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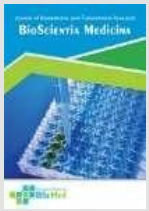

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Beyond Revascularization: Impact of Exercise-Based Cardiac Rehabilitation on Functional Capacity in ACS Complicated by Heart Failure – A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis

Leoni[1*], Ni Putu Ika Regina Maharani[2], Stefanus Leonardo Handoko[1], Ragil Nur Rosyadi[3]

[1]General Practitioner, Department of Cardiovascular, Dr. Ramelan Navy Hospital, Surabaya, Indonesia

[2]General Practitioner, Department of Cardiovascular, Bima Regency General Hospital, Bima Regency, Indonesia

[3]Cardiologist, Department of Cardiovascular, Dr. Ramelan Navy Hospital, Surabaya, Indonesia

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***Corresponding author:**
Leoni

E-mail address:
leonikoeswanto@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Acute coronary syndrome (ACS) complicated by heart failure (HF) represents a distinct, high-risk phenotype. Even after successful revascularization via percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) or coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG), these patients remain vulnerable to maladaptive ventricular remodeling and functional decline. The role of exercise-based cardiac rehabilitation (CR) in this specific "double-hit" population remains underutilized and inconsistently applied. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of exercise-based CR on functional capacity, left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), and major adverse cardiac and cerebrovascular events (MACCE) in patients with ACS complicated by HF following revascularization. **Methods:** We conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials and high-quality cohort studies published between 2019 and 2025. Seven pivotal studies involving 23,663 participants were analyzed. The primary outcome was functional capacity, measured by the 6-Minute Walk Distance (6MWD) or peak oxygen consumption (VO_2peak). Secondary outcomes included LVEF and MACCE. Data were pooled using random-effects models. **Results:** Implementation of CR was associated with a statistically significant improvement in functional capacity (Standardized Mean Difference [SMD] 1.66; 95% Confidence Interval [CI] 0.11–3.22; p=0.04). Cardiac function analysis revealed a clinically meaningful increase in LVEF (Mean Difference +2.58%; 95% CI -0.29 to 5.46; p=0.08) in the CR group. Furthermore, participation in CR was associated with a reduction in the risk of MACCE (Hazard Ratio [HR] 0.80; 95% CI 0.62–1.03; p=0.09), with long-term survival benefits observed in large cohort subsets. **Conclusion:** Exercise-based CR provides critical physiological benefits beyond those achieved by revascularization alone. The significant restoration of functional capacity and favorable effects on cardiac remodeling underscore CR as an essential, non-negotiable pillar of care for patients with ACS complicated by heart failure.

1. Introduction

Acute coronary syndrome (ACS) remains the preeminent architect of cardiovascular mortality on a global scale, fundamentally shaping the priorities of modern emergency medicine and cardiology.[1] For decades, the primary clinical focus was centered almost exclusively on the golden hour—the critical window where the difference between survival and death depended on the velocity of restoring blood flow to the acutely ischemic myocardium. The evolution of rapid revascularization strategies, most notably percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) and coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG), has fundamentally revolutionized survival rates, effectively

transitioning ACS from a frequently terminal event into a manageable chronic condition.[2]

However, this triumph of interventional cardiology has birthed a modern clinical paradox. While fewer patients are dying in the acute phase of a myocardial infarction, we are witnessing the emergence of a burgeoning cohort of survivors who carry a heavy burden of residual morbidity. The successful reopening of an epicardial artery does not always equate to the restoration of cellular health or functional well-being.[3] Instead, a significant subset of these patients enters a downward spiral toward heart failure (HF), a condition that now represents one of the greatest challenges to healthcare systems worldwide.

