

Featured Article

The efficacy of 7-week cognitive training in patients with mild to moderate cognitive impairment, no dementia (the Cog-VACCINE study): A randomized controlled trial

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Introduction: Evidence for the efficacy of cognitive training in patients with mild to moderate cognitive impairment, no dementia is still lacking. Methods: A randomized, active controlled design; in multidomain, adaptive, computerized cognitive training for 30 min, 5 days/week for 7 weeks. Age, gender, included global cognitive function and executive function (primary outcome) and brain functional connectivity and neural change (secondary outcome). Results: Sixty patients were randomized across the medical center in Beijing. At the end of the intervention, the cognitive training group showed significant improvement in Montreal Cognitive Assessment, gender-related activities of daily living (P = .013) and significant increase in functional connectivity between the left dorsolateral prefrontal and medial prefrontal cortex, which was significant compared with Montreal Cognitive Assessment, gender change (P = .017). Discussion: Computerized cognitive training significantly improved global cognitive function, which was supported by the improved brain plasticity. Incorporation of biomarkers should be implemented in cognitive training trials.

Abstract

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Discussion: Computerized cognitive training significantly improved global cognitive function, which was supported by the improved brain plasticity. Incorporation of biomarkers should be implemented in cognitive training trials.
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Key words: Mild to moderate cognitive impairment; Computerized cognitive training; Randomized controlled trial; Brain plasticity

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1. Introduction

Vascular cognitive impairment (VCI) is one of the most common causes of acquired cognitive impairment, second only to Alzheimer's disease (AD) [1]. Vascular cognitive impairment without dementia (VCIND) refers to cognitive deficits associated with underlying vascular pathology in the absence of confirmed diagnosis of dementia. According to the China Cognition and Aging Study, VCIND accounts for 42.0% of cases of mild cognitive impairment (MCI) in China, indicating it is the most common subtype of MCI herein [2]. A 5-year follow-up of patients with VCIND revealed that 50.0% of the patients developed dementia, including AD [3].

Although VCIND is potentially a key stage at which early intervention may delay or prevent dementia, an appropriate method of intervention has yet to be developed. Recent advances in cognitive training, however, may inform a strategy to treat VCIND. In a healthy elderly population, the Advanced Cognitive Training for Independent and Vital Elderly trial led to improvement in a general domain and daily function, which was maintained at 6-month follow-up [4]. In addition, computerized cognitive training has demonstrated potential as an effective intervention for patients with MCI or early AD [5]. Despite the promise of such findings, a few caveats have been allocated to nonpharmacological approaches to treating dementia, including cognitive training, such as the development of pharmacological disease-modifying therapies [6]. Evidence for the efficacy of cognitive training in patients with VCIND is consequently lacking. Considering the significance of the etiology of VCIND, each method of data on the efficacy of intervention is likely to be specific to VCIND subtype.

The present study focused on the most common subtype of the disease, VCIND caused by bilateral chemical, metabolic, electrolyte, and/or hormonal abnormalities, a relatively homogeneous feature under a stable age condition for intervention. We conducted a randomized, active-controlled trial to determine the efficacy of a 7-week multidomain, adaptive, computerized cognitive training regimen in patients with bilateral VCIND (the Cog-VACCINE study). As executive dysfunction is the primary impairment associated with bilateral VCIND [7], we used the Trail Making Test (TMT) in tandem with a cognitive functional measure, the Montreal Cognitive Assessment (MoCA) as an additional primary outcome to confirm whether cognitive training could enhance executive dysfunction in patients with bilateral VCIND. Observed alleviation of cognitive dysfunction would likely be accounted for by changes in brain plasticity [8], including increased gray matter volume, improved white matter integrity, and changes in neural functional connectivity. To assess these secondary outcomes and elucidate the mechanism underlying a potential effect of cognitive training, we performed structural magnetic

resonance imaging (MRI) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI).

