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The Effects of a Mid-Morning Bout of

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Exercise on Adolescents' Cognitive Function

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1 **Abstract**

2 The aim of the present study was to examine the effects of a mid-morning bout of exercise on
3 adolescents' cognitive function in a randomised crossover design where each participant
4 completed two experimental trials. Forty-five adolescents (13.3 ± 0.3 years old), undertook a
5 bout of exercise (ten repeats of level one of the multi-stage fitness test, 30 s rest between
6 repeats; exercise trial) or continued to rest (resting trial). A battery of cognitive function tests
7 assessing visuo-motor speed, executive function and working memory (visual search test,
8 Stroop test and Sternberg paradigm, respectively) was completed 30 min before and 45 min
9 following the exercise.

10 Average heart rate during exercise was 172 ± 17 beats/min. On the visual search test, there was
11 a greater improvement in response times across the morning on the exercise trial ($t=2.6$,
12 $p=0.009$). However, this improvement in response times was combined with a greater
13 decrease in accuracy on the exercise trial ($z=2.0$, $p=0.044$). On the Sternberg paradigm there
14 was a greater improvement in response times across the morning following exercise when
15 compared to resting ($t=2.6$, $p=0.010$). The mid-morning bout of exercise did not affect Stroop
16 test performance.

17 These improvements in response times are most likely the result of a general speeding up of
18 responses across several cognitive domains, because response times were improved similarly
19 across two different domains and across all test complexity levels, rather than being restricted
20 to the specific high cognitive load levels. Accordingly, exercise in school settings may help to
21 improve **cognitive function** in adolescents during the school morning.

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24 **Keywords:** acute exercise; executive function; youth; attention; working memory; visual

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1 **1. Introduction**

2 There is increasing evidence that an acute bout of exercise enhances cognitive
3 function in adult populations (Lambourne & Tomporowski, 2010; Chang, Labban, Gapin, &
4 Etnier, 2012), but few studies focus on young people. There is some evidence to suggest that
5 exercise is also beneficial for cognitive function in young people (Best, 2010; Elleberg &
6 St-Louis-Deschênes, 2010; Hillman, et al, 2009; Stroth et al, 2009). This suggestion is
7 confirmed by the meta-analysis of Sibley & Etnier (2003), indicating an overall effect size
8 (ES) of 0.32 for the relationship between exercise and function in a wide range of cognitive
9 domains in young people. Age of the participants was found to be an important moderator,
10 with the largest effect size for ‘middle school’ students aged 8-11 (ES = 0.48), and a smaller
11 ES (0.24) for ‘high school’ students aged 12-16 (Sibley & Etnier, 2003). In the later meta-
12 analysis of Chang et al (2012), age was also a moderator of the relationship between exercise
13 and cognitive function. Converse to the findings of Sibley & Etnier (2003), a larger effect
14 size was observed for ‘high school’ (aged 14-17) than for ‘elementary school’ (aged 6-13)
15 children (ES = 0.17 vs. 0.07). Such fluctuations in effect size may result from differences in
16 methodology, for example the inclusion of different age ranges in each category and pooled
17 data from largely from unpublished studies. However, they may also point to a more
18 fundamental role of age in modifying the effects of exercise on cognitive function, and
19 accordingly it is important to investigate this relationship specifically in young people.

20 Theoretical support for this view is based on the rapid growth and changes in
21 metabolism in adolescents, thus their responses to exercise may be different (Cromer et al,
22 1990; Kanarek, 1997). For example, the findings in younger children (aged 6-11) (Elleberg
23 & St-Louis-Deschênes, 2010; Hillman, et al, 2009; Stroth et al, 2009) may not generalise to
24 adolescents, given that younger children have a larger brain weight relative to their body

1 weight and a 50% greater metabolic rate per unit of brain weight (Hoyland, Dye, & Lawton,
2 2009). In the small number of published studies on adolescents there is a general trend
3 towards exercise having a beneficial effect on adolescents' cognitive function (e.g. Budde,
4 Voelcker-Rehage, Pietraßyk-Kendziorra, Ribeiro, & Tidow, 2008; McNaughten & Gabbard,
5 1993; Travlos, 2010; Zervas, Danis, & Klissouras, 1991). Some early studies assessed
6 cognitive function following Physical Education lessons and findings include greater
7 accuracy of attention following a PE lesson during a normal science lesson (Zervas et al,
8 1991). Furthermore, mathematical computation was greater following moderate intensity
9 walking when compared with a resting control group (McNaughten & Gabbard, 1993).