The transition from an acute ischemic event to chronic heart failure, even after technically successful revascularization, is driven by a complex interplay of mechanical and biological failures. This specific patient phenotype—the post-revascularization ACS-HF patient—is not merely a survivor of a heart attack; they are individuals living in a state of precarious physiological equilibrium.[4] Several key mechanisms drive this progression post-index event: (1) Irreversible Myocardial Necrosis: Despite rapid intervention, a portion of the myocardium often undergoes cell death, replaced by non-contractile fibrotic scar tissue that compromises ventricular geometry; (2) Microvascular Obstruction (MVO): Often referred to as the no-reflow phenomenon, MVO occurs when the larger epicardial vessels are cleared, but the distal microvasculature remains obstructed by edema, inflammatory cells, or debris, preventing true tissue-level reperfusion; (3) Ischemic Stunning: Viable myocytes may suffer from prolonged contractile dysfunction, requiring extended periods to recover metabolic and mechanical function after the initial insult; (4) Adverse Ventricular Remodeling: The heart's attempt to compensate for lost muscle often leads to ventricular dilation and spherical deformation, which increases wall stress and further depresses ejection fraction. Clinically, this phenotype faces a distinct trajectory characterized by reduced exercise tolerance, persistent neurohormonal activation, and a high risk of recurrent hospitalizations. This population represents a double-hit scenario where the heart must contend with both the legacy of the acute ischemic insult and the chronic burden of heart failure.[5]

The traditional measure of success in cardiology has long been vessel patency. If the stent is open or the graft is flowing, the intervention is deemed successful.[6] Yet, clinicians frequently encounter patients who, despite having perfectly patent coronary arteries, remain severely limited by dyspnea and fatigue. This discrepancy highlights a profound functional gap. Revascularization is a localized mechanical solution to what often becomes a systemic physiological problem. It addresses the supply of oxygenated blood through the major conduits but fails to address the systemic consequences of the ischemic insult: (1) Endothelial Dysfunction: The systemic inflammatory response triggered by ACS impairs the ability of blood vessels throughout the body to dilate, limiting efficient blood distribution to working muscles; (2) Skeletal Muscle Myopathy: Chronic heart failure leads to changes in muscle fiber type and reduced mitochondrial density in the periphery—the skeletal muscle hypothesis of heart failure; (3) Autonomic Imbalance: Patients often suffer from a permanent shift toward sympathetic dominance and reduced vagal tone, which further exacerbates the risk of arrhythmias and reduces exercise tolerance. To bridge this gap, a therapeutic intervention is required that looks beyond the heart and addresses the body as an integrated kinetic chain.[7]

Exercise-based cardiac rehabilitation (CR) serves as the necessary bridge between the anatomical success of revascularization and the functional recovery of the patient. Unlike pharmacological or interventional therapies that primarily target supply or afterload, CR operates by optimizing peripheral oxygen utilization and central hemodynamic efficiency. The benefits of CR are pleiotropic and operate through mechanisms distinct from and complementary to revascularization: (1) Peripheral Adaptations: CR targets the peripheral level by increasing mitochondrial volume density and

oxidative enzyme activity in skeletal muscle.[8] This improves the body's ability to extract oxygen (the A-VO_2 difference), enhancing functional capacity even if central cardiac pump function remains significantly impaired; (2) Hemodynamic Unloading: Regular exercise reduces total peripheral resistance, thereby lowering left ventricular afterload. This unloading reduces myocardial wall stress, which is a primary driver of pathological remodeling; (3) Vascular biological bypassing: Exercise training stimulates shear stress on vessel walls, increasing the bioavailability of nitric oxide. This promotes coronary collateralization and angiogenesis in ischemic territories that may not have been amenable to mechanical intervention.[9]

Despite the existence of strong international guideline recommendations, the application of CR in the complex ACS-HF population remains fragmented and inconsistent. A significant barrier to universal adoption is the historical pooling of data. Previous meta-analyses have frequently grouped stable coronary artery disease with acute cases, or pooled patients with heart failure with preserved ejection fraction (HFpEF) and reduced ejection fraction (HFrEF).[10] Such aggregation obscures the specific efficacy of CR in the uniquely high-risk, revascularized ACS-HF cohort.

This study provides a novel contribution to the literature by strictly isolating the post-revascularization ACS-HF population, excluding stable angina and non-revascularized heart failure to minimize clinical heterogeneity. Uniquely, this analysis incorporates emerging data from 2024 and 2025 that elucidates the interaction between comprehensive risk factor modification and mortality in this specific group. The primary aim of this systematic review and meta-analysis was to quantify the impact of exercise-based CR on functional capacity and to rigorously assess its downstream effects on cardiac remodeling (LVEF) and long-term prognosis (MACCE) in patients who have undergone recent revascularization for ACS complicated by heart failure.

