EVALUATION OF HEAT STRESS BY THE PHYSIOLOGICAL STRAIN INDEX (PSI)

D.S. Moran¹,², A. Shitzer³ and K.B. Pandolf³

¹U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine, Natick, MA, USA,
²Heller Institute of Medical Research, Sheba Medical Center, IDF Medical Corps—The Institute of Military Physiology, Israel 52621
³Department of Mechanical Engineering, Technion, Haifa, Israel 3200.

INTRODUCTION

During this century, more than 20 heat strain indexes were developed (1,2). However, none are accepted as a universal physiological strain index. The best known index to use is the Heat Strain Index (HSI) suggested by Belding and Hatch (3). This index, which related total evaporation required to the evaporative capacity of the environment is widely accepted, probably because it combines environmental variables and body activity. However, according to Belding (2) there were situations in which heat strain was seriously underpredicted or overpredicted by this index, and corrections were necessary for improving the prediction of the index for various exposures (4,5).

In 1996, Frank et al. (6) suggested a different approach for evaluation of heat stress by introducing the Cumulative Heat Strain Index (CHSI) based on rectal temperature (TR) and heart beats (HB). However, HB is not commonly measured and therefore causes difficulties in using this index. The purpose of this study was to evaluate a simple physiological strain index (PSI) for hot environments (9).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data for this study were obtained from 2 separate studies by Montain et al. (7,8). In the first study, 7 men wearing full (clo = 1.5) and partial (clo = 1.3) protecting clothing performed exercise (VO₂ ~1 L·min⁻¹) for 180 min in hot/dry and hot/wet environmental conditions (43°C, 20%RH; 35°C, 50%RH, respectively). Evaluation of the index was performed with a 2nd study representing a database of 9 men who completed a matrix of 9 trials of 50 min each at 3 metabolic rates (25, 45 and 65% VO₂max) while euhydrated and hypohydrated at 3% and 5% of body weight (BWL).

The HSI was calculated as suggested by Belding and Hatch (3), with algorithm modifications published by Pandolf et al. (10). The CHSI was calculated as suggested by Frank et al. (6). The material and methods are presented in greater detail elsewhere (7,8).

RESULTS

To evaluate heat stress on a universal scale of 0 to 10 and to overcome the CHSI's limitation of continually getting higher values during rest or recovery periods, we constructed an index that enabled us to calculate the strain online.
The index is based on the maximal limits for $T_{re}$ and heart rate (HR) of 39.5°C and 180 bpm, respectively. The same weight functions for $T_{re}$ and HR are assumed normalized for the initial value of each, resulting in the following Physiological Strain Index (PSI) (9):

$$PSI = 5(T_{re} - T_{reo})/(39.5 - T_{reo}) + 5(HR - HR_{0})/(180 - HR_{0})^{-1}$$

where $T_{re}$ and HR are simultaneous measurements taken at any time.

![Figure 1. Comparison between HR (top), $T_{re}$ (middle) and PSI (bottom) in hot-dry and hot-wet climates wearing partial (MOPP I) and full (MOPP IV) protective clothing. Data obtained from Montain et al. (7).](image-url)
PSI differentiated significantly \((P < 0.05)\) between the strain at the hot/dry and the hot/wet climates, and between the full (MOPP IV) and the partial (MOPP I) protective clothing configurations (Figure 1). The CHSI and PSI rated the exposures in the hot/dry climate condition at higher physiological strain, whereas the HSI used in Montain et al. study \((7)\) rated the exposures in the hot/wet climate condition with higher strain (Table 1).

**Table 1. Comparison between PSI, HSI and CHSI applied to Montain et al. (7) database at 180 min.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PSI MOPP I</th>
<th>PSI MOPP IV</th>
<th>HSI MOPP I</th>
<th>HSI MOPP IV</th>
<th>CHSI MOPP I</th>
<th>CHSI MOPP IV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hot/dry</td>
<td>3.1 ± 0.9</td>
<td>7.2 ± 1.3</td>
<td>77 ± 4</td>
<td>152 ± 11</td>
<td>362 ± 212</td>
<td>1516 ± 400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot/wet</td>
<td>2.3 ± 0.9</td>
<td>4.9 ± 0.7</td>
<td>85 ± 5</td>
<td>161 ± 14</td>
<td>228 ± 171</td>
<td>843 ± 289</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The 2nd database to validate PSI was compiled from results obtained during 50 min exposure under 9 combinations of exercise intensity and hypo-hydration level. The PSI correctly discriminated between the exposures (Table 1) and categorized the heat strain in a rank order. Significant values of PSI were observed with increasing hypohydration level and exercise intensity \((P < 0.01)\).

**Table 2. PSI (mean ± SE) applied to Montain et al. (8) database at 50 min.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypohydration (%BWL)</th>
<th>25% (\dot{V}O_{max})</th>
<th>45% (\dot{V}O_{max})</th>
<th>65% (\dot{V}O_{max})</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.6 ± 0.2</td>
<td>4.3 ± 0.2</td>
<td>7.4 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2 ± 0.3</td>
<td>5.5 ± 0.4</td>
<td>9.1 ± 0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.1 ± 0.3</td>
<td>6.4 ± 0.4</td>
<td>10.0 ± 0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DISCUSSION**

The PSI described well the physiological strain on a universal scale of 0 to 10 and categorized every exposure in proper order. This index, which is based only on two physiological parameters \((HR\ and\ T_{re})\), adequately depicts the combined strain reflected by the cardiovascular and the thermoregulatory systems.

PSI differs from other indexes that are based on \(HR\) and \(T_{re}\). The CHSI, which is also based on \(T_{re}\) and \(HR\), is valid only for subjects exposed for the same duration, without rest or recovery periods. From following the \(T_{re}\), HR and PSI dynamics in Figure 1, it can be concluded that the HSI failed to rate the exposures in a hot-dry climate with higher strain, probably because subjects were dressed in protective clothing.

Most of the heat strain indexes are limited in their evaluation since they were valid only under certain specific conditions. The suggested PSI is a valid index either online or when data analysis is applied. It is a simpler index to interpret and to use than other indexes available and includes the ability to be applied in
rest or recovery periods. This index has the potential to be widely accepted and used universally.

REFERENCES


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