Pulmonary Effects of Sustained Periods of High-G Acceleration Relevant to Suborbital Spaceflight

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BACKGROUND: Members of the public will soon be taking commercial suborbital spaceflights with significant $+G_x$ (chest-to-back) acceleration potentially reaching up to $+6\ G_x$. Pulmonary physiology is gravity-dependent and is likely to be affected, which may have clinical implications for medically susceptible individuals.

METHODS: During 2-min centrifuge exposures ranging up to $+6\ G_x$, 11 healthy subjects were studied using advanced respiratory techniques. These sustained exposures were intended to allow characterization of the underlying pulmonary response and did not replicate actual suborbital G profiles. Regional distribution of ventilation in the lungs was determined using electrical impedance tomography. Neural respiratory drive (from diaphragm electromyography) and work of breathing (from transdiaphragmatic pressures) were obtained via nasoesophageal catheters. Arterial blood gases were measured in a subset of subjects. Measurements were conducted while breathing air and breathing 15% oxygen to simulate anticipated cabin pressurization conditions.

RESULTS: Acceleration caused hypoxemia that worsened with increasing magnitude and duration of $+G_x$. Minimum arterial oxygen saturation at $+6\ G_x$ was 86 ± 1% breathing air and 79 ± 1% breathing 15% oxygen. With increasing $+G_x$ the alveolar-arterial (A-a) oxygen gradient widened progressively and the relative distribution of ventilation reversed from posterior to anterior lung regions with substantial gas-trapping anteriorly. Severe breathlessness accompanied large progressive increases in work of breathing and neural respiratory drive.

DISCUSSION: Sustained high-G acceleration at magnitudes relevant to suborbital flight profoundly affects respiratory physiology. These effects may become clinically important in the most medically susceptible passengers, in whom the potential role of centrifuge-based preflight evaluation requires further investigation.

KEYWORDS: $+G_x$ acceleration, commercial suborbital spaceflight, space travel, respiratory physiology, hypoxemia, passenger health.

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Private citizens will soon be flying on commercial suborbital spaceflights.[38] As at the dawn of air travel a century ago, suborbital flights will not be widely affordable initially, but high-speed suborbital spaceflight is ultimately expected to revolutionize global transportation by transforming long-haul routes into short trips (e.g., London–New York in 30 min).[29]

Current suborbital flights provide several minutes of weightlessness. This is preceded and followed by short periods of high acceleration (high 'G forces' or 'G') during launch and atmospheric re-entry that are potentially greater in magnitude than

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for NASA's now-retired Space Shuttle, although shorter in duration (typically less than a minute).[1,6,9] Unlike professional astronauts, suborbital passengers may have widely varying age, fitness, and baseline health—hundreds of people have already purchased flights, including many who are elderly (some older than 90 yr of age) or have significant medical problems, or both. The physiological and clinical implications of this dynamic flight environment in such a diverse population have yet to be established.[1,8] According to U.S. regulations, commercial spaceflight crew must demonstrate an ability to withstand the stresses of spaceflight, including high acceleration, but there is no regulatory requirement for centrifuge-based training or experience for prospective suborbital passengers.[8,38]

Spacecraft occupants are usually reclined in a supine position during launch and re-entry phases so that acceleration is experienced in the chest-to-back direction ($+G_x$). This reduces the likelihood of loss of consciousness compared with the head-to-foot direction when seated upright ($+G_z$, experienced by fast-jet pilots), but instead causes chest compression that has been commonly likened to an 'elephant sitting on the chest'.[19] Anticipated suborbital G loads may exceed +3 G_x for periods of 20–30 s, reaching a transient peak of up to +6 G_x on re-entry.[6,9] At +6 G_x an object's weight is increased sixfold so that, for example, an 85-kg person weighs half a ton.

Most individuals with well-controlled medical conditions are expected to be capable of safely tolerating the hypergravity phases of suborbital spaceflight.[8] Centrifuge-simulated suborbital acceleration profiles conducted under normoxic conditions have been tolerated by many volunteers of widely varying ages and with minor and stable medical conditions,[7,9,10] although physical symptoms and problematic anxiety were quite common and approximately 5% of volunteers were unable to complete the exposures, possibly related in part to a sensation of difficulty breathing.[8,26] Limited measurements of arterial oxygen saturation (S_pO_2) in some individuals indicated desaturation as low as 89% that was not associated with adverse sequelae.[9,10] Pulmonary physiology has not otherwise been studied during simulated suborbital profiles, yet the lung is unusually vulnerable to gravitational effects—it has little actual tissue mass and deforms under its own weight.[31]

The precise role of gravity and its interaction with other factors in lung physiology is not completely understood, but postural effects of gravity on respiratory function are well established in clinical medicine, such as the use of prone positioning in critically ill patients.[18,25] Regional ventilation and blood flow normally increase toward the dependent region of the lung, but become more inhomogeneous with increasing high G acceleration, eventually resulting in hypoxemia secondary to ventilation/perfusion mismatch.[16,17,31] Perfusion of the nondependent lung is reduced[16,17] while compression of lung tissue under its increased weight, further compounded by the displacement of mediastinal contents, leads to airway closure within dependent lung regions, loss of alveolar ventilation, and shunt.[5,28,31] Centrifuge studies primarily conducted in healthy subjects in the 1960s[3,16,28] and more recently[5,31,32] have induced well-tolerated hypoxemia using various magnitudes and durations of $+G_x$ acceleration.[17] Based on extrapolation from these diverse studies it is possible that hypoxemia may occur during suborbital flights. This would not necessarily be clinically concerning in itself, particularly in individuals who are young and healthy, but may have greater significance in older and less healthy individuals.

