group of people because of the evidence that shows the positive effects of it on healthy older adults, such as the prevention of some diseases including type 2 diabetes, strokes, hypertension and some types of cancer (Vogel et al., 2009). Furthermore, there are also beneficial effects of PA on unhealthy elders with dementia (Blankevoort et al., 2010), depression (Lavretsky et al., 2011), mild cognitive impairment –MCI– (Karssemeijer et al., 2017), and Alzheimer’s (Salazar et al., 2017) or Parkinson’s disease (Rios-Romenets et al., 2015).

Physiologically, regular physical exercise increases maximal oxygen consumption ($VO_2\max$) (Malbut et al., 2002), physical function (Geirsdottir et al., 2015), strength and cardiorespiratory fitness (Ruiz-Montero et al., 2020). Because of that, physical performance is improved in healthy elderly practitioners of PA (Vaughan et al., 2014).

It is necessary to highlight brain health as an important factor related to regular PA (Powell et al., 2019) due to its effects on cognition, such as an enhancement of executive function and information processing speed (Coetsee and Terblanche, 2017) or beneficial effect on peripheral blood concentrations of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) (Karssemeijer et al., 2017). Regular PA increases the function of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin, noradrenaline or dopamine; therefore, the motivation, happiness and satisfaction are going to be increased in practitioners (Secher et al., 2008).

Consequently, there is research focused on the relation between PA and cognitive function, which confirms that PA in healthy older adults enhances existing cognitive function and prevents or delays progression of cognitive diseases, such as Alzheimer’s dementia (Carvalho et al., 2014), in both older adults with and without cognitive impairment (Gomes-Osman et al., 2018). In fact, combined physical and cognitive interventions have been proven as an effective tool for improving cognition in healthy older adults (Zhu et al., 2016).

Overall, considering how important and useful it is to be updated about different physical exercise interventions in an older adult population, the present systematic review pretends to highlight them, taking the recent literature into consideration.

The rationale for conducting the present systematic review was to summarize those supervised physical exercise interventions aimed to improve physical, emotional and/or cognitive performance in healthy older adults aged 60 or over. Studies without interventions in non-sedentary older adults with an active lifestyle have also been included. They are specified in the intervention characteristics column of the Table 1.

Broadly, this review is organized following different aspects, including original source of information, sample characteristics, study design, duration and characteristics of the intervention in case it exists, and the main outcomes under investigation.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Survey methodology

This systematic review has followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Urrútia and Bonfill, 2010). A PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1) summarizes the information on the phases of the systematic review process.

Search strategies

A systematic search for relevant studies was conducted on two of the most respected databases in the field of social sciences and education, ISI Web of Knowledge and Scopus-Elsevier. From these, we contemplated all peer-reviewed publications from the current century, between January of 2000 and December of 2020. We consider two decades as an appropriate period of time, which includes literature from recent years and allows us to observe the gradual process of change and development in this area. In order to be as accurate as possible, we decided which terms should be taken into account. Consequently, all the publications had to contain at least one of the following terms: 'older adults' (older adults, elderly, seniors, elders); 'cognition' (cognition, cognitive function, cognitive flexible, memory); 'physical activity' (physical activity, physical exercise, exercise); 'mood' (mood, state of mood); and 'emotions' (depression, sadness, anxiety, happiness, self-esteem, optimism, anger, hostility).

The search included those articles where the terms were found in titles and abstracts.

Apart from that, all the references from the retrieved articles were reviewed looking for possible additional publications related to physical exercise interventions in healthy older adults, as well as those where samples were active older adults.

Selection criteria

Studies were included according to the following criteria: (1) complete original study; (2) written in English; (3) involving healthy or active people aged 60 years and over; and (4) related to PA and the physical exercise field.

According to these criteria, healthy people were considered as those who did not suffer any kind of mental (e.g., Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease), emotional (e.g., depression) or physical (e.g., arthritis) diagnosed impairment, while active older adults were those who exercised regularly (e.g., marathon runners) (Batmyagmar et al., 2019).

Studies were excluded if they were (1) not written in English; (2) a review, theoretical or protocol article; (3) book or chapter in a book; (4) related to other areas, such as medicine (Ates-Bulut et al., 2019) or genetics (Szentés et al., 2019); or (5) involving unhealthy older adults 60 years old and over.