2. Methods

2.1. Study Design

The present randomized, active-controlled clinical trial was conducted in accordance with both the CONSORT statement and the CONSORT statement for nonpharmacological intervention. Participants with bilateral VCIND were recruited from Hubei Province, Xianwu Hospital; Beijing Fuying Hospital; and Fuxing Hospital, Capital Medical University. All participants provided written informed consent. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Xianwu Hospital, Capital Medical University (2015010). The trial was registered under ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT02640716) and its protocol has been published previously [9].

2.2. Participants

The diagnosis of VCIND was based on evidence of both cognitive impairment without dementia and metabolic, electrolyte, and/or hormonal abnormalities, confirmed by a complete blood count, panel including hematology, and chemistry, including the following inclusion criteria: (1) living in Hubei Province with a continuous residence (>4 days/week); (2) complain and/or informally report of cognitive impairment in daily life and/or in the cognitive domain with a duration of at least 3 months; (3) according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition, the patients were neither normal nor demented as indicated by a clinical dementia rating of ≥ 0.5 on at least one domain, a global score of ≤ 0.5 , and a Mini-Mental State Examination score of ≥ 20 (primary school) or ≥ 24 (junior school or above); and (4) no mild or slightly impaired daily living activities defined by a global score of ≤ 1.5 for the functional clinical dementia rating domain (home and hobby, community affairs, and personal care). We excluded participants who exhibited any condition that would preclude completion of neuropsychological testing or who had bilateral VCIND with a history of affective disorder.

The MRI-based inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) multiple (≥ 3) periaxial bilateral infarcts (3–20 mm in diameter) with/without white matter lesions of any degree of mode a-e-2, or white matter lesions (score of ≥ 2 according to the Fazekas rating scale [10]) with/without bilateral infarcts; (2) absence of cerebral atrophy, hydrocephalus, or white matter lesions with specific causes (e.g., multiple sclerosis); and (3) no hippocampal or entorhinal cortex atrophy (score of zero according to the medial temporal lobe atrophy scale of Scheltens [11]).

Exclusion criteria included the following: (1) severe aphasia or other factors that might preclude completion of

ne op ychological a; e; men; o MRI; (2) clinically ; igned gā oin e inal, enal, hepa ic, e pi a o y, o o he : y. emic dī ea e ; and (3) o he dī o de: o : e of medica ion ha migh affec cogni i e f nc ion .

2.3. B . . .

The pa icipan; we e andomly a; igned o aining o ac i e con ol g o p. The pe; onnel in ol ed in cond c ing he ; dy and da a analy; i; we e ma ked o he pa ien andomiza ion. S dy pa icipan; , hei ca egi e , and all a; e; o; we e blinded o ea men a; ignmen h o gho he; dy.

2.4. P

Pa ien; in he in e en ion g o p ecei ed a comp e ized, m lidomain, adap i e aining p og am fo 7 week . The aining domain; incl ded p oce; ing; peed, a en ion, pe cep ion, long- e m memo y, wo king memo y, calc la ion, exec i e con ol, ea oning, and p oblem ; ol ing. The igo wi h which each domain wa ained diffe ed acco ding o each a k and info med he g o ping of he a k . Pa icipan; we e eq i ed o comple e 30 min of aining pe day (fi e 2-min a k comple ed h ice), 5 day; a week. Wi hin each a k, high acc cy (>80%) wa eq i ed o pg ade o he nex diffic l y le el.

The ac i e con ol g o p ecei ed fi e p oce; ing; peed and a en ion a k , wh o d a ion o aled o 30 min each aining day. Howe e , he e a k we e : e o a fixed, p ima y diffic l y le el ac o; he; dy.

The aining of all pa icipan; wa comple ed a home and ; pe i ed by an independen ne ologi o e he In e ne (www.66nao.com) o g a an ee he f lfillmen of he aining.

The in e en ion began di ec ly af e andomiza ion. All he o come we e a; e; ed a he ba eline, end of in e en ion, and 6 mon h af e andomiza ion o mea e long- e m e ilience of he effec . Fo he de ail of he in e en ion ;, ee [Me hod](#) in S pplemen a y Ma e ial .

2.5. O

The p ima y o come mea e we e global cogni i e f nc ion, mea ed by MoCA, and exec i e f nc ion, mea ed by TMT B-A; bo h we e cen ally a; e; ed.