Such hypoxemia could be exacerbated by the use of airline-style cabin pressurization on suborbital spacecraft. Commercial airline passengers routinely experience mild hypoxia (S_pO_2 typically 90–95%) due to reduced atmospheric pressure within the cabin that is equivalent to an altitude of up to 8000 ft (2438 m).[2] This is sufficient to activate classic physiological responses to hypoxia in flight such as erythropoietin secretion and hypoxic pulmonary vasoconstriction.[36,39] More severe hypoxemia occurs in passengers with respiratory disease and in some healthy individuals, particularly with increasing age, and can contribute to adverse medical events in flight.[2,27,34] Some suborbital spacecraft will have similarly reduced cabin pressure and thus similarly hypoxic conditions, which in theory could accentuate any G-induced hypoxemia and impact medically susceptible individuals,[1] but this has not yet been investigated.

This study aimed to characterize the underlying pulmonary response to $+G_x$ acceleration in order to guide the medical approach to prospective suborbital flyers and improve passenger safety. Rather than replicate the brief and dynamic G profiles of actual suborbital flights, this study used sustained G exposures to allow more complete and detailed characterization of the underlying pulmonary response. We aimed to determine how $+G_x$ acceleration loads ranging up to +6 G_x affect respiratory physiology, what degree of hypoxemia this may cause, and how this is influenced by simulated airline-style cabin pressurization.

METHODS

Subjects

Healthy volunteers were recruited following medical screening, which included a health questionnaire, medical examination, 12-lead ECG, urinalysis, and spirometry. Detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria are described in the supplementary online appendix (**Appendix A**; https://doi.org/10.3357/AMHP.5790sd.2021) together with further details of the experimental methods. The study was approved by the King's College London and QinetiQ Research Ethics Committees and was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All subjects provided written informed consent. There were 11 healthy subjects who took part in the study, which used a randomized, repeated measures, crossover design.

Equipment

The study was undertaken using a long-arm human centrifuge (radius 9.14 m; QinetiQ, Farnborough, UK). Heart rate (from three-lead ECG), S_pO_2 at the earlobe, and tidal volume and respiratory rate (from a pneumotachograph in line with the demand valve regulator controlling breathing gas delivery) were recorded continuously via Powerlab 16SP and LabChart 7 (AD

Instruments, Oxford, UK). Breath-by-breath end-tidal partial pressures of oxygen ($P_{ET}O_2$) and carbon dioxide ($P_{ET}CO_2$) were measured using an in-line molecular flow sensor (University of Oxford, Oxford, UK).[13]

Regional distribution of lung ventilation was determined using electrical impedance tomography (EIT) via 16 circumferential chest electrodes (Goe-MF II EIT device, CareFusion, Höchberg, Germany).[15] This technique uses bio-impedance measurements in which a sinusoidal current is injected and the resulting surface potential measured in adjacent electrodes. Through these measurements, EIT tracks lung conductivity as it varies depending on the degree of inflation and forms a tomographic image that reflects regional ventilation. EIT is used in respiratory research and is under investigation for clinical use. Functional EIT images at each acceleration level were used in eight regions of interest in the lung defined as anterior (A1–A4) and posterior (P1–P4) moving from chest to back. Tidal impedance and end-expiratory impedance were determined and normalized to a percentage of global impedance for each region of interest (Dräger EIT Data Analysis Tool 6.1, Dräger Medical, Lübeck, Germany).[15]

In nine subjects, nasoesophageal catheters were used to study respiratory drive to the diaphragm (neural respiratory drive) and breathing mechanics. Diaphragm electromyography (EMG_{di}) was recorded continuously from an esophageal multipair electrode catheter and expressed as a proportion of the value obtained during maximum volitional inspiratory maneuvers (EMG_{di}%max) as previously described.[21] EMG_{di}%max was multiplied by respiratory rate to calculate the neural respiratory drive index (NRDI; arbitrary units, AU).[21,23] Transdiaphragmatic pressure was measured simultaneously using a dual pressure transducer tipped catheter (Gaeltec, Dunvegan, UK) with the proximal transducer in the midesophagus and the distal transducer in the stomach, and the diaphragm pressure-time product (PTP_{di}) was calculated to provide an index of the work of breathing.[4,22]

Arterial blood gases were analyzed in a subset of three subjects via a 20-gauge radial artery cannula. Subjects withdrew an arterial sample immediately prior to completing each G exposure. A video and description of the arterial sampling procedure on the centrifuge are included in the supplementary online appendix (Appendix A; https://doi.org/10.3357/AMHP.5790sd.2021). The

