Treadmill training can be used to help people with Parkinson's disease achieve better walking movements, say researchers. In a systematic review of the evidence, Cochrane Researchers concluded treadmill training could be used to improve specific gait parameters in Parkinson's patients.

Gait hypokinesia, characterised by slowness of movement, is one of the main movement disorders that affects Parkinson's patients and can have a major impact on quality of life. More recently, health professionals have started incorporating exercise into treatment regimes as a useful complement to traditional drug therapies. Training on treadmills is one option that may help to improve movement.

The researchers analysed data from eight trials including 203 patients for the review, published in The Cochrane Library. They compared treadmill training versus no treadmill training, using effects on walking speed, stride length, number of steps per minute (cadence) and walking distance to measure improvement in gait. Treadmill training had a positive impact on each of these measurements, apart from cadence.

“Treadmill training appears to be a safe and effective way of improving gait in patients with Parkinson's disease,” said lead researcher Jan Mehrholz, of the Wissenschaftliches Institut in Kreischa, Germany. “Crucially, we saw very few adverse effects or drop outs in patients given this type of rehabilitation therapy.”

However, the researchers say the findings must be treated with care as they are based on a limited number of small trials. “There is still a need for larger trials to establish if treadmill training can be safely used as a routine therapy for Parkinson's patients,” said Merholz. “We also need to answer basic questions about how long the benefits last and what a good training programme should consist of. For instance, how often and how long should patients train for?”

BELL’S PALSY: STUDY CALLS FOR RETHINK OF CAUSE AND TREATMENT

Drugs widely prescribed to treat facial paralysis in Bell’s palsy are ineffective and are based on false notions of the cause of the condition, according to Cochrane Researchers. They say research must now focus on discovering other potential causes and treatments.

Between 11 and 40 people in every 100,000 are affected by the condition, which causes paralysis on one side of the face. Paralysis is usually temporary, but a third of people suffer ongoing problems including facial disfigurement, pain and psychological difficulties.

Antiviral medications are widely prescribed to treat the condition, because studies have indicated that Bell’s palsy may be associated with the same virus that causes cold sores (herpes simplex). Previous Cochrane Systematic Reviews did not find sufficient evidence to determine whether or not antiviral medications are effective.

In the current review, the researchers considered data from seven trials that together include 1,987 people. Antivirals were no more effective than placebo. Antivirals were also significantly less effective than steroid drugs called corticosteroids which will be the subject of another Cochrane Review in progress.

“The evidence from this review shows that antivirals used for herpes simplex offer no benefit for people with Bell’s palsy. These results cast doubt on research that suggests herpes simplex causes the condition,” said Pauline Lockhart, who is based at the Centre for Primary Care and Population Research at the University of Dundee. “In view of this, further research should be aimed at discovering alternative causes and treatments.”

“It is worth pointing out that a 10 day course of the antivirals often prescribed for Bell’s palsy can cost in excess of £10 in the UK. Obviously widespread prescription of drugs that we know do not work is a waste of resources.”