



Synopsis

Outcomes of specialist physiotherapy for functional motor disorder: the Physio4FMD RCT

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Plain language summary

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Why did we do this trial?

Functional motor disorder causes persistent disabling symptoms, for which there are few treatment options. Physiotherapy is widely considered to be an important part of treatment, but there is little evidence to prove that it is effective. We, therefore, wanted to test the effectiveness of specialist physiotherapy for people with functional motor disorder.

What did we do?

We conducted a randomised controlled trial, comparing specialist physiotherapy to standard physiotherapy suitable for people with neurological symptoms.

Between 19 October 2018 and 31 January 2022, we recruited 355 adults with functional motor disorder to participate in the trial. Participants were randomly assigned to receive specialist physiotherapy or standard physiotherapy for neurological symptoms.

We used a range of questionnaires to compare the outcomes from the two treatments. We also explored the cost-effectiveness (value for money from the perspective of the National Health Service) of specialist physiotherapy.

What did we find?

There were 241 people in our final analysis, 89 were excluded because the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted their treatment and 25 were lost to follow-up. After 12 months, we found that specialist physiotherapy for functional motor disorder was no more effective than usual physiotherapy treatment, as both groups improved in our main measurement, which asked participants to rate their physical function (ability to walk, climb stairs, and complete moderate and vigorous activities). On average, there was no difference between the groups on this measurement.

Participants were more likely to report improvement in their motor symptoms if they received specialist physiotherapy compared to standard physiotherapy (59% receiving specialist physiotherapy reported improvement compared to 38% receiving standard physiotherapy). There were other benefits in specialist physiotherapy over standard physiotherapy, including slightly better mental health scores, and it was very likely to be more cost-effective, in that the cost for improvement was lower. Both physiotherapy treatments appeared to be safe with no dangerous complications found.

What does this mean?

Physiotherapy is a safe and potentially useful treatment for a proportion of people with functional motor disorder. Physiotherapy specifically designed to help functional motor disorder may be more cost-effective than standard neurological physiotherapy.