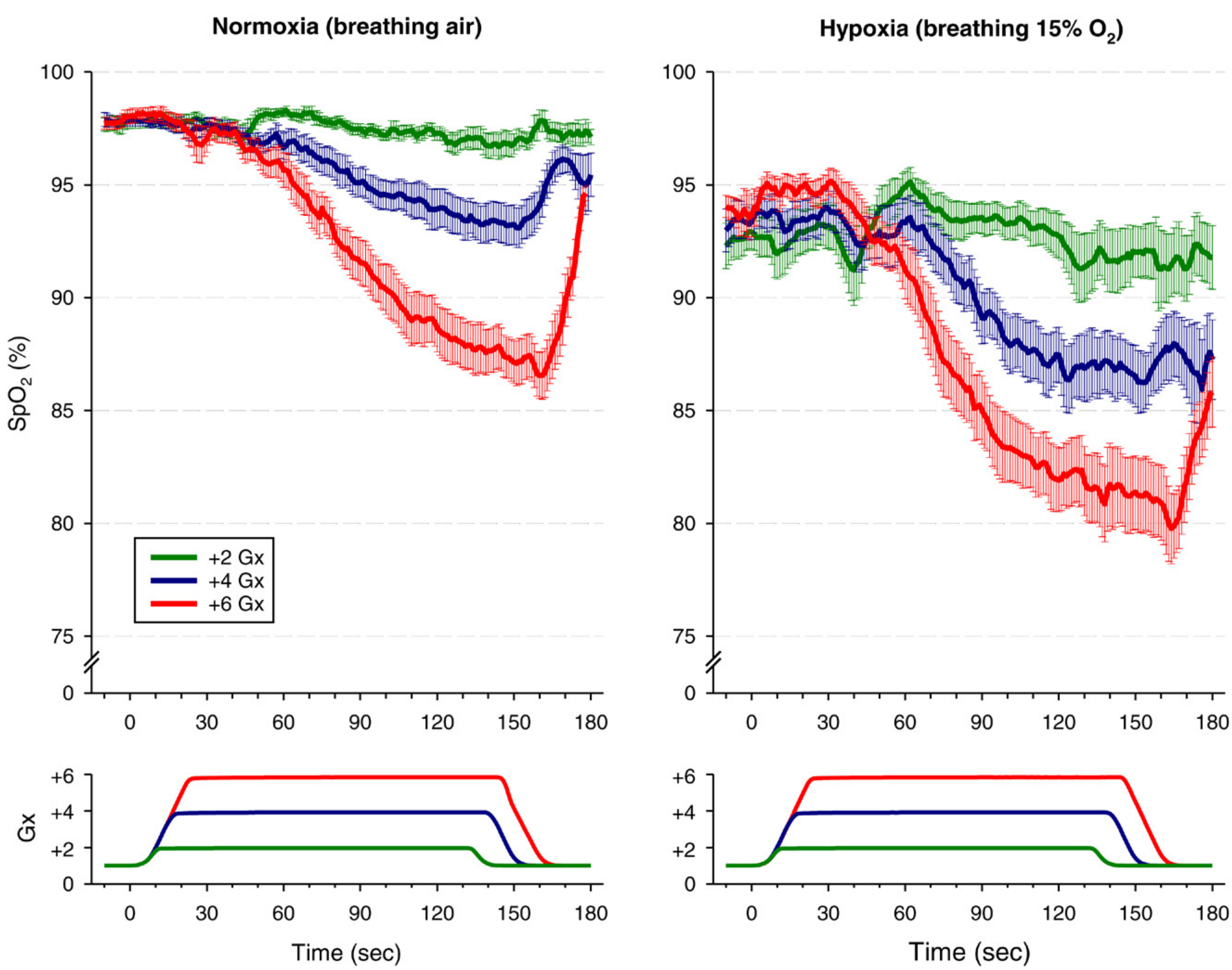

Fig. 1. Arterial oxygen saturation during $+G_x$ acceleration Upper panels show arterial oxygen saturation (S_pO_2) and lower panels show applied acceleration (G_x). Left panels show measurements breathing air and right panels show measurements breathing 15% oxygen to simulate a cabin pressure altitude of 8000 ft (2438 m). Data are mean ± SEM.

alveolar-arterial (A-a) gradient was calculated using the alveolar gas equation, with an assumed *R* value of 0.8.