Two independent expert reviewers screened the titles and abstracts; secondly, they evaluated full-text articles independently. In case of disagreement, a third reviewer was required to solve it. The way to agree on difference in evaluated manuscripts were to share own perspectives about them between the three reviewers. Those reviewers, who are members of different universities with much experience working with

older adults and research in physical exercise in the area of health and sport sciences, followed the considerations previously described.

The present systematic review was registered in an international database of prospectively systematic reviews in health and social care named PROSPERO with the registry number CRD42020223081.

RESULTS

Study selection

A total of 2148 studies were identified using the databases as described in the Search Strategies section. After the removal of 45 duplicated papers, 1888 papers were also excluded based on titles and abstracts. The remaining 215 articles were screened, and from these, 146 were excluded after a full-text evaluation due to the exclusion criteria previously described, leaving 69 studies that were eligible for this review (Figure 1). These 69 papers were classified according to different aspects, including original source of information, sample characteristics, study design, duration and characteristics of the intervention in case it exists, and the main outcomes under investigation.

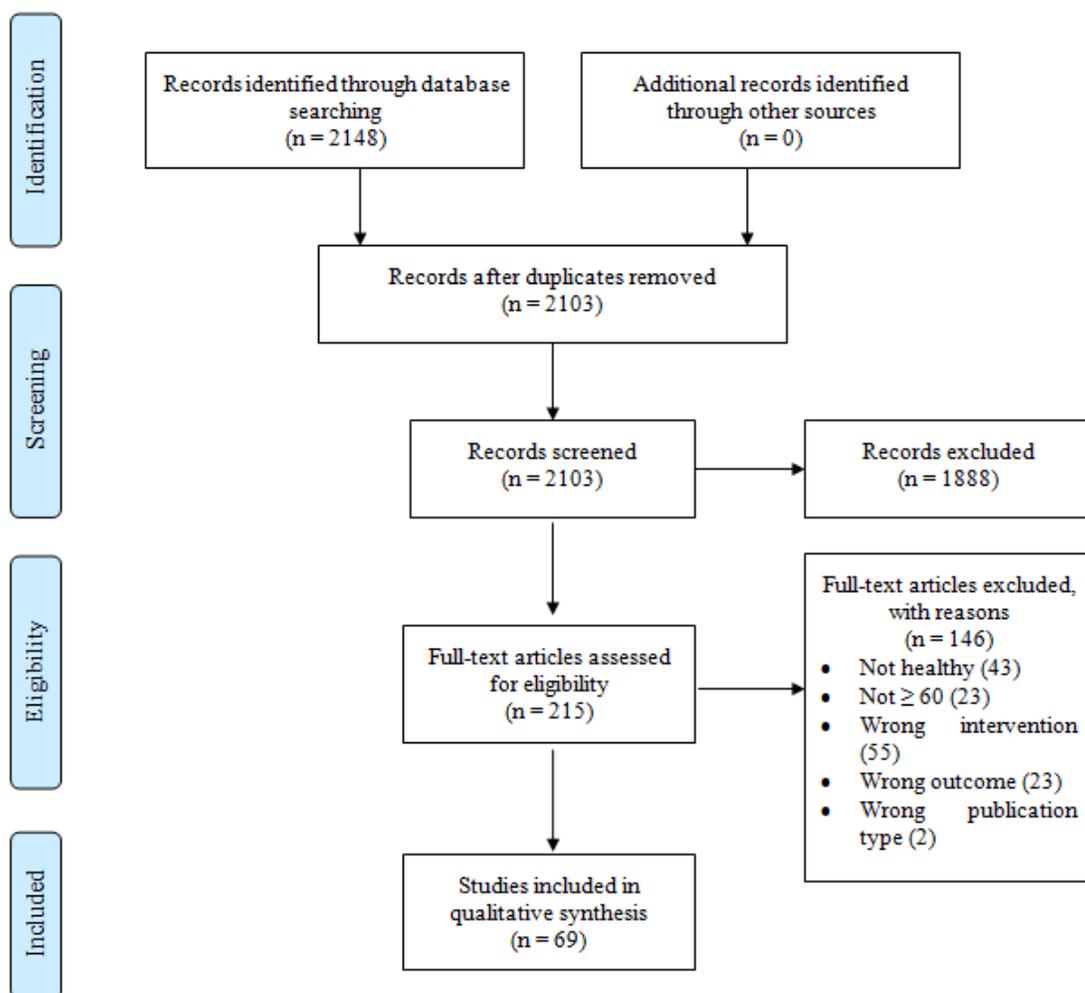


Figure 1: Flowchart of the study selection process using the PRISMA framework.