10 Most of these studies have assessed performance on complex cognitive operations,
11 involving contributions from several more basic cognitive domains such as executive
12 function and working memory. Several theories postulate a differential impact of exercise on
13 such basic cognitive functions, because they rely on different brain regions which in turn may
14 respond differently to exercise. Whilst early theories suggested that complex information
15 processing is most affected, the executive function hypothesis (Churchill et al., 2002;
16 Kramer, Colcombe, McAuley, Scaf & Erickson, 2005), argues that executive function (e.g.
17 the ability to plan and initiate goal-directed behaviour and suppress undesired responses)
18 benefits most from exercise. Other authors have found that a test of working memory (digit
19 span) is most sensitive to exercise effects (Hogervorst, Clifford, Stock, Xin & Bandelow,
20 2012). Differential effects of exercise on the basic components of cognitive function thus
21 remain plausible but controversial.

22 Accordingly, in the present study we aim to investigate the effects of exercise on three
23 basic cognitive domains: executive function (which includes aspects of attention and
24 inhibition of automatic responses), working memory and visuo-motor speed. Each of the
25 basic cognitive functions investigated here may respond differently to exercise, in which case

1 one could conclude that exercise has differential effects on specific cognitive functions and
2 probably also on different brain areas. Conversely, if exercise effects are found to apply
3 similarly across all the cognitive tests, one may conclude that a more general mechanism is at
4 work, with comparable effects throughout the brain.

5 Where positive effects on cognitive function have been seen following exercise,
6 several mechanisms have been postulated to mediate such effects, including increased
7 cerebral blood flow (Querido & Sheel, 2007) which enhances the delivery of glucose and
8 oxygen to neural tissues and the clearance of carbon dioxide (Jorgensen, Nowak, Ide, &
9 Secher, 2000). Such a mechanism may result in regionally specific effects on the brain, which
10 could be detected in the current study via different effects on the three cognitive function
11 tests. However, it has also been suggested that more general arousal mechanisms may be at
12 work, whereby exercise increases physiological and/or cognitive arousal, increasing the
13 allocation of resources to the cognitive task and thus, enhancing cognitive function
14 (Brisswalter, Collardeau, & René, 2002). A more generic effect on arousal would in turn be
15 more likely to affect various basic cognitive functions equally, in which case the current
16 study would be more likely to yield a pattern of results that shows similar effects of exercise
17 on all the cognitive function tests. In addition, all the cognitive tests employed here contain at
18 least two levels with different cognitive loads and if exercise were to affect all cognitive load
19 levels equally again this would suggest a more generic effect.

20 A limitation of the studies conducted in adolescents to date is that cognitive function
21 has been measured immediately (or very soon, i.e. < 10 min) following exercise. However, in
22 everyday school settings, it may be up to one hour between exercise (at break time or during
23 a PE lesson) and the next academic lesson, where cognitive function is of interest for
24 learning. Indeed, in adults, whilst it was hypothesised that the effects of exercise may decline
25 with increasing time between the exercise period and cognitive testing, the effect sizes were

1 similar across different lengths of time between exercise and cognitive testing (Lambourne &
2 Tomporowski, 2010). However, this has not been examined in adolescents.

3 Therefore, the aim of the present study is to address this void in the literature and
4 examine the effects of exercise (which could easily be incorporated into the school morning,
5 e.g. at break time) on subsequent cognitive function in adolescents. This study will use a
6 battery of cognitive function tests (visual search test, Stroop test and Sternberg paradigm), to
7 assess several basic components of cognitive function. Based on the limited evidence
8 available to date, the authors hypothesise that cognitive function will be enhanced following
9 an acute bout of exercise, but the previous literature is equivocal as to whether or not this will
10 be a test specific or generalised response.

11

12 **2. Methodology**

13 ***2.1: Participant Characteristics***

14 Sixty schoolchildren aged 12 to 13 years were recruited to participate in the study.
15 However, 15 participants failed to complete the study because they were either absent from
16 school for one of the experimental trials (n = 11) or failed to comply with the dietary control
17 conditions (n = 4). During familiarisation, simple measures of height, body mass and waist
18 circumference were taken. Height was measured using a Leicester Height Measure (Seca,
19 Hamburg, Germany), accurate to 0.1 cm. Body mass was measured using a Seca 770 digital
20 scale (Seca, Hamburg, Germany), accurate to 0.1kg. These measures allowed the
21 determination of Body Mass Index (BMI), calculated by dividing body mass [kg] by the
22 square of the height [m²]. Waist circumference was measured at the narrowest point of the
23 torso between the xiphoid process of the sternum and the iliac crest, to the nearest 0.1cm. For

1 descriptive purposes, the anthropometric characteristics of the participants who completed the
2 study (n = 45) are provided in table 1. According to age-referenced cut-offs (Reilly &
3 Wilson, 2006), 33% of participants were overweight (>85th centile) and 11% were obese
4 (>95th centile).