Procedure

Subjects wore comfortable clothes with no anti-G trousers or other G protection. Following instrumentation subjects were positioned supine in the centrifuge gondola wearing an occlusive nose clip and breathing through a mouthpiece. Exposures of 2 min to +2, +4, and +6 G_x were undertaken twice, once breathing air and once breathing 15% oxygen (balance 85% nitrogen) to simulate a cabin pressure altitude of 8000 ft (2438 m).[2] The order of exposures was randomized and subjects were

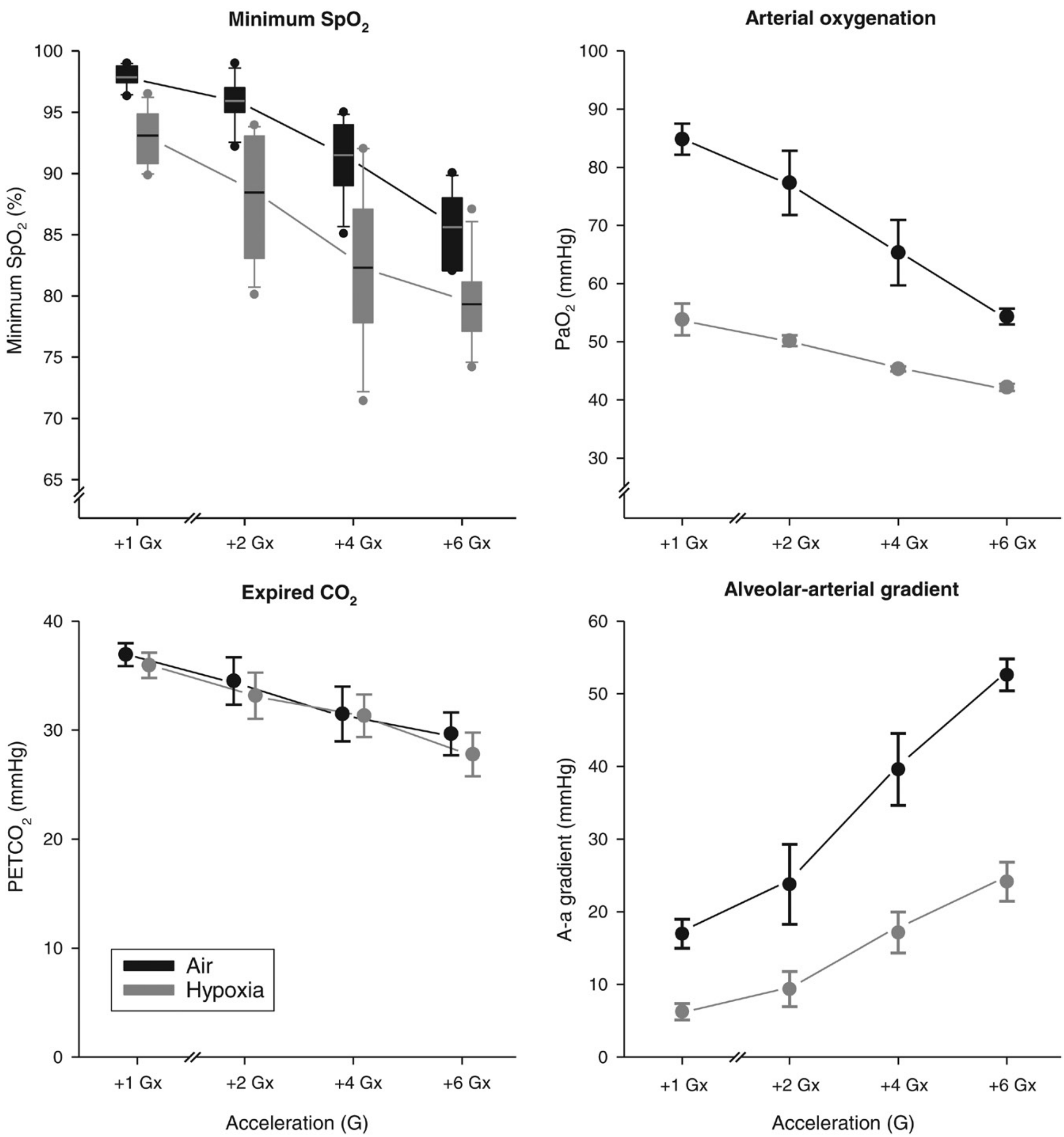

Fig. 2. Pulmonary gas exchange during $+G_x$ acceleration. Upper left panel shows the minimum arterial oxygen saturation (S_pO_2) observed during each G exposure, including the mean, interquartile range (boxes), 10–90% range (bars), and individual outliers beyond this range. Upper right panel shows the arterial partial pressure of oxygen (P_aO_2), lower right panel shows the calculated alveolar-arterial (A-a) oxygen gradient, and lower left panel shows the end-tidal partial pressure of carbon dioxide ($P_{ET}CO_2$); data are mean ± SEM. Data were obtained while breathing air (black symbols) and breathing 15% oxygen to simulate a cabin pressure altitude of 8000 ft (2438 m; gray symbols).

blinded to the gas mixture. The centrifuge was stationary for at least 5 min between exposures. Breathlessness intensity was recorded using the modified Borg (mBorg) scale[11] and subjects were asked to report any symptoms of pain or discomfort.

Statistical Analysis

The study was powered to detect a change in S_pO_2 of 5 percentage points with a power of 80% and a two-sided significance of 0.05. Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics and statistical significance was assumed at $P < 0.05$. Data were normally distributed (Shapiro-Wilk test). Differences between G levels and breathing gases were assessed using one-way and two-way repeated measures ANOVA with Greenhouse-Geisser correction and with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons. Data are reported as mean ± SEM unless otherwise stated.

