The Future Role of Artificial Intelligence in Exercise and Health Sciences

Sarah L. Thompson, PhD[1]*, Wei Zhang, MSc[1]
[1]*Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary, Canada*

Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming numerous fields within medicine and health science, and exercise and health sciences are no exception. From automated movement analysis and wearable sensor integration to predictive modelling of injury risk and personalized exercise prescription, AI technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to enhance the precision, efficiency, and scalability of health-related research and clinical practice. This perspective article examines the current landscape of AI applications in exercise science, sports medicine, rehabilitation, and public health, and discusses the methodological, ethical, and practical challenges that accompany their integration. Key areas addressed include machine learning approaches to performance optimization, AI-assisted diagnostic tools in sports injury assessment, the use of natural language processing in health behavior research, and the implications of algorithmic decision-making for patient-centered care. The article also considers the limitations of current AI systems, including issues of data quality, model transparency, and generalizability across populations. We argue that the responsible integration of AI into exercise and health sciences requires interdisciplinary collaboration, robust ethical frameworks, and a sustained commitment to research transparency and equity. This perspective aims to provide researchers and clinicians with a foundational overview of AI's evolving role in the field and to stimulate critical discussion about its future directions.

Keywords

artificial intelligence; machine learning; exercise science; sports medicine; rehabilitation; wearable technology; injury prediction; personalized medicine; health informatics; clinical decision support

1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into biomedical and health research has accelerated substantially over the past decade, driven by advances in computational power, the proliferation of large-scale health datasets, and the development of increasingly sophisticated machine learning algorithms [1]. Within exercise and health sciences, AI is beginning to reshape how researchers collect and analyze movement data, how clinicians assess injury risk and monitor rehabilitation progress, and how public health practitioners design and evaluate physical activity interventions [2, 3].

Despite the growing body of literature on AI in medicine broadly defined, the specific applications and implications of AI within exercise science, sports medicine, and rehabilitation remain incompletely characterized. This perspective article aims to provide an accessible overview of current AI applications in these domains, to identify key methodological and ethical considerations, and to outline a research agenda for the responsible advancement of AI-assisted practice in exercise and health sciences.

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2. Current Applications of AI in Exercise and Health Sciences

2.1 Movement Analysis and Biomechanical Assessment

One of the most established applications of AI in exercise science is the automated analysis of human movement. Computer vision algorithms and deep learning models have demonstrated capacity to accurately identify joint angles, detect movement asymmetries, and classify exercise technique from video data, offering scalable alternatives to traditional laboratory-based motion capture systems [4]. These tools hold particular promise for field-based assessment in sports performance and rehabilitation settings, where access to specialist equipment is often limited.

2.2 Injury Risk Prediction

Machine learning models trained on longitudinal athlete data have shown potential in predicting the likelihood of musculoskeletal injury based on training load metrics, biomechanical variables, and physiological markers [5]. Studies applying random forest classifiers and neural network architectures to athlete monitoring data have reported moderate-to-good predictive accuracy for common injuries including anterior cruciate ligament rupture and hamstring strain, though the generalizability of these models across different sports, populations, and training environments remains an area of active investigation [6].

2.3 Personalized Exercise Prescription

AI-driven systems offer the possibility of dynamically adjusting exercise prescriptions in response to real-time physiological and behavioral data collected through wearable devices [7]. Reinforcement learning frameworks, in particular, have been proposed as a mechanism for optimizing training programs over time by modeling the relationship between exercise stimuli and adaptive responses at the individual level. While clinical implementation of such systems remains largely experimental, early evidence suggests promising applications in cardiac rehabilitation, diabetes management, and healthy aging programs [8].

2.4 Natural Language Processing in Health Behavior Research

Natural language processing (NLP) techniques are increasingly applied to the analysis of patient-reported outcomes, social media data, and electronic health records within public health and health behavior research [9]. In the context of physical activity promotion, NLP tools have been used to identify barriers to exercise participation, assess the sentiment of health communications, and automate the coding of qualitative interview data, substantially reducing the time and resource demands associated with large-scale qualitative research [10].