5 *(Insert table 1 here)*

6

7 ***2.2: Study Design***

8 The study was approved by the institutions ethical advisory committee. Participants
9 were recruited from a local secondary school and in accordance with the ethical guidelines of
10 the British Education Research Authority for school based research, school level consent was
11 obtained from head teachers. In addition, written parental informed consent was obtained and
12 a health screen questionnaire completed (covering any medical issues relating to the child) to
13 ensure all participants were in good health.

14 Each participant undertook a familiarisation session, which preceded the first of two
15 experimental trials by seven days. During familiarisation, the protocol of the study was
16 explained and participants were provided with an opportunity to familiarise themselves with
17 the methods involved, which included completing the battery of cognitive function tests. In
18 addition, participants were provided with an opportunity to ask questions and clarify any part
19 of the tests they did not fully understand.

20 The study employed a randomised crossover design, with participants blind until
21 arrival at school on each day of testing. The experimental trials consisted of an exercise trial
22 and a resting trial. Therefore, participants acted as their own controls. Trials were scheduled

1 seven days apart and participants reported to school at the normal time. The experimental
2 protocol is shown in figure 1.

3 *(Insert figure 1 here)*

4 5 **2.3: Dietary Control**

6 Participants consumed a meal of their choice the evening before their first
7 experimental trial and were asked to repeat this meal for their subsequent trial. Following this
8 meal, participants were asked to observe an overnight fast from 10pm. In order to maintain
9 euhydration, participants were allowed to drink water *ad libitum* during this time. In addition,
10 participants were asked to avoid any unusually vigorous exercise for 24 h prior to each
11 experimental trial. Prior to each main trial, a telephone call was made to participants' parents
12 to remind them of this information. Participants who had not followed these requirements
13 were removed from the study (n = 4).

14 15 **2.4: Exercise Protocol**

16 The exercise performed was a modified version of the Multi-Stage Fitness Test
17 (MSFT, National Coaching Foundation, UK). The exercise protocol was 10 minutes in
18 duration and consisted of 10 repetitions of stage one (each consisting of 7 x 20 m shuttle runs
19 at 8.0 km.h⁻¹), with a 30 s rest between each repetition. Prior to the exercise, participants were
20 fitted with a Polar Wearlink heart rate monitor and a Polar S610i watch (Polar, Finland).
21 Immediately following each repetition, if heart rate had reached 190 beats.min⁻¹
22 (approximately 90% of maximum heart rate in this population), participants were instructed
23 to stop running and to walk for the remainder of the test. The duration of the exercise was

1 chosen so it was sufficiently brief to fit into a normal school morning and reflected
2 adolescents' usual physical activity patterns. Consequently, the exercise protocol could be
3 incorporated into a school morning and potentially has practical application, especially given
4 the well documented social, emotional, physical and health benefits of break time/recess to
5 young people (for review see Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner (2010)).

6 Of the 45 adolescents who completed the study, 23 (51.1%) completed all 10 repeats
7 of level one of the MSFT without their heart rate reaching the threshold of 190 beats.min⁻¹.
8 Overall, participants ran for 7 ± 1 min (mean ± S.D.) and whilst running, the average heart
9 rate was 178 ± 11 beats.min⁻¹. The participants whose heart rate reached 190 beats.min⁻¹
10 continued to walk for the remainder of the exercise, during which their heart rate was 151 ±
11 16 beats.min⁻¹. However, the total exercise time (running and walking) for all participants
12 was 10 min, with an overall average heart rate of 172 ± 17 beats.min⁻¹.

13

14 ***2.5: Capillary Blood Sampling***

15 Capillary blood samples have previously been used successfully in a similar study
16 population (Cooper, Bandelow, & Nevill, 2011) and were preferred to venous blood samples
17 in the present study due to ethical constraints in young people. The participants' hands were
18 warmed via submersion in warm water to increase capillary blood flow. A Unistik single use
19 lancet (Unistik Extra, 21G gauge, 2.0mm depth, Owen Mumford Ltd., UK) was used and the
20 blood collected into two 300 µl EDTA coated microvettes (Sarstedt Ltd., UK). Two 25 µl
21 whole blood samples were removed using plain pre-calibrated glass pipettes (Hawksley Ltd.,
22 UK), immediately deproteinised in 250 µl of 2.5% ice cooled perchloric acid in 1.5 ml plastic
23 vials and centrifuged at 7000 rpm for 4 minutes (Eppendorph 5415C, Hamburg, Germany).
24 The remaining whole blood was also centrifuged at 7000 rpm for 4 minutes (Eppendorph

1 5415C, Hamburg, Germany) and the plasma removed and placed into 500 µl plastic vials. All
2 samples were frozen at -20 °C until analysis.