Participant characteristics

The sample size varied from eight participants (Lindahl et al., 2016) to 1193 (Brady et al., 2020) participants. The ages of the participants ranged from 60, which was the minimum accepted in this paper, to 99 years old (Anderson-Hanley et al., 2011).

In terms of gender, most of the papers (74%) had mixed samples, although there was a minority with men exclusively (6%) and a bigger percentage of studies (20%) comprised mainly of women. Three papers included in this systematic review (Dupuy et al., 2018; Joung and Lee, 2019; Pereira et al., 2014) did not distinguish between men or women in their samples.

According to a PA profile, we found more articles (32%) with a sample composed of sedentary older adults in comparison with those with an active sample (24%). Those active practitioners took part in different studies doing regular activities, such as yoga (Afonso et al., 2017), athletics (Batmyagmar et al., 2019) and dancing (Serra et al., 2016).

However, there were also studies (41%) that did not specify the PA profile of their samples, as well as those whose samples were comprised of both active and sedentary people (Stone et al., 2018). In those papers in which there was no physical exercise intervention, we only included the physically active sample.

Type of intervention

One of the peculiarities of this systematic review is the inclusion of those papers in which there was no physical exercise intervention, but the articles were related to physical exercise in older adult practitioners. In this way, there were 15 studies (22%) out of the 69 included where there was not a physical exercise intervention. The rest of studies included physical exercise interventions with differences in the length of those, from five weeks (the shortest one) (Lee et al., 2017) to five years (Pandya, 2020). In relation to the weekly frequency of physical exercise sessions, most of the interventions had two (28%) or three (51%) sessions per week in comparison to those with four (Vaccaro et al., 2019), five (Tada, 2018) or seven (Hardman et al., 2020) weekly sessions. Moreover, we found papers where the number of weekly sessions varied depending on the intervention group (Anderson-Hanley et al., 2011; Hunter et al., 2013; Matsouka et al., 2005).

According to the type of physical exercise during the intervention, aerobic training was the most common one whether isolated (45%) or combined with strength training (16%). The combination of different types of activities, such as cognitive and physical training; outdoor leisure activities and callisthenic exercises; or aerobic, strength and balance exercises was also interesting. These types of exercise combinations have been defined in Table 1 of this study as concurrent interventions.

Research methodology

In terms of methodology, almost all studies (97%) followed a quantitative methodology, whereas only two (Fox et al., 2007; Zafar et al., 2017) used a mixed model. Therefore, none of the articles included in this systematic review followed a qualitative methodology. However, there was less of a difference between the design of studies. Almost half of the number of articles ($n = 34$; 49%) had a quasi-experimental (QE) study design in contrast to those with a randomized controlled trial (RCT) study design.

Main outcomes investigated

This systematic review is focused on summarizing different types of studies where the main outcomes investigated are related to physical, cognitive and/or emotional performance. Those outcomes investigated

from studies included in this systematic review that were not related to physical, cognitive and/or emotional performance were not included in Table 1.

Table 1: Overview on main characteristics of included studies.