RESULTS

There were 11 subjects (8 men and 3 women) with mean (± SD) age 29 ± 6 yr, weight 80 ± 17 kg, height 1.76 ± 0.09 m, and body mass index 26 ± 4 ($kg \cdot m^{-2}$). There was a large fall in S_pO_2 during exposure to $+G_x$ acceleration (**Fig. 1** and **Fig. 2**), indicating substantial impairment of gas exchange. The fall in S_pO_2 increased significantly with the magnitude [$F(1.7,13.4) = 19.3$, $P < 0.001$] and duration [$F(1.5,12.2) = 26.9$, $P < 0.001$] of $+G_x$, reaching a minimum S_pO_2 of 86 ± 1% at +6 G_x while breathing air. Breathing 15% oxygen significantly exacerbated these effects [$F(1,8) = 64.7$, $P < 0.001$], with a minimum S_pO_2 of 79 ± 1% at +6 G_x (Fig. 2). These effects were evident even at +2 G_x (minimum S_pO_2 96 ± 1% breathing air and 88 ± 1% breathing 15% oxygen).

Similarly, the arterial partial pressure of oxygen (P_aO_2) fell with increasing $+G_x$ to 54 ± 1 mmHg at +6 G_x [$F(1.9,3.8) = 15.9$, $P = 0.015$] and was significantly lower breathing 15% oxygen [$F(1,2) = 69.8$, $P = 0.014$], reaching 42 ± 1 mmHg at +6 G_x (Fig. 2). The A-a gradient widened substantially with increasing acceleration to a peak of 53 ± 2 mmHg at +6 G_x [$F(1.5,3.0) = 38.4$, $P = 0.008$; Fig. 2], indicating worsening impairment of ventilation/perfusion matching. The A-a gradient was smaller with reduced inspired oxygen [$F(1,2) = 76.7$, $P = 0.013$], but still widened with increasing $+G_x$ (Fig. 2). $P_{ET}CO_2$ fell with increasing $+G_x$ [$F(1.9,13.5) = 17.4$, $P < 0.001$], but was not significantly affected by inspired oxygen level [$F(1,7) = 5.4$, $P = 0.053$; Fig. 2]. Changes in $P_{ET}O_2$ (Fig. A2 online) and heart rate (Fig. A3 online) are reported in the supplementary online Appendix A (https://doi.org/10.3357/AMHP.5790sd.2021).

With increasing acceleration from +1 G_x baseline to +6 G_x there was a reversal of the normal relative distribution of ventilation from posterior to anterior lung regions. A progressive inversion of normalized tidal impedance from chest to back and a significant interaction between region of interest and G level [$F(4.0,35.9) = 10.8$, $P < 0.001$; **Fig. 3**] were observed. End-expiratory impedance increased in the most anterior lung regions with increasing $+G_x$, with a significant interaction between region of interest and G level [$F(3.4,30.3) = 11.9$, $P < 0.001$], indicating higher end-expiratory regional lung volume due to progressively greater gas-trapping anteriorly (Fig. 3).

Increasing acceleration loads caused a substantial, dose-dependent increase in the work of breathing, with PTP_{di} increasing from 242 ± 22 $cmH_2O \cdot s^{-1} \cdot min^{-1}$ at baseline to 658 ± 86 $cmH_2O \cdot s^{-1} \cdot min^{-1}$ at +6 G_x when breathing air [$F(1.3,10.3) = 36.8$, $P < 0.001$; **Fig. 4**]. A parallel increase from baseline to +6 G_x in EMG_{di}%max (11 ± 1% vs. 45 ± 7%) and in NRDI [112 ± 14 AU vs. 825 ± 174 AU, $F(1.1,8.6) = 17.0$, $P = 0.003$; Fig. 4] was observed. Whereas NRDI, PTP_{di} and respiratory rate [$F(2.1,20.8) = 34.4$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 4] increased with increasing $+G_x$, tidal volume decreased significantly [$F(2.7,27.4) = 9.7$, $P < 0.001$; Fig. 4], limiting the consequent increase in ventilation [$F(1.7,16.9) = 11.1$, $P = 0.001$; Fig. 4]. Thus, increasing $+G_x$ was associated with progressive neuroventilatory uncoupling (i.e., increased neural respiratory drive without a parallel increase in ventilation)[20] [further depicted in **Fig. A4** and **Fig. A5** in the supplementary online appendix (Appendix A; https://doi.org/10.3357/AMHP.5790sd.2021)]. Breathing 15% oxygen resulted in greater increases in PTP_{di} [$F(1,8) = 38.8$, $P < 0.001$], but had no further significant effects on NRDI [$F(1,8) = 4.3$, $P = 0.072$] or the other ventilatory parameters (Fig. 4).

Subjectively, subjects reported increasing breathlessness with each step change in acceleration [$F(1.3,12.8) = 64.1$, $P < 0.001$], with severe breathlessness at +6 G_x (median mBorg 5 [IQR 3.5-7]), and mildly hypoxic conditions resulted in further increases in mBorg [$F(1,10) = 6.3$, $P = 0.031$; Fig. 4]. Eight subjects (73%) reported musculoskeletal chest pain at +4 or +6 G_x, which was generally parasternal or subcostal and worse on inspiration, and persisted for 2 d after testing in two subjects.