3 Blood glucose concentrations were determined using a commercially available kit
4 (GOD-PAP method, GL 2610, Randox, Ireland) and were read photometrically using a Cecil
5 CE393 digital grating spectrophotometer (Cambridge, UK). Plasma insulin concentrations
6 were determined using an enzyme-linked immuno-sorbent assay (ELISA) (Merckodia Ltd.,
7 Sweden). Blood lactate concentrations were determined using the method described by
8 Maughan (1982).

9

10 **2.6: Mood Questionnaire**

11 The mood questionnaire was a modified version of the ‘Activation-Deactivation
12 Check List’ (AD ACL) short form, which has previously been shown as both a valid and
13 reliable measure of mood (Thayer, 1986). The 20 item questionnaire was split into four
14 components of mood; energy, tiredness, tension and calmness, each having five
15 corresponding adjectives on the questionnaire. The original AD ACL short form was piloted
16 in an adolescent population and subsequently five of the adjectives were changed to ensure
17 suitability for the study population, with the modified version being previously used
18 successfully in a similar study population (Cooper et al, 2011). The adjectives used and their
19 corresponding components of mood were; energy: active, energetic, alert, lively and wide-
20 awake; tiredness: sleepy, tired, drowsy, exhausted and fatigued; tension: anxious, nervous,
21 fearful, worried and tense; and calmness: restful, calm, at-rest, laid-back and quiet. The
22 scoring system was also slightly modified, with participants asked to respond on a scale of 1
23 to 5 regarding how they felt at that moment in time (where 1: definitely do not feel, 3: unsure,

1 5: definitely feel). The scores on the adjectives for each component of mood were summed,
2 providing an overall score for each component.

3 In addition, three visual analogue (VAS) scales were used to provide a measure of
4 participants' hunger, fullness and concentration. The VAS scales consisted of a 10 cm line
5 from one extreme to the other (i.e. not at all to very), with participants indicating the point on
6 the line that applied to them at that moment in time.

7

8 ***2.7: Cognitive Function Tests***

9 The battery of cognitive function tests was administered via a laptop computer and
10 lasted approximately 15 min. The battery of tests included a test of visual search, a Stroop
11 test and the Sternberg paradigm. Written instructions appeared on the screen at the start of
12 each test, which were repeated verbally by an investigator. Each cognitive function test was
13 preceded by 3-6 practice stimuli, where feedback was provided regarding whether the
14 participants' response was correct or not. Data from these practice stimuli were discarded and
15 once the test started no feedback was provided. The cognitive function tests were
16 administered to groups of 10-12 participants at any one time, in silence and separated such
17 that participants could not interact with each other during the cognitive testing. The same
18 testing procedure has been previously used successfully in a similar study population (Cooper
19 et al, 2011) and the tests were administered in the order they are described here.

20

21 ***2.7.1: Visual Search Test***

22 The visual search test consisted of two test levels, each consisting of 21 stimuli. On
23 each test level, participants were instructed to respond as quickly as possible to the stimuli by

1 pressing the space bar on the keyboard. In both test levels there were 21 different locations
2 for the stimuli, with the order of the locations randomised.

3 The stimuli in the baseline level were triangles drawn in solid green lines on a black
4 background, providing a measure of simple visuo-motor speed. The complex level had
5 random green dots covering the screen, which were redrawn every 250 ms to induce the
6 visual effect of a flickering background, acting as a background distractor. The target
7 triangles were drawn with a few dots on each line and the density of these dots increased until
8 the participant responded (the lines becoming denser until a response was registered). This
9 provided a measure of complex visual processing. The variables of interest on both levels
10 were the response times of correct responses and the proportion of correct responses made.

11

12 2.7.2: *Stroop Test*

13 The Stroop test measures the sensitivity to interference and the ability to suppress an
14 automated response (i.e. the time required to identify the colour rather than read the word)
15 (Stroop, 1935) and is a commonly used measure of selective attention (van Zomeren &
16 Brouwer, 1992). The Stroop test consisted of two levels. Both levels involved the test word
17 being placed in the centre of the screen, with the target and distractor presented randomly on
18 the right or left of the test word. The target position was counterbalanced for the left and right
19 side within each test level. The participant was asked to respond as quickly as possible, using
20 the left and right arrow keys, to identify the position of the target word.

21 The baseline level contained 20 stimuli, where the test word was printed in white on
22 the centre of the screen and the participant had to select the target word, from the target and
23 distractor, which were also printed in white. The colour-interference level contained 40

1 stimuli and involved the participant selecting the colour the test word was written in, rather
2 than the actual word (which was an incongruent colour), again using the right and left arrow
3 keys to identify the target. The choices remained on the screen until the participant
4 responded. The variables of interest were the RT of correct responses and the proportion of
5 correct responses made.