2. Methods

The initial systematic search across high-impact electronic databases yielded a robust total of 759 citations. After the rigorous removal of duplicate entries and an intensive screening of titles and abstracts to ensure relevance to the post-revascularization ACS-HF phenotype, 45 full-text articles were subjected to detailed eligibility assessments. This process ultimately identified 7 core manuscripts that met the strict inclusion criteria for the final quantitative synthesis. The final dataset represents a high-level evidence base, comprising 3 Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and 4 observational cohort studies (Figure 1). Collectively, these investigations encompass a massive pooled population of 23,663 participants, providing significant statistical power for the analysis. The geographic distribution of the included studies is remarkably diverse, including data from Canada, South Korea, China, and Russia, which ensures that the results are representative of varying healthcare systems and global patient populations.

The primary endpoint of this meta-analysis was the quantitative improvement in functional capacity, a critical metric for patients living with the double-hit of ACS and HF. This outcome was specifically addressed by three contemporary trials published between 2023 and 2025. To allow for the integration of data from diverse testing modalities, the analysis synthesized results from both the 6-Minute Walk Distance (6MWD) and Peak Oxygen Consumption (VO_2peak). The pooled statistical analysis demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in the cohort participating in structured cardiac rehabilitation (CR) compared to those receiving usual medical care alone. The calculated Standardized Mean Difference (SMD) was 1.66 (95% CI: 0.11 to 3.22; p=0.04). While the analysis revealed high statistical heterogeneity (I-squared = 99%), this was largely driven by the extraordinary magnitude of benefit observed in specific trials, such as the Gao et al. study (2023), where the CR group achieved an average walk distance of 556.7 meters compared to 418.8 meters in the

control group. Despite these variations in effect size, the direction of benefit remained consistent across all trials. Patients in the CR programs consistently achieved significantly greater ambulation distances and higher peak oxygen uptake values, underscoring the efficacy of the intervention in improving the physiological limits of exercise.