Source	Sex, N, age	Duration	Intervention characteristics/ Study design	Main outcomes investigated
(Afonso et al., 2017)	F, 21, ≥ 60	-	- /QE	Instrumental activities of daily living, depression, cognitive function, anthropometrics measurements
(Alghadir et al., 2016)	F/M, 35/65, 65–95	24 weeks	Moderate aerobic exercise, three times a week/ RCT	Leisure time of PA, cognitive abilities
(Alghadir and Gabr, 2020)	F/M, 10/20, 65–95	12 weeks	Aerobic training program with moderate intensity, 45–60 min session three times a week/ RCT	Mood state, leisure-time physical activity
(Anderson-Hanley et al., 2011)	F/M, 13/1, 60–99	12 weeks	Virtual reality-enhanced stationary bike exercise, two–five times a week/ RCT	Anthropometrics measurements, heart rate, exercise effort
(Antunes et al., 2015)	F, 51, 60–70	24 weeks	Concurrent intervention: aerobic exercise, stretching and joint flexibility, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Physical assessment, depression, attention, memory, spatial/visual orientation, global cognitive and executive functioning, mental control, non-verbal and general intelligence, verbal fluency
(Azizan and Justine, 2016)	F/M, 35/28, ≥ 60	12 weeks	Concurrent intervention: cardiorespiratory endurance, strength, balance and flexibility training, 1 h session three times a week/ QE	Depression, health-related quality of life
(Batmyagmar et al., 2019)	F/M, 4/46, ≥ 60	-	- / QE	Cognitive function, self-reported physical, mental and emotional health
(Bouaziz et al., 2019)	F/M, 44/16, ≥ 70	9.5 weeks	Cycling, 30 min session twice a week/ RCT	Verbal fluency, cognitive impairment, attention, anxiety, depression, health-related quality of life, functional performance, aerobic capacity, gait and balance
(Brady et al., 2020)	F/M, 569/624, 65–89	-	- / QE	PA frequency, social isolation, loneliness, health-related quality of life
(Brown et al., 2009)	F/M, 135/19, 62–95	24 weeks	Concurrent intervention: resistance and balance training; flexibility exercise and relaxation technique, 1 h session twice a week/ RCT	Fluid intelligence, visual, verbal and working memory, executive function, depression, mood
(Carrasco et al., 2020)	F/M, 26/12, ≥ 65	6 weeks	Nintendo Wii Sports (tennis, baseball, bowling and boxing), 1 h session twice a week/ QE	PA frequency, health-related quality of life, cognitive performance

(Cassilhas et al., 2007)	M, 62, 65–75	24 weeks	High resistance training; moderate resistance training, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Body composition, muscle strength, digit span, short and long-term memory, attention, quality of life, depression, mood
(Cassilhas et al., 2010)	M, 43, 65–75	24 weeks	High resistance training, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Muscle strength, mood, anxiety
(Čekanauskaitė et al., 2020)	F/M, 30/3, ≥ 60	10 weeks	Yoga, 90 min session twice a week/ RCT	Heart rate variability, mood, anxiety, depression, perceived stress, mental flexibility, working memory, response inhibition, visuospatial processing, motor learning, balance
(Chutimakul et al., 2018)	F/M, 37/7, 60–65	12 weeks	Khon exercise, 1 h session three times a week/ QE	Functional fitness
(Coubard et al., 2011)	F/M, 104/6, 60–89	23 weeks	Contemporary dance; fall prevention programme; Tai Chi Chuan, 1 h session once a week/ QE	Neuropsychological assessment
(Cruz-Ferreira et al., 2015)	F, 57, 65–80	24 weeks	Creative dance, 50 min session three times a week/ RCT	Physical fitness, life satisfaction
(de Oliveira et al., 2019)	F/M, 77/23, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	PA frequency, health-related quality of life, anxiety, depression
(Douka et al., 2019)	F/M, 107/23, ≥ 60	32 weeks	Greek traditional dance, 75 min session twice a week/ QE	Physical fitness
(Dupuy et al., 2018)	F/M, 19, 60–70	-	-/ QE	Aerobic fitness, heart rate variability, cognitive assessment
(Eckardt et al., 2020)	F/M, 41/27, 65–79	10 weeks	Instability resistance training; stable machine-based resistance training; stable machine-based adductor/abductor training, 1 h session twice a week/ RCT	Working memory, response and processing speed, attention, conflict resolution, set shifting
(Ericson et al., 2018)	F, 32, 65–70	24 weeks	Resistance training, twice a week/ RCT	Health-related quality of life, hope, affect
(Filar-Mierzwa et al., 2017)	F, 24, 61–74	12 weeks	Dance sessions, 45 min session three times a week/ QE	Postural stability, limits of stability, risk of falls
(Flegal et al., 2007)	F/M, 101/34, 65–85	24 weeks	Iyengar/Hatha yoga, 90 min session once a week; Aerobic walking, 1 h session once a week/ RCT	Cognitive function, mood, fatigue, anxiety, health-related quality of life, physical measures
(Flodin et al., 2017)	F/M, 27/20, 64–78	24 weeks	Aerobic exercise, 30–60 min session three times a week/ RCT	VO ₂ peak, episodic and working memory, executive function, processing speed
(Fox et al., 2007)	F/M, 74/58, ≥ 70	48 weeks	Concurrent intervention: aerobic exercise, strength, Tai Chi and flexibility exercises, 60–90 min session three times a week/ QE	Quality of life, global life satisfaction, general well-being, physical self-perception profile, PA