DISCUSSION

Currently there are no medical criteria for determining an individual's suitability for suborbital spaceflight, reflecting the lack of evidence on which to base such criteria.[38] While most people are likely to be able to tolerate a suborbital spaceflight safely,[8] a deeper understanding of the underlying physiology may assist medical decision-making for individuals with conditions that raise particular concerns. This study has demonstrated that sustained periods of $+G_x$ at magnitudes relevant to suborbital spaceflight profoundly affect respiratory physiology and impair gas exchange in healthy individuals. Marked hypoxemia and breathlessness were exacerbated by simulating potential cabin pressure conditions with mild hypoxia, although mean S_pO_2 did not fall below 85% within the first minute, which is most relevant to actual suborbital flights.

Conducting detailed physiological measurements during high-G acceleration is complex, challenging, and rarely attempted, and the integration of multiple advanced techniques is a strength of this study. To our knowledge, no previous centrifuge studies have used electrical impedance tomography, diaphragm electromyography, esophageal/gastric manometry, molecular flow sensing, or concurrent hypoxia during $+G_x$ acceleration. A

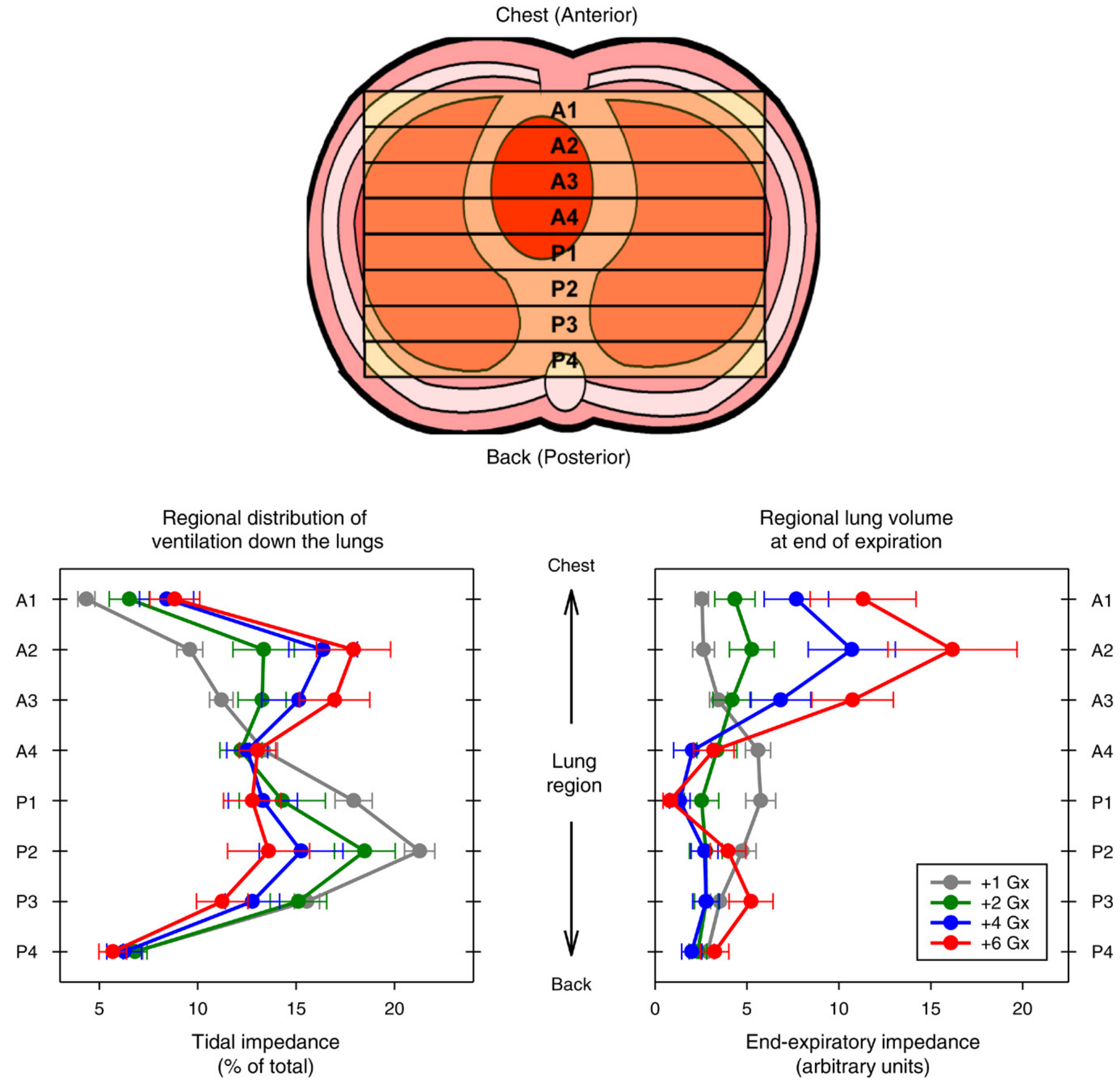

Fig. 3. Regional distribution of ventilation in the lungs during $+G_x$ acceleration. Electrical impedance was averaged in eight regions of interest in the lung defined as anterior (A1–A4) and posterior (P1–P4) moving from chest to back (illustrated in upper panel). Lower left panel shows the regional distribution in tidal ventilation derived from tidal impedance expressed as a percentage of global impedance. Lower right panel shows the regional lung volume at the end of expiration derived from end-expiratory impedance. Data are mean ± SEM.