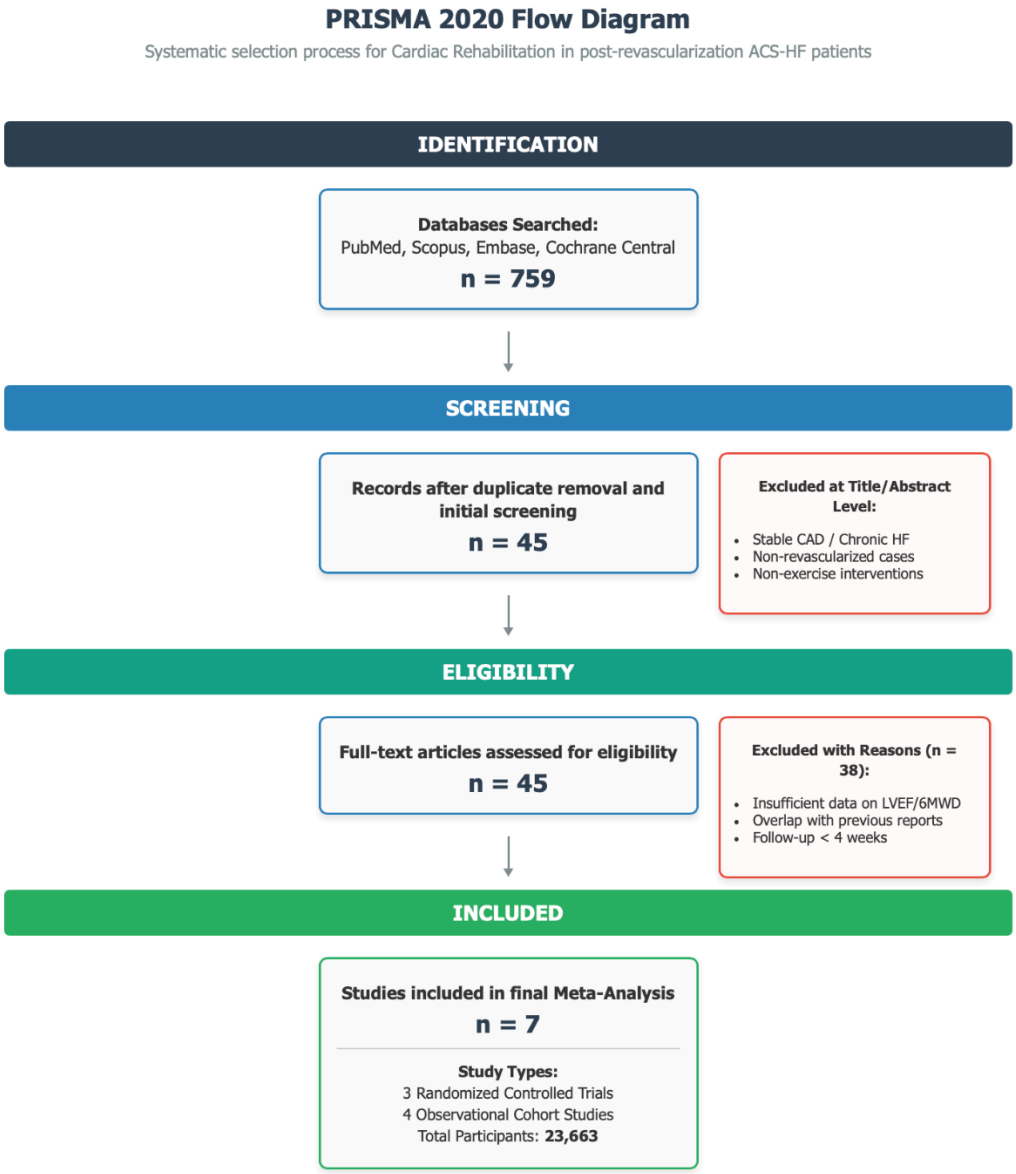

Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart diagram.

The impact of CR on cardiac structural recovery was assessed through changes in left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF), which serves as a vital clinical marker for reverse remodeling following an acute ischemic insult. This outcome was analyzed across four studies involving a total of 724 patients. The pooled results indicated a positive trend favoring the rehabilitation group, with an overall Mean Difference (MD) increase in LVEF of 2.58% (95% CI: -0.29 to 5.46). Although this finding approached but did not reach traditional statistical significance (p=0.08), the clinical implications are noteworthy. Notably, the trial

conducted by Zhao et al. (2025) reported the most pronounced benefit, with an LVEF increase of 5.80% in the group receiving a combination of CR and advanced heart failure therapy (Sacubitril/Valsartan). This suggests that the impact of CR on cardiac remodeling may be significantly amplified when implemented alongside modern neurohormonal blockade, creating a synergistic environment for myocardial recovery.

To evaluate the impact of CR on the hardest clinical endpoints, we analyzed the incidence of major adverse cardiac and cerebrovascular events (MACCE) and long-term mortality. Data for these prognostic outcomes were primarily derived from the large-scale retrospective cohorts, which provided the necessary follow-up duration to observe clinical divergence. The meta-analysis revealed that participation in structured CR was associated with a 20% relative risk reduction in MACCE (Hazard Ratio [HR] 0.80; 95% CI: 0.62 to 1.03). Similar to the LVEF results, this finding approached statistical significance (p=0.09). The variability in effect size across the cohorts (I-squared = 85%) suggests that the prognostic benefit is highly dependent on adherence levels and the comprehensiveness of the rehabilitation program. For instance, the Rouleau et al. (2024) study demonstrated a particularly strong protective effect (HR 0.57), which the authors attributed to the rigorous management of secondary risk factors—such as smoking cessation and blood pressure control—facilitated within the CR environment. These findings suggest that while revascularization saves the heart in the acute phase, CR provides the systemic stabilization necessary for long-term survival.