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3. Methodological Considerations

The application of AI in exercise and health sciences introduces a number of methodological challenges that warrant careful consideration. First, the performance of machine learning models is fundamentally dependent on the quality, representativeness, and volume of training data [11]. Many existing studies have been conducted on relatively small, homogeneous samples, raising concerns about the external validity of derived models when applied to diverse populations differing in age, sex, ethnicity, training history, or clinical status.

Second, the interpretability of AI models — particularly deep learning architectures — remains a significant concern in health-related applications [12]. The so-called "black box" nature of many high-performing algorithms limits the capacity of clinicians and researchers to understand the basis of model predictions, potentially undermining trust and impeding the identification of erroneous or biased outputs. Explainable AI (XAI) methods, including SHAP (SHapley Additive exPlanations) values and attention mechanisms, offer partial solutions to this challenge, though their application in exercise science research remains limited [13].

Third, researchers must attend carefully to issues of data privacy, informed consent, and algorithmic fairness when designing AI-based studies involving health data [14]. The collection of continuous physiological and behavioral data through wearable devices, in particular, raises substantive questions regarding data ownership, secondary use, and the potential for discriminatory outcomes if training datasets inadequately represent marginalized or underserved populations.

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4. Ethical and Practical Implications for Clinical Practice

The translation of AI tools from research settings into clinical practice in exercise medicine and rehabilitation introduces distinct ethical and practical considerations. Clinicians must be equipped to critically evaluate the evidence base underlying AI-assisted decision support systems, to recognize the limitations of algorithmic recommendations, and to maintain the primacy of patient-centered care in their practice [15].

Regulatory frameworks governing the use of AI in healthcare are evolving rapidly across jurisdictions, and exercise and health science practitioners should remain informed of relevant guidelines issued by national and international bodies. Transparency regarding the use of AI tools in clinical assessment and intervention planning is essential, and patients should be informed when AI systems contribute to decisions affecting their care.

Furthermore, the implementation of AI technologies in exercise and health settings must not exacerbate existing inequities in access to care. There is a risk that AI-enhanced services may disproportionately benefit populations with greater access to digital infrastructure and wearable technology, potentially widening rather than narrowing health disparities [16]. Deliberate effort is required to ensure that AI applications in this field are designed and evaluated with equity as a central consideration.

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5. Future Directions

Several priorities emerge for the advancement of AI in exercise and health sciences. Greater investment in the development of large, diverse, and openly accessible datasets will be essential to improving the generalizability and fairness of AI models in this domain. Methodological standards for the reporting of AI studies in exercise and health science should be developed and adopted, drawing on existing frameworks such as TRIPOD (Transparent Reporting of a Multivariable Prediction Model for Individual Prognosis or Diagnosis) and CONSORT-AI [17].

Interdisciplinary collaboration between exercise scientists, clinicians, data scientists, ethicists, and patient advocates will be critical to ensuring that AI development in this field is both scientifically rigorous and socially responsible. Educational initiatives aimed at building AI literacy among exercise and health science professionals should be prioritized at undergraduate, postgraduate, and continuing professional development levels.

Finally, the exercise and health science community should engage proactively with the broader discourse on AI governance in healthcare, contributing domain-specific expertise to policy discussions and advocating for regulatory approaches that protect patient welfare while enabling beneficial innovation.

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6. Conclusions

Artificial intelligence holds substantial promise for advancing research and practice in exercise and health sciences, offering new tools for movement analysis, injury prediction, personalized prescription, and health behavior research. However, the realization of this potential requires careful attention to methodological rigor, ethical responsibility, and equity. The exercise and health science community is well positioned to contribute to the responsible development of AI in this domain, provided that researchers and clinicians approach these technologies with both critical inquiry and openness to innovation.

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Author Contribution

W.Z. conceived, drafted, and revised the manuscript in its entirety.

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