(González-Palau et al., 2014)	F/M, 31/8, ≥ 60	12 weeks	Concurrent intervention: cognitive training, 40 min session three times a week and physical training in platform, 1 h session three times a week/ QE	Language, attention, working memory, sustained attention, executive functions, verbal learning, depression
(Gothe et al., 2019)	F/M, 169/78, 60–79	24 weeks	Aerobic dance; aerobic walking; aerobic walking + nutritional supplement; stretching exercise, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	PA, physical, mental and social well-being, quality of life
(Haraldstad et al., 2017)	F, 49, 60–81	12 weeks	Strength training, three times a week/ QE	Health-related quality of life, maximal strength, physiological characteristics
(Hardman et al., 2020)	F/M, 26/12, 60-90	24 weeks	Aerobic exercise; Mediterranean diet; aerobic exercise + diet intervention 45-60 min session every day/ RCT	Aerobic fitness, simple and choice reactions times, different types of memory, mood, wellness, brain-derived neurotropic factor
(Hars et al., 2014)	F/M, 129/5, ≥ 65	24 weeks	Music-based multitask exercise classes, 1 h session once a week/ RCT	Cognitive impairment, executive functioning-related abilities, anxiety, depression
(Haslacher et al., 2012)	F/M, 6/50, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	Executive functions, depression
(Haslacher et al., 2015a)	F/M, 5/50, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	Physical performance, depression, cognitive abilities
(Haslacher et al., 2015b)	F/M, 5/50, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	Depression, estimators of intelligence, quality of life, physical and psychical well-being
(Haslacher et al., 2016)	F/M, 4/43, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	Physical performance
(Haslacher et al., 2017)	F/M, 4/43, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	Physical performance
(Hunter et al., 2013)	F, 72, 60–74	16 weeks	Concurrent intervention: aerobic and resistance training, two, four or six 50 min sessions a week/ RCT	Maximal strength, physical performance, mood
(Imaoka et al., 2019)	F/M, 61/13, ≥ 60	12 weeks	Concurrent intervention: memory training and aerobic exercise; memory training, aerobic exercise and soy peptide supplementation, 1 h session once a week/ RCT	Cognitive impairment, attentiveness, body composition, muscle strength, gait speed, depression
(Joung and Lee, 2019)	F/M, 82, 65–80	8 weeks	Creative dance; stretching training, 90 min session twice a week/ RCT	Physical fitness, functional balance, functional mobility
(Kang et al., 2020)	F, 20, 68–80	16 weeks	Aquatic exercise, 1 h session three times per week/ QE	Cognitive function
(Khazaei-pool et al., 2015)	F/M, 37/83, 65-89	8 weeks	Concurrent intervention: aerobic exercise, stretching, kinetic movements and balance exercises, three times a week/ RCT	Well-being, happiness