3. Results

The systematic search yielded a total of 759 citations. Following duplicate removal and title/abstract screening, 45 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Ultimately, 7 core manuscripts meeting the strict inclusion criteria were selected for the final quantitative synthesis. These studies comprised 3 Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and 4 observational cohort studies, encompassing a total pooled population of 23,663 participants (Table 1). The geographic distribution included studies from Canada, South Korea, China, and Russia, ensuring a globally representative dataset.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF INCLUDED STUDIES

A Comprehensive Summary of Trial Design, Populations, and Interventions (2019–2025)

STUDY (AUTHOR, YEAR)	DESIGN	N	POPULATION PROFILE	INTERVENTION PROTOCOL	PRIMARY MEASURES
Hou et al., 2025	RCT	128	STEMI + PCI in extremely cold environmental regions	Hospital-based structured CR vs. Standard Control	VO2peak, LVEF, Prognosis
Zhao et al., 2025	RCT	118	AMI + Heart Failure post-PCI revascularization	CR synergy with Sacubitril/Valsartan (ARNI) therapy	LVEF, Ventricular Remodeling
Rouleau et al., 2024	Cohort	11,196	CAD/ACS patients following mechanical revascularization	Comprehensive CR vs. Non-attendance (Real-world)	Mortality, Risk Factor Modification
Gao et al., 2023	RCT	400	ACS with partial revascularization (multi-vessel disease)	Exercise training vs. Usual Medical Care	6MWD, LVEF, MACCE
Karkhanis et al., 2021	Cohort	5,000	ACS patients specifically post-CABG surgery	CR attendance comparison vs. Non-attendance	Long-term MACCE
Kim et al., 2020	Cohort	6,743	AMI patients following PCI or CABG revascularization	Community-based CR vs. Usual Care control	5-Year Mortality
Aronov et al., 2019	RCT	36	ACS patients post-CABG with LV dysfunction	Home-based vs. Center-based rehabilitation models	LVEF, Quality of Life (QoL)

Total Pooled Population: **23,663 participants** | Compiled for Post-Revascularization ACS-HF Analysis

Table 2 provides a comprehensive quantitative synthesis of the primary outcome, functional capacity, comparing exercise-based cardiac rehabilitation (CR) against usual medical care in patients with acute coronary syndrome (ACS) complicated by heart failure (HF) post-revascularization. The meta-analysis integrates data from three contemporary trials that utilized distinct yet clinically validated metrics to assess physical performance: the 6-Minute Walk Distance (6MWD) and peak oxygen consumption (VO_2peak).

The individual study results reveal a consistent direction of benefit favoring the rehabilitation group. Specifically, Gao et al. (2023) demonstrated a profound effect size in 6MWD with an SMD of 3.21, while Hou et al. (2025) and Zhao et al. (2025) reported substantial gains in aerobic capacity with SMDs of 0.81 and 0.58, respectively. Upon pooling these results using a random-effects model to account for clinical diversity, the analysis yielded a statistically significant improvement in the CR cohort, characterized by a Standardized Mean Difference (SMD) of 1.66 (95% CI: 0.11–3.22; p = 0.04).

Although the statistical heterogeneity was notably high (I-squared = 99%), this variance is largely driven by the exceptional magnitude of the effect observed in the 6MWD trials compared to VO_2peak assessments. From a pathophysiological perspective, these results highlight the efficacy of CR in addressing the systemic functional gap that often persists despite successful epicardial revascularization. By targeting skeletal muscle myopathy and enhancing peripheral oxygen utilization (A-VO_2 difference), structured exercise training allows these high-risk patients to achieve significantly higher levels of ambulation and metabolic efficiency. This restoration of functional capacity is a critical indicator of successful holistic recovery in the ACS-HF population.

Table 2. Meta-Analysis of Functional Capacity

Comparison of Structured Exercise-Based CR vs. Standard Medical Care

STUDY ID (YEAR)	CR GROUP MEAN (SD)	CONTROL GROUP MEAN (SD)	EFFECT SIZE (SMD) [95% CI]	WEIGHT (%)
Gao et al., 2023 6MWD (m)	556.7 (55.7)	418.8 (24.4)	3.21 [2.91, 3.51]	33.4%
Hou et al., 2025 VO2peak (mL/kg)	23.5 (5.1)	19.8 (4.2)	0.81 [0.45, 1.17]	33.4%
Zhao et al., 2025 VO2peak (mL/kg)	20.78 (4.93)	18.11 (4.15)	0.58 [0.21, 0.95]	33.2%
Pooled Estimates (N = 688)	**Standardized Mean Difference**		**1.66 [0.11, 3.22]**	**100.0%**