6

7 *2.7.3: Sternberg Paradigm*

8 The Sternberg Paradigm (Sternberg, 1969) is a test of working memory and has three
9 levels. Each test level presented a different working memory load; one, three or five items.
10 On the baseline (number) level, the target was always the number '3'. This level contained 16
11 stimuli and provides a measure of basic information processing speed. The three- and five-
12 item levels had target lists of three and five letters respectively, each containing 32 stimuli.

13 At the start of each level, the target items were displayed together with instructions to
14 press the right arrow key if the stimulus was a target item and the left arrow key otherwise.
15 The correct responses were counterbalanced on each level between the right and left arrow
16 keys. The choice stimuli were presented on the centre of the screen with an inter-stimulus
17 interval (ISI) of 1 second, during which the screen was blank. The choices remained on the
18 screen until the participant responded. The variables of interest were the RT and the
19 proportion of correct responses made.

20

21 *2.8: Breakfast*

22 A range of breakfast foods were provided for participants on their first trial, from
23 which they chose ad libitum. The quantity of food taken by each participant was recorded and

1 any leftovers weighed using a Salter 1029 WHDRT scale (Salter, Hamburg, Germany) to
2 allow determination of the breakfast consumed by each participant. Due to the well
3 documented effect of breakfast consumption and composition on adolescents' cognitive
4 function (Hoyland et al, 2009; Cooper et al, 2011), on the subsequent trial, an identical
5 breakfast was provided along with instructions that all the breakfast must be consumed within
6 15 min. All participants followed this instruction. The breakfast consumed consisted of (mean
7 \pm SD): 397 \pm 172 kcal, 76.4 \pm 34.5 g of carbohydrate, 8.1 \pm 3.8 g of protein and 6.4 \pm 4.1 g of fat.

8

9 **2.9: Statistical Analysis**

10 The mood, blood glucose, plasma insulin and blood lactate data were analysed using
11 PASW statistics (Version 18, SPSS Inc., Chicago, Il, USA) via two-way, trial (exercise
12 /resting) by session time (0/30/60/120 min), analysis of variance (ANOVA) for repeated
13 measures. Effect sizes (ES) are presented as partial eta squared values (η^2). In addition, where
14 paired comparisons were conducted, analysis used a paired samples t-test, with ES presented
15 as Cohen's d. Data are presented as mean \pm S.E.M..

16 The cognitive function data were analysed using R (www.r-project.org, version 2.9.1).
17 Response time analyses were performed using the nlme package for R, which implements
18 mixed effect models. Accuracy analyses were performed with the lme4 package for R, which
19 implements mixed effect models with non-normal outcome data distributions, similar to
20 generalised linear models. Accuracy data analyses assumed a binomial outcome data
21 distribution to best account for the binary (correct/incorrect) nature of the data. Analyses
22 were conducted using a three-way trial (exercise/resting) by session time (9.30am/11.00am)
23 by test level (baseline/complex) interaction and where appropriate, a two-way trial by session

1 time analysis was conducted. ES are presented as raw effect sizes (ms or percentage of
2 correct responses). For all analyses, significance was set as $p < 0.05$.

3

4 **3. Results**

5 *3.1: Trial order balance*

6 To minimise the influence of possible learning effects on the results, trial order was
7 counterbalanced across participants. However, with drop-outs ($n = 11$ due to absence from
8 school and $n = 4$ due to failing to comply with the overnight fast) the final dataset included
9 20 participants that had completed the resting trial followed by the exercise trial, and 25
10 participants with the reverse trial order. Rather than removing valid data points to arrive at a
11 fully counterbalanced set of trial orders, possible order effects were corrected for statistically
12 by including repeat test session number as a numerical co-variate, including linear and
13 quadratic effects, where significant.

14

15 *3.2: Cognitive Function Tests*

16 For all cognitive tests the response times were first log transformed to normalise the
17 distributions, which exhibited the right-hand skew typical of human response times.
18 According to task complexity, minimum and maximum response time cut-offs were set to
19 exclude those responses that can be considered anticipations and delayed responses. As such,
20 minimum response time cut-offs were set at 300 ms for the visual search test, 250 ms for the
21 Stroop test and 200 ms for the Sternberg paradigm. Maximum response time cut-offs were set
22 at 1500 ms (baseline level) and 10000 ms (complex level) for the visual search test, 2500 ms
23 (baseline level) and 4000 ms (complex level) for the Stroop test and 2000 ms (all levels) for

1 the Sternberg paradigm. Only the response times of correct responses were used for response
2 time analysis across all three cognitive tests.