Ba ed on p e io; : die , we hypo he ized ha cogni i e aining co ld enhance f nc ional and; c al connec i i y and/o local mo phome y. The ; econda y o come of he p e en ; dy he efo e incl ded; c al and f nc ional indice; he g ay-ma e ol me of he hippocamp ; , a key b ain; c e linked wi h memo y impai men [12]; and whi e-ma e (WM) in eg i y, which

Fi he ; Z an fo ma ion co ela ion coefficien; we e hen ex ac ed fo each pai in each ime poin and ; ed a inp ; fo he co e ponding linea mixed effec model .

2.7. S / . . / / /

All da a we e analyzed acco ding o in en - o- ea p inciple . The effec; of cogni i e aining on ne op ychological ; co e and MRI da a we e examined ; ing linea mixed effec model ne ed wi hin indi id a . Time wa a; igned a he epea ed a iable. G o p, ime, and g o p-by- ime we e incl ed a fixed effec; . We analyzed he change in he ne op ychological ; co e and MRI da a f om he ba eline o he end of in e en ion and f om ba eline o 6-mon h follow- p. A ; a i ; ically ; igned diffence (wo ailed, $P < .05$) fo any of he wo p ima y o come a he end of he in e en ion wo ld be con ide ed a p elimina y e idence of efficacy. Co ela ion analy e be ween ; igned b ain f ncional change and ne op ychological ; co e we e hen pe fo med o explo e a po enial ne al mechani m fo cogni i e f ncional change .

3. Results

3.1. P / . . . / ' / / . . .

Pa icipan; we e en olled f om Decembe 22, 2015 h o gh No embe 7, 2016. The la follow- p mea emen; we e ob ained in May 8, 2017. The flow of pa icipan; h o gh he ; dy i ; hown in Fig. 1. A o al of 212 indi id a f om he ne ology and ge ia ic clinic; we e incl ded and a; e; ed fo eligibili y. Of he e, 152 we e excl ded and he p e en ; dy he efo e en olled a o al of 60 pa ien; . They we e andomly a; igned o he cogni i e aining o ac i e con ol g o p. A o al of 54 pa icipan; (27 in each g o p) fini hed he ial wi h good compliance. A o al of 44 pa icipan; (23 in he aining g o p and 21 in he ac i e con ol g o p) comple ed he 6-mon h follow- p. Of he 16 pa icipan; (26.7%) who wi hd ew f om he ; dy, fi e epo ed heal h i; e; , fo epo ed ime con ain; , fi e we e di; a i ; fied, and wo epo ed pe; onal i; e . Ba eline cha ac e i ; ic and ne op ychological a; e; men da a a e; hown in Table 1. We fo nd no g o p diffence in age; ex, o d a ion of ed ca ion. Excep fo immedia e call, he ne op ychological e ing; co e we e ma ched be ween he wo g o p . All pa icipan; comple ed mo e han 90% of he aining eq i men . The e wa no; igned g o p diffence in boh aining day; ($P = .167$) and aining ime pe day ($P = .134$) (Table 1).

3.2. P / . . / / /

The change f om he ba eline o he end of he 7-week in e en ion and f om he ba eline o he end of he 6-mon h follow- p fo he p ima y o come a e; hown in