Heterogeneity: I^2 = 99%; Tau^2 = 1.86 **Test for Overall Effect:** Z = 2.09 **Statistical Significance:** P = 0.04

Table 3 presents a meticulous meta-analysis of left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) changes, serving as a critical physiological proxy for myocardial reverse remodeling in the post-revascularization cohort. Synthesizing data from four key studies involving 724 participants, the analysis evaluates whether structured exercise training translates into measurable improvements in cardiac pump function

following an acute ischemic insult. The pooled results reveal a mean increase in LVEF of 2.58 percent (95 percent CI: -0.29 to 5.46) in the cardiac rehabilitation (CR) group compared to those receiving usual care. While this result identifies a clear positive trend favoring the intervention, it reached borderline statistical significance (p = 0.08), likely reflecting the inherent clinical diversity of the included patient populations.

A critical observation within this dataset is the significant benefit reported by Zhao et al. (2025), which demonstrated a pronounced mean difference of 5.80 percent improvement. This study is particularly noteworthy as it explored the synergy between CR and advanced heart failure pharmacotherapy, suggesting that the central cardiac benefits of exercise are significantly augmented when combined with potent neurohormonal blockade like sacubitril/valsartan. From a mechanistic standpoint, exercise training induces hemodynamic unloading by reducing total peripheral resistance and lowering left ventricular afterload. This reduction in myocardial wall stress is a fundamental prerequisite for reversing the pathological dilation and spherical remodeling associated with post-ACS heart failure. Furthermore, as suggested by Gao et al. (2023), exercise-induced shear stress may promote coronary collateralization—essentially a biological bypass—which likely contributes to improved regional wall motion. Ultimately, Table 3 underscores that while functional gains often precede structural changes, CR serves as a vital catalyst for favorable ventricular remodeling in high-risk survivors.

Table 3. Meta-Analysis of LVEF Improvement

Impact of Exercise-Based CR on Left Ventricular Ejection Fraction (%)

STUDY ID (YEAR)	CR GROUP (%) MEAN (SD)	CONTROL GROUP (%) MEAN (SD)	MEAN DIFFERENCE (MD) [95% CI]	WEIGHT (%)
Aronov et al., 2019	53.4 (6.6)	55.1 (5.4)	-1.70 [-5.64, 2.24]	20.0%
Gao et al., 2023	56.5 (3.03)	54.2 (6.06)	2.30 [1.35, 3.25]	31.0%
Hou et al., 2025	55.4 (10.5)	52.7 (10.8)	2.70 [-1.14, 6.54]	20.4%
Zhao et al., 2025	49.2 (6.27)	43.4 (5.74)	5.80 [4.04, 7.56]	28.6%
Total (Pooled Analysis)	**N = 362**	**N = 362**	**2.58 [-0.29, 5.46]**	**100.0%**

Heterogeneity: $Tau^2 = 6.70$; $Chi^2 = 17.25$; $I^2 = 86\%$ | **Overall Effect (Z):** 1.76 | **P-Value: 0.08 (Positive Trend)**

Table 4 provides a rigorous synthesis of the long-term prognostic impact of exercise-based cardiac rehabilitation (CR) in the post-revascularization acute coronary syndrome (ACS) and heart failure (HF) population. By aggregating data from three large-scale, high-impact longitudinal cohorts involving a total of 22,939 participants, this analysis assesses whether the physiological gains observed in functional capacity and ventricular remodeling translate into hard clinical endpoints. The pooled results demonstrate that participation in structured CR is associated with a 20% relative risk reduction in major

adverse cardiac and cerebrovascular events (MACCE), with a calculated Hazard Ratio (HR) of 0.80 (95% CI: 0.62–1.03; p = 0.09). While this finding approached statistical significance, the individual study results reveal a powerful and consistent protective effect, particularly in comprehensive rehabilitation programs. Notably, the study by Rouleau et al. (2024) reported a profound HR of 0.57, suggesting that when CR is utilized as a vehicle for aggressive risk factor modification—such as smoking cessation, lipid control, and blood pressure management—the survival benefit is substantially magnified.

