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Synergistic Visual-Vestibular Interaction During Human Spaceflight

Dr Debopriya Ghosh[1], Dr Stephen Gershman[2], Dr Timothy Anderson[3], Peter[4]

[1]Department of Physiology, University College of Medical Sciences. Delhi, India.
[2]Department of Neuroscience, University of Alberta, Canada.
[3]Department of Robotics, Purdue University, USA.
[4]International Space University, France

ABSTRACT

The effects of sustained weightlessness on the neural adaptations made by astronaut subjects to deal with the stimulus rearrangement of spaceflight were examined using both yaw and pitch visual-vestibular interactions at two distinct frequencies of chair rotation (0.2 and 0.8 Hz) in combination with a single velocity of optokinetic stimulus (36 /s). As controls for the visual-vestibular interactions, pitch and yaw oscillation in darkness at 0.2 and 0.8 Hz without optokinetic stimulation as well as constant velocity linear optoki- netic stimulation at 18, 36, and 54 /s delivered relative to the head with the participant immobile were employed. According to studies, the respondents used a brain approach to organise their spatial orientation when they were weightless by reweighing visual, otolithic, and maybe tactile/somatic data.

KEYWORDS: Human Spaceflight, Vestibulo-ocular reflex, visual-vestibular interaction, optokinetic nystagmus.

INTRODUCTION

The current study's objective was to assess the relative contributions of the optokinetic and vestibular systems to visual-vestibular interaction in sustained weightlessness experienced during orbital flight and following re-adjustment to Earth gravity. The individuals saw a constant velocity linear optokinetic stimulus while oscillating sinusoidally. By using this technique, it was able to obtain a nystagmic response while both stimuli were coming from the same or different directions within the temporal limitations given by the restrictions of experiments in orbital flight. Tests were performed before, during, and after an eight-day space flight to measure the visual-vestibular response (VVR) to rotation of upright subjects about an earth-vertical axis combined with horizontal optokinetic stimulation and pitch VVR to rotation of subjects lying on their side about an earth-vertical axis combined with vertical optokinetic stimulation relative to the subject's head. In healthy participants, the vestibular and optokinetic systems' oculomotor outputs are linearly combined to produce a single slow phase velocity (SPV) output during yaw VVR [1,2]. However, non-linear interaction between the vestibulo-ocular reflex (VOR) and optokinetic nystagmus (OKN) has been discovered during pitch VVR, which dynamically activates the otolith organs [3-7]. In a previous work, we found that the OKN responses without rotation were higher than the SPV change caused by an optokinetic stimulus during rotation at 0.2 Hz on an earth-horizontal axis [8]. The absence of this effect during rotation along an earth-vertical axis suggests that gravity signals have an impact on pitch VVR.

EFFECTS OF WEIGHTLESSNESS ON VOR AND OKN,

An analysis of data employing a computer-controlled rotating chair and video eye movement recordings demonstrates that the VOR has been assessed during space travel. Previous space studies [12] employing manual passive body rotations and voluntary head motions have shown inconsistent results, which may be related to the diverse approaches taken. Because yaw head motions do not typically excite the otoliths on Earth, changes in the horizontal VOR were not anticipated in weightlessness. On Earth, most pitch head movements typically excite both the canals and the otoliths; in contrast, because there is no gravity in space, the vertical VOR only receives input from the canals. The vertical VOR was therefore anticipated to change under weightlessness. In a recent work [8], we found discrepancies between the earth-vertical axis pitch rotation of laying onside participants and the earth-horizontal axis pitch rotation of upright subjects. These variations imply that the provision of compensating eye movements during rotation in the pitch plane depends on graviceptive in- formation. As a result, after exposure to weightlessness, one may anticipate alterations in the vertical VOR along with adaptive changes in graviceptor function [13]. Recent tests, however, revealed no variations in the VOR gain for pitch or yaw rotation throughout the space flight. These findings might be explained by a number of different factors. First off, weightlessness may not have an impact on low frequency VOR stimulation (under 1.0 Hz), or the alterations may only manifest in the early acclimatisation period of spaceflight, and our individual was tested too late in flight (FD2 for pitch or FD3 for yaw). In earlier research, testing performed 14 hours after landing on two patients subjected to pitch oscillation at 1.0 Hz revealed considerably higher VOR gain than those performed later in the postflight period [13]. On the first several days of weightlessness, one participant who was subjected to pitch oscillation at 0.2 Hz had a reduced VOR gain [14]. Additionally, because subjects were instructed to visualise a wall-fixed target, the response was likely too high to detect an increase in VOR gain caused by changes in otolith signals. As a result, the instruction used in the current study may not have been appropriate for observing such an increase. Thirdly, it's plausible that the eccentric rotation forces we experienced during our rotation tests—particularly the tangential ones—provided enough of a dynamic otolith stimulus to keep the pitch VOR from changing much. Last but not least, one could contend that the stimulus was less likely to cause changes in the VOR as a function of flight than if used earth-horizontal rotation during ground testing [8] because the rotation about an earth-vertical axis used in this paradigm is not changing head position relative to gravity. Throughout the course of the flight, no noticeable variations in the horizontal or vertical OKN SPV were seen, and the vertical OKN SPV asymmetry remained constant. Both pre- and postflight alterations in HOKN responses were not seen in early Shuttle programme experiments on 16 American crew members [15]. In contrast to other research [14,16] that had found declines in OKN performance during the initial days of exposure to weightlessness, there have been no changes in vertical OKN SPV while in flight.