(Kim et al., 2019)	F, 21, 67–81	24 weeks	Strength exercise, 50–80 min session three times a week/ RCT	Depression
(Laredo-Aguilera et al., 2018)	F/M, 32/6, ≥ 65	10 weeks	Concurrent intervention: aerobic exercise, muscular strengthening and balance training, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Anthropometrics, pain, mood, depression
(Lee et al., 2017)	M, 21, ≥ 65	5 weeks	Concurrent intervention: aerobic cycling and leg stretching, 50 min session twice a week/ RCT	Depression, balance
(Lindahl et al., 2016)	F/M, 2/6, ≥ 60	7 weeks	Hatha yoga, 1 h session twice a week/ QE	Balance, flexibility, functional mobility, health-related quality of life, exhaustion, stress
(Liu et al., 2019)	F/M, 21/10, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	Depression, personality, attention
(Machacova et al., 2017)	F/M, 172/17, ≥ 60	12 weeks	Basic steps and combinations of ballroom dances, 1 h session once a week/ RCT	Mobility, basic activities of daily living, instrumental activities of daily living
(Martins et al., 2011)	F/M, 47/31, 65–95	16 weeks	Aerobic training; strength exercise, 45 min session three times a week/ RCT	Functional fitness, mood states
(Mason et al., 2020)	F/M, 15/16, 65–84	-	-/ QE	VO ₂ peak, cognitive function
(Matsouka et al., 2005)	F, 55 60–75	12 weeks	Concurrent intervention: outdoor and indoor leisure activities and callisthenic exercises, 45 min session once/twice/three times a week/ QE	Positive engagement, revitalization, tranquillity, physical exhaustion
(Matsouka et al., 2010)	F, 45, 60–75	12 weeks	Concurrent intervention: outdoor leisure activities and callisthenic exercises, 45 min session twice a week/ QE	Positive engagement, revitalization, tranquillity, physical exhaustion
(Noopud et al., 2019)	F, 43, 60–80	12 weeks	Thai traditional dance, 30–60 min session three times a week/ RCT	Posture control, agility, functional balance, walking speed
(Oken et al., 2006)	F/M, 101/34, 65–85	24 weeks	Hatha yoga, 90 min session once a week; aerobic exercise, 1 h session once a week/ RCT	Attention, alertness, mood, fatigue, depression, health-related quality of life, anxiety, physical performance
(Pandya, 2020)	F/M, 394/398, ≥ 60,	5 years	Yoga, 40 min session once a week/ RCT	Cognitive impairment, memory
(Pereira et al., 2014)	F/M, 32 ≥ 60	16 weeks	Square-stepping exercise, 1 h session twice a week/ QE	Cognitive function, balance, functional mobility, depression
(Rosanti et al., 2014)	F, 17, 60–70	-	-/ QE	Neuropsychological assessment, self-efficacy
(Serra et al., 2016)	F, 55, 60–85	-	-/ QE	PA level, muscle strength, postural balance

(Solberg et al., 2012)	F/M, 80/38, ≥ 70	16 weeks	Strength training; functional strength training; endurance training, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Vitality, psychological need satisfaction, perceived autonomy support
(Solberg et al., 2013a)	F/M, 80/38, ≥ 70	16 weeks	Strength training; functional strength training; endurance training, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Body composition, functional performance, maximal strength, life satisfaction, affect
(Solberg et al., 2013b)	F/M, 80/38, ≥ 70	16 weeks	Physical exercise, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Motivation, perceived competence, causality orientations, well-being
(Starkweather, 2007)	F/M, 14/6, 60–90	10 weeks	Aerobic exercise, 30 min session five times a week/ QE	Stress, mood, quality of life
(Stone et al., 2018)	F/M, 41/75, ≥ 60	-	-/ QE	Self-confidence on daily activities, fear of/concern for falling, expectations and experiences of ageing
(Tada, 2018)	F/M, 42/19, ≥ 60	24 weeks	Resistance exercise using Thera-Band, 20 min session twice a week/ QE	Mental health status
(Tsai et al., 2015)	M, 48, 65–79	48 weeks	Resistance exercise, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	PA frequency, maximal strength, cognitive performance
(Vaccaro et al., 2019)	F/M, 17/8, ≥ 65	24 weeks	Dance classes and free dance, 2 h session three times a week and 1 h 30 min session once a week/ QE	Anthropometrics, physical fitness, cognitive impairment, memory, depression, anxiety
(Vrinceanu et al., 2019)	F/M, 30/10, 60–86	12 weeks	Dance/movement training; aerobic exercise training, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Maximal aerobic power, gait speed, cognitive impairment, depression, anxiety, quality of life, social engagement
(Zafar et al., 2017)	F/M, 49/14, ≥ 80	12 weeks	Adapted Tango dance intervention, 90 min session twice a week/ QE	Depression, physical function, cognitive impairment
(Zanuso et al., 2012)	F/M, 10/10, ≥ 65	12 weeks	Isotonic resistance training programme, 1 h session three times a week/ RCT	Anxiety, mood state profile
(Zheng et al., 2020)	F/M, 257/62, ≥ 65	6 weeks	Playing alone; playing with peers; playing with youths A set of exergames, each being played for 5–10 min twice a week/ RCT	Attitude toward exergames, sociability, positive and negative affect.

Note: N= Number of participants; QE= Quasi-experimental; RCT= Randomized controlled trial.

DISCUSSION

This systematic review aimed to summarize those studies of healthy older adults aged 60 and over with or without a physical exercise intervention programme where the main outcomes investigated have been related to physical, cognitive and/or emotional performance. We found 69 suitable studies fitting the pre-established inclusion criteria.