limitation of the study is that the physiology of young healthy subjects does not necessarily reflect that of older age groups, with associated higher prevalence of medical disease that may be more characteristic of commercial spaceflight participants,[8] at least for early flights. In this respect the current study is only a starting point and detailed physiological studies in more representative subjects are still required.

This study did not seek to replicate the anticipated G profiles of actual suborbital flights in which in-flight acceleration peaks and overall G exposures will be brief compared with the sustained G required to characterize the underlying pulmonary response. As such, the responses we observed are not expected to be evident generally in suborbital passengers, but rather provide an understanding of the physiological processes that will be triggered and may interact with individual factors such as pre-existing morbidity. On actual flights the in-flight $+G_x$ exposure may also be intensified by a simultaneous $+G_z$ component in some circumstances (e.g., seated crew),[9] and the period of microgravity could itself interfere with gas exchange in the elderly or in the presence of lung pathology.[24,35] Furthermore, rapid transition to high G from zero G (rather than from 1 G, as in the current study) could impair tolerance during actual

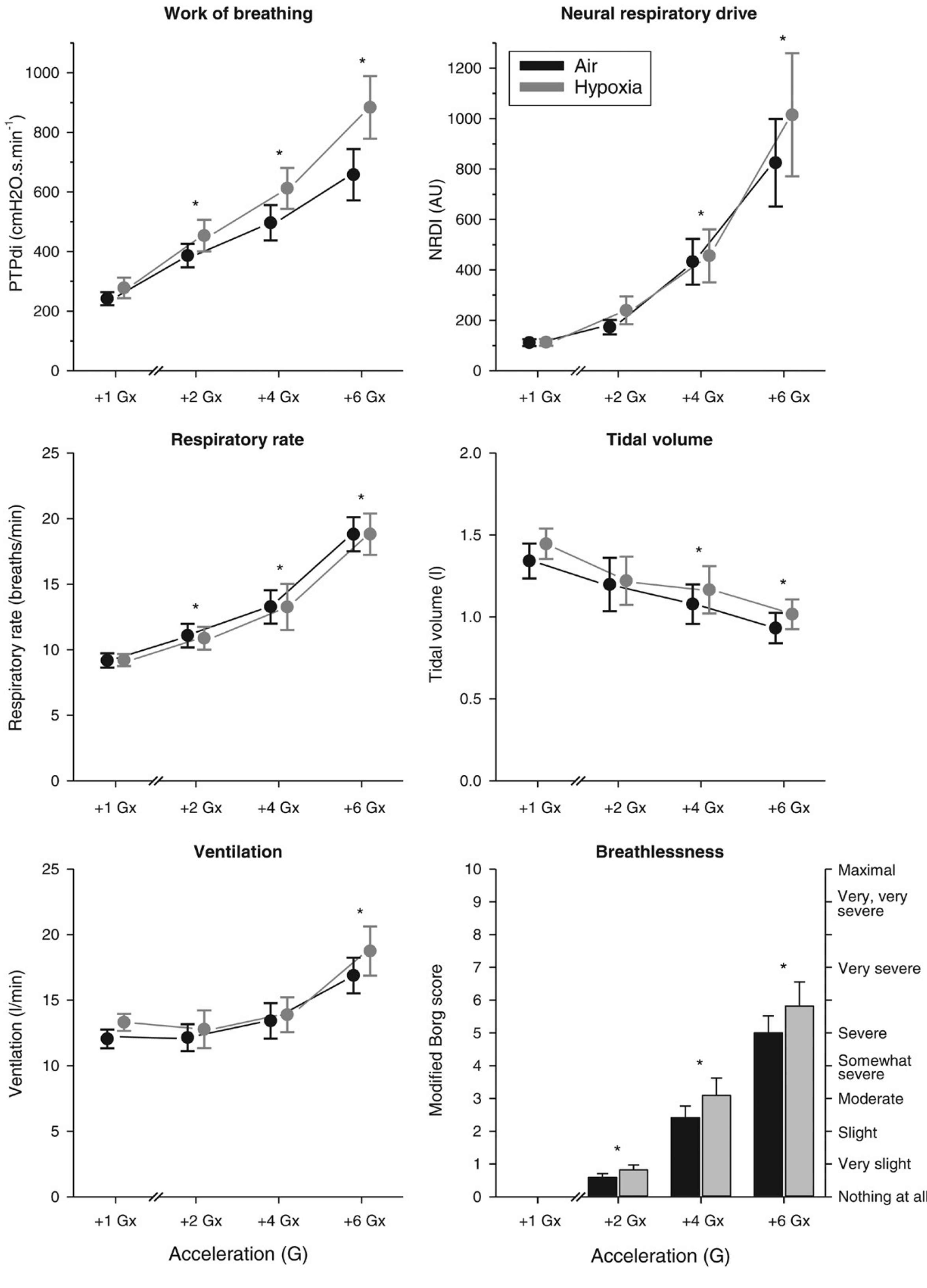

Fig. 4. Breathing mechanics, breathing drive, ventilation, and breathlessness during $+G_x$ acceleration. Work of breathing was determined from transdiaphragmatic pressure as the diaphragm pressure-time product (PTPdi). Neural respiratory drive index (NRDI) was determined from diaphragm electromyography (EMG_{di}) as the proportion of maximum volitional EMG_{di} ($EMGdi_{\%max}$) multiplied by respiratory rate. Breathlessness intensity was rated using the modified Borg scale. Data were obtained while breathing air (black symbols) and breathing 15% oxygen to simulate a cabin pressure altitude of 8000 ft (2438 m; gray symbols). Asterisks denote a statistically significant difference ($P < 0.05$) from baseline for respective G loads after Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons. Data are mean ± SEM.

suborbital re-entry, when peak $+G_x$ is sufficient to make it momentarily difficult even to move.[1]

This study found that magnitudes of $+G_x$ acceleration experienced over the suborbital range profoundly changed the regional distribution of pulmonary ventilation and the mechanical behavior of the lung and chest wall. Progressive anterior gas-trapping combined (in real-time) with a relative reversal in regional lung ventilation has not been identified with previous techniques.[5,16] With increasing $+G_x$ the ventilatory response was limited by impaired pulmonary mechanics leading to neuroventilatory uncoupling and disproportionate breathlessness.[20,33] These are novel data. The peak values observed for work of breathing and neural respiratory drive were higher than those typically seen in patients with severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease[21] or obesity.[37] Indeed, together with the pronounced anterior gas-trapping, the effect of increasing $+G_x$ was analogous to a transient form of respiratory failure associated with such disease states. High-G acceleration also multiplies body weight and suborbital profiles can be considered as briefly inducing a temporary 'super obesity-like' state that, like obesity itself, causes respiratory embarrassment.[37]