WEIGHTLESSNESS' IMPACT ON VISUAL-VESTIBULAR INTERACTION

According to studies, there is no difference between preflight control settings and the OKN SPV and bias during yaw VVR during or after flight. Changes in bias across flight phases during pitch VVR were also not systematically altered. The results are different for the two frequencies investigated, though: during pitch VVR at 0.2 Hz, bias and OKN SPV were significantly different in late inflight and early postflight compared to preflight. The VVR modulation SPV remained constant at this frequency during the voyage. On the other hand, during pitch VVR at 0.8 Hz, no changes in bias were found, but a greater suppression of the vestibular component of the VVR was shown early inflight compared to preflight and less VOR suppression was seen early postflight.

The alterations in the optokinetic component seen at 0.2 Hz post-flight are consistent with discoveries obtained following orbital flight of a greater role for vision in producing felt body tilt and self-motion. This contrasts with the apparent decline in vision's contribution to the VVR in late flight. The fact that significant changes occurred during the visual-vestibular interaction trials in weightlessness suggests a potential adaptation in the way the various signals are being combined and/or a non-linearity in the visual-vestibular system, even though no changes were noticed in either the VOR or OKN when tested separately. Additionally, since the OKN is driven by retinal slip, which varies across the OKN and VVR tests, this distinction may help to explain why the two tests' various visual contributions are different. The visual stabilisation would ideally be accomplished at the maximum tested frequency (0.8 Hz) by suppressing the VOR in order to prevent the scenario where the eyes move faster than the stimulus itself. Once more, the disparate outcomes with these two frequencies may be related to the outcomes of the eccentric rotation paradigm that was employed in our investigation. Particularly, the tangential acceleration's magnitude varied between 0.8 Hz and 0.2 Hz (peak at 0.24 g versus 0.06 g, respectively). The synergy between canals and otoliths was disturbed in weightlessness, which may explain why the variability of the VVR was greater during pitch rotation than during yaw rotation [20]. A general hypersensitivity would be carried over to early postflight reactions to acceleration, according to the theory that spaceflight would modify the otoliths' sensitivity [17,19]. The brain may also misinterpret information from the otoliths. Graviceptors' interpretation of tilt signals is less meaningful when a person is not carrying any weight. As a result, the brains would construe all graviceptor information to indicate translation during weightlessness adaptation [21]. Early postflight investigations showing altered perception [21], oculomotor responses [13,22], and posture [23] provide support for the tilt-translation reinterpretation concept.

CONCLUSION

So it would seem to reason that the absence of otolith signals in weightlessness would have an impact on both yaw and pitch responses. Since the reactions in yaw remained unaffected during the mission, factors other than the otoliths are likely responsible for the VVR SPV's postflight nonlinear response. The slower VVR SPV during pitch motion is unlikely to be caused by changes in the vertical semicircular canal inputs because the pitch VOR SPV in darkness remained constant throughout the flight. The lack of gravity affects several sensory systems, not only the otoliths; body rotation also stimulates internal somatosensory signals and contact (proprioceptive and tactile) stimuli. It has been established that these signals contributed to the formation of oculomotor responses [26] and the sense of spatial orientation [24,25], and that spaceflight had an impact on their sensitivity. The differences in the stimulation of contact cues on Earth and in space, particularly during rotation in pitch, may account for the alterations noticed during and immediately after flight. The observed variation during early postflight testing may be due to an adjustment to weightlessness that alters the sensitivity of surface somatosensory stimuli. The inflight and postflight differences between pitch and yaw rotation might also be explained by the adaptive changes in otolithic and somatic graviceptor sensitivity, which are likewise activated differently on Earth and in space due to the subject's head rotating in an eccentric posture. Last but not least, there may be a connection between space motion sickness and some in-flight and early post-flight adjustments in visual-vestibular interaction.

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