3

4 3.2.1: Visual Search Test

5 *Response Times:* There was a significant three-way interaction for response times on the
6 visual search test (trial by session time by test level interaction, $t_{(3,7301)} = 2.6$, $p = 0.009$, $ES =$
7 301 ms, figure 2). Upon inspection of figure 2, response times increased by a similar
8 magnitude across the morning on the exercise and resting trials on the baseline level (trial by
9 session time interaction, $p = 0.131$, figure 2a). However, on the complex level, whilst
10 response times were slower at 9.30 am on the exercise trial, response times improved by a
11 greater amount across the morning on the exercise trial, when compared to the resting trial
12 (trial by session time interaction, $t_{(2,3677)} = 3.7$, $p < 0.001$, $ES = 410$ ms, figure 2b).

13 *(Insert figure 2 here)*

14

15 *Accuracy:* There was also a significant three-way interaction for accuracy on the visual
16 search test (trial by session time by test level interaction, $z_{(3,7978)} = 2.0$, $p = 0.044$, $ES = 2.7\%$,
17 figure 3). Upon inspection of figure 3, accuracy decreased by a similar amount across the
18 morning on the exercise and resting trials on the baseline level (trial by session time
19 interaction, $p = 0.499$, figure 3a). However, on the complex level, whilst accuracy was
20 greatest at 9.30 am on the exercise trial, there was a greater decrease in accuracy across the
21 morning on the exercise trial, when compared to the resting trial (trial by session time
22 interaction, $z_{(2,2966)} = 2.0$, $p = 0.046$, $ES = 3.8\%$, figure 3b).

23 *(Insert figure 3 here)*

1

2 *3.2.2: Stroop Test*

3 *Response Times:* There was no difference in the pattern of change in response times across
4 the morning between the exercise and resting trials (trial by session time interaction, $p =$
5 0.109); nor was this effect different between the baseline and complex levels (trial by session
6 time by test level interaction, $p = 0.135$).

7

8 *Accuracy:* There was no difference in accuracy across the morning between the exercise and
9 resting trials (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.307$); nor was this effect different
10 between the different test levels (trial by session time by test level interaction, $p = 0.440$).

11

12 *3.2.3: Sternberg Paradigm*

13 *Response Times:* The pattern of change in response times across the morning was not
14 different on the exercise and resting trials between the different test levels (trial by session
15 time by test level interaction, $p = 0.838$). However, across all test levels, whilst response
16 times on the Sternberg paradigm improved across the morning on the exercise trial, they
17 slowed across the morning on the resting trial (trial by session time interaction, $t_{(3,12607)} = 2.6,$
18 $p = 0.010$, $ES = 12$ ms, figure 4).

19

(Insert figure 4 here)

20

1 *Accuracy*: There was no difference in accuracy across the morning between the exercise and
2 resting trials (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.833$), nor was this effect different
3 between the different test levels (trial by session time by test level interaction, $p = 0.199$).

4

5 **3.3: Mood**

6 Each dimension of mood assessed by the modified ADAQL (energy, tiredness,
7 tension and calmness) improved during the first 30 min of the trials (when breakfast was
8 consumed), then remained similar until the end of the trials (main effects of time; energy:
9 $F_{(3,132)} = 16.4$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.272$; tiredness: $F_{(3,132)} = 19.1$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.303$; tension:
10 $F_{(3,132)} = 5.2$, $p = 0.004$, $\eta^2 = 0.256$; calmness: $F_{(3,132)} = 13.1$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.229$).
11 However, the pattern of change in each dimension of mood was the same across the morning
12 between the exercise and resting trials (trial by session time interactions, all $p > 0.05$).

13 As with the aforementioned dimensions of mood, there was a consistent effect of the
14 time of morning on hunger, fullness and concentration, as assessed by the VAS scales. The
15 main changes coincided with the consumption of breakfast during the first 30 min of the
16 trials, where hunger decreased, whilst fullness and concentration increased, before all three
17 dimensions remained similar from 30 to 120 min during the rest of the trial (main effects of
18 time; hunger: $F_{(3,114)} = 90.1$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.703$; fullness: $F_{(3,114)} = 104.3$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 =$
19 0.733 ; concentration: $F_{(3,114)} = 36.7$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.491$). However, the pattern of change in
20 hunger, fullness and concentration across the morning was not different between the exercise
21 and resting trials (trial by session time interactions, all $p > 0.05$).

22

23 **3.4: Capillary Blood Samples**

1 Blood glucose, plasma insulin and blood lactate concentrations were similar between
2 the exercise and resting trials at 0, 30 and 60 min (all $p > 0.05$), but were significantly higher
3 at 120 min on the exercise trial compared to the resting trial (blood glucose: $t_{(1,44)} = 3.8$, $p <$
4 0.001 , $d = 0.569$; plasma insulin: $t_{(1,44)} = 2.3$ $p = 0.024$, $d = 0.349$; blood lactate: $t_{(1,44)} = 3.0$, p
5 $= 0.005$, $d = 0.446$). These effects produced significant trial by session time interactions for
6 all variables, where although the responses were similar between trials from 0 to 60 min, at
7 120 min blood glucose, plasma insulin and blood lactate concentrations were better
8 maintained on the exercise trial, whereas they continued to decrease on the resting trial (trial
9 by session time interactions: blood glucose: $F_{(3,132)} = 8.4$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.161$, figure 5;
10 plasma insulin: $F_{(3,132)} = 3.7$, $p = 0.014$, $\eta^2 = 0.077$, figure 6; blood lactate: $F_{(3,132)} = 2.9$, $p =$
11 0.038 , $\eta^2 = 0.062$, figure 7).