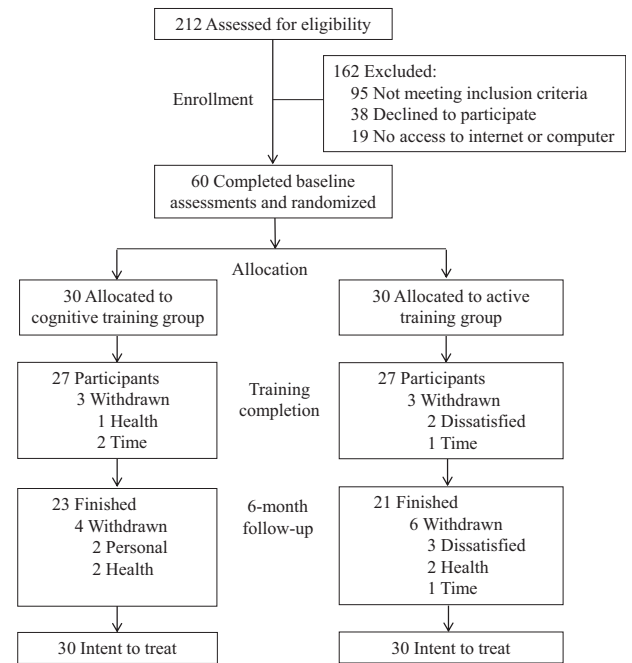


Fig. 1. The flowcha fo he Cog-VACCINE; dy.

Fig. 2 and Table 2. The e wa a; igned g o p \times ime in e ac ion in MoCA a he end of he in e en ion pe iod. Af e 7 week; , MoCA had ; igned ly imp o ed in he cogni i e aining g o p (f om 21.87 o 25.22) ela i e o

Table 1
Ba eline cha ac e i ; ic and aining adhe ence of he wo g o p

Variable	Training group (n = 30)	Action control group (n = 30)
Age, y	63.9 (7.9)	64.9 (6.6)
Female	12 (40.0%)	8 (26.7%)
Education, y	10.8 (3.5)	10.0 (2.8)
MoCA	21.9 (3.8)	21.2 (3.8)
ADL	21.7 (3.1)	21.5 (2.8)
Digi ; pan fo wa d	7.4 (1.6)	7.2 (1.1)
Digi ; pan backwa d	4.3 (1.5)	4.2 (1.1)
BNT	22.2 (3.7)	23.4 (3.6)
WHO-UCLA AVLT		
Immediate call	22.9 (5.8)	19.2 (6.7)
Delayed call	7.3 (2.7)	6.3 (3.3)
Recognition	10.9 (2.7)	9.9 (2.9)
TMT B-A	74.0 (56.6)	77.0 (65.3)
Hachin ki i chemic Scale	3.5 (3.0)	2.3 (2.7)
NPI*	3.9 (3.9)	2.7 (4.4)
GDS	8.9 (6.7)	7.4 (5.7)
Training day; (day;)	34.0 (1.0)	33.6 (1.1)
Training ime/day (min e;)	29.2 (1.9)	28.3 (2.1)

Abb e ia ion : MoCA, Mon eal Cogni i e A; e; men; ADL, ac i i e; of daily li ing; BNT, Bon Naming Te; ; WHO-UCLA AVLT, WHO-UCLA A di o y Ve bal Lea ning Te; ; TMT B-A, Tail Making Te; B-A; NPI, Ne op ychia ic In on y; GSD, Ge ia ic Dep e; ion Scale.

*Tho gh he da a e no nally di ; b ed, he mean and; anda d de ia ion of; co e a e ep e en ed; ame a in p e io; e ea ch. Mann-Whi ney e; ; we e ; ed o compa e g o p diffence in he o al NPI; co e.