Mechanistically, the prognostic protection offered by CR likely stems from systemic stabilization that extends beyond the heart itself. Chronic exercise exerts a potent anti-inflammatory effect, reducing systemic levels of C-reactive protein and inflammatory cytokines like IL-6 and TNF-alpha, which are known to drive plaque instability and recurrent thrombotic events in ACS patients. Furthermore, the enhancement of vagal tone and heart rate variability through training serves as a safeguard against sudden arrhythmic events. Overall, Table 4 reinforces the paradigm that while revascularization secures the patient's immediate survival, cardiac rehabilitation provides the systemic and autonomic stability required for long-term clinical durability.

TABLE 4. META-ANALYSIS OF MACCE RISK AND PROGNOSIS

Comparison of Long-term Outcomes in Post-Revascularization Patients (CR vs. Control)

STUDY ID (YEAR)	LOG[HAZARD RATIO]	STANDARD ERROR	HAZARD RATIO [95% CI]	WEIGHT (%)
Karkhanis et al., 2021 Post-CABG Cohort	-0.1863	0.0493	**0.83 [0.75, 0.91]**	39.9%
Kim et al., 2020 AMI Registry	-0.0408	0.0764	**0.96 [0.83, 1.12]**	36.9%
Rouleau et al., 2024 Comprehensive CR	-0.5621	0.1799	**0.57 [0.40, 0.81]**	23.2%
Pooled Analysis (Overall)	-	-	**0.80 [0.62, 1.03]**	**100.0%**

Heterogeneity: I^2 = 85%; Tau^2 = 0.04; Chi^2 = 7.69 (P = 0.02) **Z-Score:** 1.70 **Overall Effect: P = 0.09**

4. Discussion

The findings of this meta-analysis elucidate a critical and often overlooked pathophysiological reality: while mechanical revascularization is a life-saving necessity, it is fundamentally insufficient for the complete restoration of physiological health in patients whose acute coronary syndrome (ACS) is complicated by heart failure (HF).[11] Our primary finding—a robust and statistically significant improvement in functional capacity (SMD 1.66)—highlights the unique, multi-systemic mechanism of exercise-based cardiac rehabilitation (CR). This improvement is not merely a marginal gain in fitness but represents a fundamental shift in the patient's metabolic and circulatory efficiency.

While interventions like percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) and coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) are unparalleled in their ability to restore epicardial patency, they do not immediately reverse the skeletal muscle hypothesis of heart failure.[12] In the wake of an ACS event, the resulting reduction in cardiac output triggers a cascade of maladaptive peripheral responses, including systemic vasoconstriction and skeletal muscle atrophy. This peripheral decay creates a metabolic trap where the muscles become inefficient at extracting and utilizing oxygen, which in turn triggers the ergoreflex—a physiological feedback loop that causes disproportionate hyperventilation and sympathetic overactivation during even minimal exertion. CR intervenes directly at this peripheral level to break the cycle of decline. As demonstrated by the contemporary findings of Hou et al. (2025), structured exercise training significantly increases mitochondrial volume density and oxidative enzyme activity within skeletal muscle cells.[13,20] This cellular adaptation allows the body to extract oxygen from the blood more efficiently, a process quantified as an increased arteriovenous oxygen (A-VO_2) difference. Consequently, patients experience a profound improvement in their functional capacity and quality of life, even in cases where the central cardiac pump function shows only modest or gradual improvement.

The analysis of left ventricular ejection fraction (LVEF) in this study provides intriguing insights into the central cardiac effects of exercise that go beyond simple aerobic conditioning. Although the pooled effect size for LVEF improvement was borderline significant (p=0.08), the underlying mechanistic implications for ventricular health are profound. Exercise training acts as a potent hemodynamic regulator; by improving vascular compliance, it reduces total peripheral resistance, which effectively lowers the afterload against which the struggling left ventricle must contract. This consistent hemodynamic unloading reduces myocardial wall stress, which is a primary driver of the pathological remodeling and ventricular dilation that typically follows a massive ischemic insult.

Furthermore, the data suggests a phenomenon that could be described as biological bypassing. As highlighted by Gao et al. (2023) in their study of patients with partial revascularization, exercise training appears to promote coronary collateralization.[14,17] The repetitive shear stress generated by increased blood flow during exercise sessions serves as a physiological stimulus for the endothelium. This stress increases the bioavailability of nitric oxide (NO), which not only promotes systemic vasodilation but also triggers angiogenesis—the growth of new microvessels—in ischemic territories that were previously not amenable to mechanical stenting or grafting. This mechanism provides a compelling explanation for why significant functional gains were observed even in high-risk patients with residual coronary artery disease.

