

SKIN-CORE TEMPERATURE CONVERGENCE OFTEN WELL TOLERATED

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INTRODUCTION

When subjects **must** work while wearing impermeable clothing **under** hot conditions, mean skin temperature (T_{sk}) often approaches rectal temperature (T_{re}). Pandolf and Goldman reported in 1978 that in their subjects such convergence produced a state of **near** collapse even though neither T_{re} nor heart rate had reached limiting values; signs and symptoms included headache, *dizziness*, nausea, vomiting, *malaise*, inability to keep pace, hyperventilation, blurred vision and mental sluggishness (1). They concluded that convergence is an accurate guide to tolerance limits under conditions which minimize evaporative cooling. More recently, Goldman called convergence "the best physiological guide to heat limits" for workers in encapsulating garments and also states that a $T_{sk} > 37^\circ\text{C}$ should be cause for cessation of work in the heat (2).

The convergence paper is quoted in the literature in connection with widely differing experimental conditions. For instance, Smolander et al. discuss their results in terms of convergence when in fact there was a T_{sk} - T_{re} gradient of $>1.0^\circ\text{C}$ (3). Holmér mentions it in connection with diving experiments (4). The human use committee at NIOSH has evidently adopted convergence as a safety cut-off for experiments (5).

While the convergence-collapse concept is attractive in its simplicity, we cannot find any published validation of the phenomenon beyond the original paper, **nor** does it fit with experience in our laboratory. We report here on two recent protocols which often produced convergence, despite which subjects usually continued work until we stopped them at $T_{re}=39^\circ\text{C}$.

METHODS

Data from two protocols were used. **Series A:** Nine subjects each participated in eight experiments wearing heavy, semi-permeable (chemical defense) clothing at $T_{db}=22-38^\circ\text{C}$ with work loads of 200, 350 or 500 W. **Series B:** Nine subjects each performed four experiments wearing impermeable clothing at $T_{db}=29$ and 38°C with a work load of 450 W.

Each subject was tested to establish individual treadmill $\dot{V}O_{2max}$ and HR_{max} . Measurements during experiments included T_{sk} , T_{re} , HR, perceived exertion, and weight loss. Convergence was defined as T_{sk} rising to within 0.1°C of T_{re} . Convergence work time (CWT) was measured from the time convergence occurred until work was discontinued for any reason.

RESULTS

Convergence occurred in eight of the experimental conditions ($T_{db}=29-38^\circ\text{C}$), involving 42 of the 60 runs under those conditions; T_{sk} rose to 37°C within the first 5-10 min of these experiments. In 29 convergence cases (64%) the subjects continued to work until $T_{re}=39^\circ\text{C}$ and/or $HR=HR_{max}$ with CWT=10-45 min; many could have continued longer. The remaining 13 experiments were terminated by the subjects at CWT=0-20 min due to extreme leg fatigue or inability to tolerate the inspiratory resistance of the full-face mask. No one collapsed or became ill.

Two examples of conditions which produced convergence are as follows. **Series A:** In Condition 7 ($T_{db}=35^\circ$, $T_{wb}=31^\circ$, $T_{bg}=40^\circ\text{C}$, work=200 W), 7 of the 9 subjects experienced convergence at $t=10-45$ min and $T_{re}=37.1-38.2^\circ\text{C}$, and all worked until $T_{re}=39^\circ\text{C}$ for CWT=15-45 min (mean=34 min). **Series B:** When subjects wore sealed, impermeable suits (with two levels of insulation) in a chamber at $T_{db}=38^\circ\text{C}$; 17 of 18 runs produced convergence at $t=4-31$ min and $T_{re}=37.0-38.1^\circ\text{C}$, and 5 worked until $T_{re}=39^\circ\text{C}$ for CWT=15-35 min (mean=23 min).

DISCUSSION

Thermal balance can be maintained when $T_{sk} \geq T_{re}$ only by means of evaporative cooling. When clothing and/or high environmental humidity suppress evaporation, cutaneous circulation reaches very high levels. In theory this poses the threat that the subject might reach a cardiovascular limit in ability to meet the combined perfusion demands of the skin and the working muscles, but we observed no evidence of such a limitation. It appears that physiological tolerance was determined instead by body heat storage accompanied by increases in T_{re} and HR, which eventually reach their physiological limiting values.

Our results fail to confirm that convergence of T_{sk} on T_{re} has any special significance. Neither did $T_{sk} > 37^\circ\text{C}$ cause any particular problem. Although subjects under these conditions were uncomfortable, they continued working until they reached classical physiological limits. Neither convergence nor high T_{sk} produced a change in the rate of rise in T_{re} or HR. In no case did a subject display the signs or symptoms of "imminent collapse" listed in the 1978 paper (1). It is unclear why Pandolf and Goldman's subjects regularly reached symptomatic end-points at convergence when ours did not. Although their experiments involved higher ambient temperatures ($T_{db}=46-49^\circ\text{C}$), the work loads were lower (about 225 W), and the rates of rise in T_{re} and T_{sk} were similar in the two studies.

A recent paper unintentionally provides further evidence that convergence per se is not limiting (4). Divers wearing impermeable suits worked in water at $T_w=38^\circ\text{C}$; their T_{sk} exceeded T_{re} for the entire 60-min experiment, which ended only when T_{re} reached 39°C or more. The work was repeated at $T_w=42^\circ\text{C}$ with similar results except that T_{re} reached 39°C sooner (34-42 min). If convergence had been viewed as a limit, these experiments could not have taken place.

The convergence concept is based on T_{re} , which is relatively slow in responding to external temperature changes and varies specifically with leg work. Under various conditions T_{re} may under- or over-estimate central venous temperature so that convergence of T_{sk} on T_{re} does not necessarily mean the absence of a core-skin temperature gradient.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis provides no support for the generalization that skin-core temperature convergence can accurately predict tolerance time for work in heat or has any unique effect on stress levels of subjects. The ability to work despite high skin temperatures appears to be a function of the rate of heat storage and the level of T_{re} , as well as subject fitness and motivation. Arbitrary termination of experiments based on either T_{sk} alone or convergence of T_{sk} on T_{re} may deprive investigators of valuable data and lead to erroneous generalizations regarding human tolerance for work in heat while wearing protective clothing.

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