These outcomes were, mainly, related to physical performance (Chutimakul et al., 2018; Douka et al., 2019), although emotional and cognitive outcomes were also studied, isolated (Coubard et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2019) or combined (Pereira et al., 2014) with the physical ones. This combination of physical, cognitive and emotional outcomes was observed in 14 (20%) out of the 69 chosen studies, where six of those 14 papers were published in 2019 (Batmyagmar et al., 2019; Bouaziz et al., 2019; Gothe et al., 2019; Imaoka et al., 2019; Vaccaro et al., 2019; Vrinceanu et al., 2019). According to this, it is conceivable that there is a current tendency of studying these combinations of physical, cognitive and emotional outcomes together with older adults. It is also interesting how technology is used for improving those outcomes through exergames (Carrasco et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2020).

Hogan et al. (2013) suggested important benefits in older adults for both affective and cognitive performance after a single bout of moderate exercise, whereas Tarazona-Santabalbina et al. (2016) published the physical, cognitive, emotional and social effects of a multicomponent exercise intervention in frail older adults. In reference to reviews and meta-analysis publications, there is considerable published research focused on the effects of physical exercise on cognition in healthy (Carvalho et al., 2014; Gomes-Osman et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2016) and unhealthy (Karssemeijer et al., 2017, Öhman et al., 2014) older adults.

Investigating cognitive or emotional outcomes, apart from physical outcomes, during physical exercise interventions may contribute to establish more connections between body, brain and emotions to the benefit of science and particularly to older adults. According to the 54 accepted papers in this systematic review in which there was a physical exercise intervention, in 26 of them (48%), the number of physical exercise min per week was 150 or more. If we compare these results and current guidelines of physical exercise for older adults (Chodzko-Zajko et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2007; Powell et al., 2019), we could suggest that a considerable number of selected papers did not contribute to the minimum of weekly min, which these guidelines established to achieve benefits in physical health: 150 min of moderate intensity exercise or 75 min of vigorous exercise. According to this, an intervention that does not follow these recommendations could not be successful for practitioners. Thus, this result may insinuate that, in the future, physical exercise interventions should follow current recommendations for weekly min in order to obtain greater benefits to health. In the overall analysis, the results found in this systematic review may prove that physical exercise interventions in healthy older adults have been increasing during recent years. An update on these interventions could provide useful information, such as the length, type of exercise or the effects produced by itself, to those professionals who are in daily contact with older adults.

We considered it appropriate to focus this systematic review in healthy older adults in order to establish differences with the unhealthy older adults. However, there are also published reviews (Coelho et al., 2013; van Uffelen et al., 2008), which include both healthy and unhealthy older adults in the same paper. In that case, data or results from those papers should be carefully observed, taking into account possible differences and conclusions to come to.

The sample of studies included in this systematic review was located in two databases, ISI Web of Knowledge and Scopus-Elsevier. We acknowledge that by limiting the search to a couple of databases, we could not capture all possible information. It would be interesting to expand the search to other databases with the purpose of giving access to more information to interested populations. Moreover, of all the included papers, none followed a qualitative methodology, which could also contribute to providing more information in this area.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the present paper suggest there were a remarkable number of research articles and systematic reviews about this topic, which has been increasing during recent years. This increment shows how current and important it is to investigate the way physical exercise is being practiced in healthy older adults and the connection it has with cognition and emotions. Moreover, the present systematic review is supported on previous systematic reviews where the impact of physical exercise on the cognitive functioning of healthy and symptomatic older adults is more than an undeniable fact. These studies show a large methodological heterogeneity in intervention characteristics (e.g., number of participants, length of the intervention or type of exercise). The current systematic review illustrates how physical, cognitive and emotional outcomes could be, or not be, simultaneously investigated following a specific physical exercise intervention or under no intervention but being focused on active older adults who regularly exercise. However, the results of these investigations are not included in this paper. Future research should also focus on results in order to provide useful information about the effects of these kinds of studies.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors were involved in the conception and design of the systematic review. Miguel Ángel Araque-Martínez generated and conducted the search. Eva María Artes-Rodríguez and Pedro Jesús Ruiz-Montero were involved in the data collection, extraction and synthesis. Antonio Jesús Casimiro-Andújar revised the manuscript critically for important intellectual content. All authors contributed to the writing of the paper, read and approved the final manuscript.

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