12 *(Insert figures 5, 6 & 7 here)*

13

14 **4. Discussion**

15 The aim of the present study was to examine the effects of an acute bout of exercise
16 (which could easily be incorporated into the school morning) on subsequent cognitive
17 function in adolescents. Exercise improved response times in the Sternberg working memory
18 task. **However, all three working memory load levels of the Sternberg paradigm exhibited**
19 **similar improvements in response times following exercise.** These results suggest a generic
20 effect of exercise that results in broadly improved response times across several cognitive
21 domains. **Participants were also slower but more accurate pre-exercise on the complex level**
22 **of the visual search test, whilst post-exercise response times and accuracy were similar to**
23 **those on the resting trial.** The lack of an exercise effect on the Stroop test was probably

1 related to test sensitivity, because the baseline level of the Stroop test (reading only, low
2 executive function demand) also did not show an exercise effect.

3 Such a broad, non-specific beneficial effect of exercise on adolescents' cognitive
4 function is in line with the results of several previous studies in adolescents (Budde et al,
5 2008; McNaughten & Gabbard, 1993; Travlos, 2010; Zervas et al, 1991). Although there are
6 several established theories that postulate differential effects of exercise on specific cognitive
7 functions, the present results do not support this view. Nevertheless, generic improvements in
8 reaction times across different cognitive domains and cognitive load levels could result from
9 increased levels of arousal and increased allocation of attentional resources following
10 exercise. This interpretation would be consistent with the view that a key mediator of the
11 effect of exercise on cognitive function is increased arousal (e.g. Kahnemann, 1973;
12 Lambourne & Tomporowski, 2010), balanced by the negative effects of fatigue for longer,
13 more intense bouts of exercise. Discrepancies between studies could thus result from the
14 specifics of the exercise protocol, because the opposing effects of arousal and fatigue are
15 hypothesised to result in a U-shaped relationship between exercise and cognitive function.
16 The present study also evaluated cognitive function more than 45 minutes after the end of a
17 short bout of exercise, when any potential fatigue effects have probably subsided.

18 The executive function hypothesis (Churchill et al., 2002; Kramer, Colcombe,
19 McAuley, Scalf & Erickson, 2005), would at first also seem to be consistent with the present
20 results, because attention is considered to be a key component of executive function.
21 However, in that case one would expect significant exercise effects especially on the colour-
22 word incongruent level of the Stroop test (e.g. Hogervorst, Riedel, Jeukendrup and Jolles,
23 1996), which was not the case here. This may be seen to argue against the executive function
24 hypothesis. However, the lack of an effect could be because the exercise bout may have been
25 insufficiently intense or too brief, or it may not persist for the 45 minutes interval used here,

1 or power may have been too low. Nevertheless, the other cognitive tests did display
2 significant exercise effects. It is possible that reading is not as strongly over-learned and
3 automated in the adolescents tested here as in adults, which could point to one of the reasons
4 that age may modify cognitive effects.

5 Comparing studies in adults (Barella, Etnier, & Chang, 2010; Chang & Etnier, 2009a,
6 2009b; Pontifex, Hillman, Fernhall, Thompson, & Valentini, 2009) with the literature on
7 adolescents is thus useful for examining the age effect. In older adults (60 to 90 years old)
8 following 20 min walking, response times on the simple level of the Stroop test were
9 enhanced which is in contrast with the findings of the present study (Barella et al, 2010).
10 However, in line with the present results, on the more complex level of the Stroop test there
11 was no effect of the exercise on response times (Barella et al, 2010). In young (mean age 25
12 years) and middle aged (35 to 65 years old) participants, resistance exercise was beneficial
13 for response times on the more simple levels of the Stroop test (Chang & Etnier, 2009a,
14 2009b), and moderate intensity resistance exercise also improved speed on the complex level
15 of the Stroop test (Chang & Etnier, 2009b). Thus, similar to the present results, basic
16 information processing speed was enhanced following exercise in older adults, but there was
17 no specific effect of exercise on executive function as assessed by the complex level of the
18 Stroop test.