Although transitory, such respiratory compromise raises potential concerns for individuals who are already obese or have lung pathology, with greater potential to contribute to adverse clinical sequelae such as cardiac events (e.g., malignant rhythms or myocardial infarction[12]) or parenchymal lung damage.[40] Suborbital G exposures will be considerable for an untrained population, although they are likely to be physically tolerable for most younger healthy people. For others, the extent to which suborbital flights may evoke the underlying responses reported in this study will depend on interaction with individual factors such as age, body mass, smoking history, baseline fitness, and pre-existing disease.

Suborbital spaceflight is ultimately expected to become commonplace as a means of transportation and overcoming potential respiratory challenges will help to enable as many people as possible to fly safely. Possible protective strategies for at-risk individuals include supplementary oxygen, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), and centrifuge-based evaluation and training. However, increasing the inspired concentration of oxygen is unlikely to reverse the hypoxemia completely and is complicated in high G due to the phenomenon of acceleration atelectasis, whereby the consequent reduction in 'nitrogen-splinting' of alveoli encourages their collapse.[30] Unobtrusive CPAP devices used routinely in managing obstructive sleep apnea could directly oppose the effects of $+G_x$ acceleration and warrant investigation for use in medically susceptible individuals with relevant conditions.[37]

For individuals in whom there is the greatest potential for adverse effects, centrifuge-based evaluation prior to suborbital spaceflight may be particularly beneficial and informative. A 'G challenge test' could be employed much like a hypoxic challenge test (breathing 15% oxygen) is used to predict in-flight responses in vulnerable airline passengers.[14] The G challenge test could consist of continuous monitoring of S_pO_2 and heart rate (as a minimum), together with subjective measures (breathlessness, discomfort, anxiety), during graded-intensity suborbital G profiles. This could be combined with simultaneous hypoxia breathing 15% oxygen, with countermeasures (such as CPAP) and with additional training activities. Studies are required to investigate the potential role for such testing in evaluating individuals with specific medical concerns such as comorbid cardiorespiratory illness and obesity. In the meantime, we suggest it may be prudent to consider centrifuge-based evaluation as part of the medical assessment in these circumstances.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that sustained periods of high-G acceleration relevant to commercial suborbital spaceflight profoundly affect respiratory physiology, causing substantial hypoxemia and breathlessness that are exacerbated by simulated cabin pressure conditions. These effects are not expected to be clinically meaningful for the majority of spaceflight participants, but provide a deeper understanding of the physiological processes that will be triggered during suborbital flight and that may impact on a minority of individuals. Further research is required to determine whether centrifuge-based testing can improve medical evaluation prior to suborbital flight for the most medically susceptible individuals, with the aim of optimizing passenger health while maximizing access to suborbital spaceflight.

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