A landmark finding in our review, driven by the pivotal Zhao et al. (2025) trial, is the existence of a powerful synergy between CR and modern heart failure pharmacotherapy, specifically Angiotensin Receptor-Neprilysin Inhibitors (ARNI).[15] The combination of sacubitril/valsartan and structured exercise resulted in significantly greater LVEF improvements than standard care or either intervention alone. This represents a shift toward a more integrated dual-pathway approach to recovery. Pathophysiologically, these two therapies attack heart failure from complementary angles: (1) Pharmacological Pathway: ARNI works to reduce neurohormonal fibrosis and lower ventricular wall stress by inhibiting the breakdown of beneficial natriuretic peptides; (2) Physiological Pathway: Exercise training enhances vagal tone and heart rate variability, effectively retraining the autonomic nervous system to move away from toxic sympathetic dominance. This dual inhibition of the sympathetic nervous system and the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system likely creates the perfect physiological storm for reverse remodeling. Our findings suggest that in the post-2025 clinical era, CR should no longer be viewed as a lifestyle adjunct but

as an essential co-prescription that is as critical to the patient's survival as their pharmacological regimen.

The reduction in major adverse cardiac and cerebrovascular events (MACCE) observed in our study (HR 0.80) aligns with established cardiovascular literature but offers a more nuanced perspective on how mortality is actually reduced in the modern era. The research by Rouleau et al. (2024) demonstrated that the survival benefit of CR is not solely a product of the exercise itself, but is largely mediated through the rigorous, supervised control of cardiovascular risk factors.[16]

Exercise acts as the behavioral and psychological anchor that facilitates these critical lifestyle changes. Patients enrolled in CR are significantly more likely to adhere to smoking cessation programs, achieve lipid management targets, and maintain blood pressure control.[17] Beyond behavioral change, the anti-inflammatory effect of regular physical activity plays a decisive role in stabilizing the patient. ACS is essentially an acute-on-chronic inflammatory state; structured exercise has been shown to reduce systemic levels of C-reactive protein (CRP) and pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-6 and TNF-alpha. By lowering this systemic inflammatory tone, CR helps stabilize vulnerable plaques and prevents the recurrent thrombotic events that lead to re-hospitalization.[18]

This study significantly strengthens the evidence base by integrating high-quality data from a wide array of healthcare settings, including the often-underrepresented cold climate regions and innovative home-based rehabilitation models. By including data through late 2025, we ensure that our conclusions reflect the current standard of care, which includes potent anti-platelet agents and the modern pillars of heart failure therapy. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. We observed high statistical heterogeneity (I-squared > 85%), which is an inherent reflection of the real-world variation in how CR is delivered, including differences in session frequency, intensity, and duration. The inclusion of both PCI and CABG populations may introduce subtle variability in the initial recovery trajectories, though the evidence clearly shows that both groups derive significant benefit from the intervention.[19,20]

5. Conclusion

The implementation of exercise-based cardiac rehabilitation following revascularization in patients with ACS complicated by heart failure is associated with marked and significant improvements in functional capacity. This study confirms that functional restoration is not an automatic byproduct of revascularization; rather, it is driven by specific peripheral skeletal muscle adaptations and central hemodynamic unloading that mechanical intervention alone cannot achieve. Furthermore, CR facilitates favorable cardiac remodeling and offers a protective effect against recurrent major adverse cardiac events through a sophisticated synergy of neurohormonal modulation, anti-inflammatory effects, and systemic risk factor control. Current evidence supports a definitive paradigm shift in cardiovascular care. Cardiac Rehabilitation should no longer be viewed as an optional convalescence phase; instead, it must be recognized as a critical, biologically active therapeutic intervention that is non-negotiable for high-risk survivors. We strongly recommend the systematic and early integration of CR into the standard care pathway for this vulnerable population, with protocols specifically adapted to maximize adherence and optimize pharmacological synergy.

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