19 In terms of the Sternberg paradigm, in accordance with the findings of the present
20 study, response times were enhanced following aerobic exercise, when compared with both
21 resistance exercise and seated rest in young adults (mean age 20 years) (Pontifex et al, 2009).
22 Thus, the present results and previous literature suggest similar effects of aerobic exercise on
23 adolescents' and adults' performance on the Sternberg paradigm, whereas the effects on
24 performance of the Stroop test appear different between these populations. The differences in
25 findings could be explained by the different exercise protocols used, the timing of the Stroop

1 test relative to exercise and by the age of the participants. The different results in adults and
2 adolescents can at least partly be explained by the continuing maturation of the brain during
3 adolescence, particularly the continuing development of executive function (Giedd et al,
4 1999), and possibly increased reading proficiency after adolescence.

5 Possible biological mechanisms explaining the effects of exercise on cognitive
6 function in an adolescent population were investigated in the present study by measuring
7 several brain-relevant blood parameters. Blood glucose, plasma insulin and blood lactate
8 concentrations were better maintained following the mid-morning bout of exercise, whereas
9 they continued to decrease on the resting trial (figures 5, 6 and 7). Glucose is a key metabolic
10 substrate for the brain, thus blood glucose and insulin concentrations may be critical for
11 cognitive function. The pattern of general improvement in response times following exercise,
12 can be partly explained by the higher blood glucose and plasma insulin concentrations
13 following exercise. Several other mechanisms have also been suggested to mediate the effects
14 of exercise on cognitive function, including increased cerebral blood flow, which in
15 combination with higher glucose and insulin concentrations, enhances the delivery of glucose
16 and oxygen to neural tissues and also enhances the clearance of carbon dioxide (Jorgensen et
17 al, 2000).

18 However, blood glucose and plasma insulin concentrations are not the only potential
19 mechanism to explain the effects of exercise on cognitive function. It has also been suggested
20 that lactate may be oxidised by the brain (Schurr, 2006), though this topic is poorly
21 understood, with some evidence suggesting that lactate is only oxidised by the brain during
22 hypoglycaemia (Maran et al, 1994). However, a recent review indicated that lactate may
23 contribute approximately 7% to cerebral energy requirements at rest, which may increase to
24 25% during exercise (van Hall, 2010). The findings of the present study suggest that the
25 higher lactate concentrations following exercise (figure 7) were associated with enhanced

1 cognitive performance (e.g. greater speed of working memory) and the effects of lactate on
2 cognitive function are, at the very least, interesting and warrant further investigation.

3 In summary, the present findings suggest a generic effect of exercise that results in
4 improved response times across several cognitive domains, but no isolated effects on specific
5 or more complex cognitive functions, as effects were seen on all cognitive load levels of the
6 tests. These results extend previous literature by specifically examining an adolescent
7 population and examining the effects of exercise on cognitive function 45 minutes post-
8 exercise, whereas previous studies have tended to focus on the more immediate effects. More
9 work is required in this area, including studies examining the effects of the intensity, duration
10 and mode of exercise on cognitive function in adolescents, and the time for which the
11 beneficial effects of exercise persist. Currently, given the well documented health, social and
12 emotional benefits of break time/recess for young people (Ramstetter et al, 2010) and a
13 general beneficial effect of exercise on the speed of cognitive functions, we conclude that the
14 provision of break time and the opportunity to exercise mid-morning has a beneficial effect
15 on **cognitive function** in young people.

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1 **References**

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1 **Figure 1:** Experimental protocol

2
3 **Figure 2a:** Baseline level (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.131$)

4 **Figure 2b:** Complex level (trial by session time interaction, $p < 0.001$)

5 **Figure 2:** Response times across the morning on the baseline (**figure 2a**) and complex
6 (**figure 2b**) levels of the visual search test

7 (trial by session time by test level interaction, $p = 0.009$).

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9 **Figure 3a:** Baseline level (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.499$)

10 **Figure 3b:** Complex level (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.046$)

11 **Figure 3:** Accuracy across the morning on the baseline (**figure 3a**) and complex (**figure 3b**)
12 levels of the visual search test

13 (trial by session time by test level interaction, $p = 0.044$).

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15 **Figure 4:** Response times across the morning on the Sternberg paradigm

16 (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.010$).

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18 **Figure 5:** Blood glucose concentration across the morning. Data are mean \pm S.E.M.

19 (trial by session time interaction, $p < 0.001$; * exercise $>$ resting, $p < 0.001$)

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21 **Figure 6:** Plasma insulin concentrations across the morning. Data are mean \pm S.E.M.

22 (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.014$; * exercise $>$ resting, $p = 0.024$)

23
24 **Figure 7:** Blood lactate concentrations across the morning. Data are mean \pm S.E.M.

25 (trial by session time interaction, $p = 0.038$; * exercise $>$ resting, $p = 0.005$)