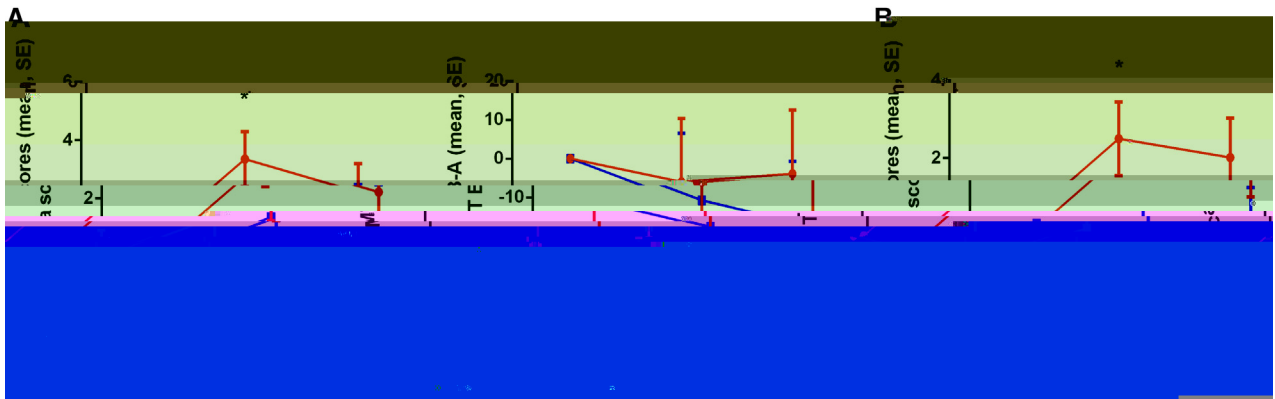


Fig. 2. Training effect on cognitive function. (A) Training effect on primary outcome (MoCA and TMT B-A), showing a significant increase in MoCA and a decrease in the error rate in the cognitive training group. (B) Training effect on the BNT, showing a significant increase by the end of the intervention in the training group. *Main effect; significant group \times time effect. Red line represents the training group, and the blue line represents the active control group. Abbreviations: MoCA, Montreal Cognitive Assessment; TMT B-A, Trail Making Test B-A; BNT, Boston Naming Test.

the active control group (21.23 to 21.15), with an effect size of 0.637 (95% CI 0.115–1.153) compared with the control group. This difference did not persist at the 6-month follow-up. We found no significant group \times time interaction in the TMT B-A.

3.3. Secondary outcomes

Secondary outcome measures included hippocampal GM volume, WM integrity, and functional connectivity. The overall significant group \times time effect for hippocampal GM volume (Fig. 3 and Supplemental Table 1) or WM integrity (Supplemental Table 1).

Critically, at the end of the intervention, there was a significant group \times time interaction for the connectivity between the DLPFC and medial prefrontal cortex (Fig. 4). Furthermore, we found a significant increase in connectivity from baseline to the end of the intervention in the training group; this change was absent in the active control group. The enhanced connectivity across the intervention was positively correlated with MoCA change ($r = 0.463$, $P = .017$) in the training group but not in the active control group ($r = 0.08$, $P = .68$). No significant group \times time interaction for connectivity was found between the two groups at the 6-month follow-up (Supplemental Table 2).

For other neuropsychological measures, a significant group \times time interaction was observed in the BNT (Fig. 2) at the end of the intervention (effect size = 0.560, 95% CI 0.042–1.074, $P = .028$); this finding had also been reported by the 6-month follow-up. No significant group \times time interaction was observed in the activities of daily living, ADL, Verbal Learning Test, Digit Span, Neuropsychiatric Inventory, or Geriatric Depression Scale.

3.4. Adverse events

No study-related adverse events were reported in either the cognitive training or active control group.

4. Discussion

VCIND features potentially an effective point at which intervention may delay or prevent dementia. The Cog-VACCINE study, the first randomized controlled trial to investigate the efficacy of computerized, multidomain, adaptive cognitive training in patients with prodromal VCIND. The strength of the present study included its active control design and use of both neuropsychological evaluation and MRI and fMRI outcomes.

Concerning primary outcome, we found that at the active control condition, cognitive training led to a significant improvement in global cognitive function, as measured by MoCA, but not in executive function, as measured by TMT B-A, by the end of the 7-week intervention. This is consistent with findings from a recent meta-analysis of computerized cognitive training [5]: although computerized cognitive training affected small-to-moderate improvements in the global cognition of patients with mild cognitive impairment, the meta-analysis reported a lack of efficacy on executive function. This is further endorsed by another meta-analysis of 16 studies, which showed a small but significant effect of cognitive training among MCI patients; however, 13 of them failed to find a significant effect of cognitive training on executive function [20]. Small sample size, inadequate training of executive processes may account for the non-significant effect in the present study. Although processing speed, inhibitory control, and attention were included in our multidomain training paradigm, the inclusion of more executive tasks may have yielded longer gains in executive function. The limited ability of the elderly participants, particularly those with relatively more severe cognitive impairment, to benefit from trained or untrained cognitive domains provide an alternative explanation [21].

For secondary outcome, we found that at the end of hippocampal GM volume decline in the active control group,

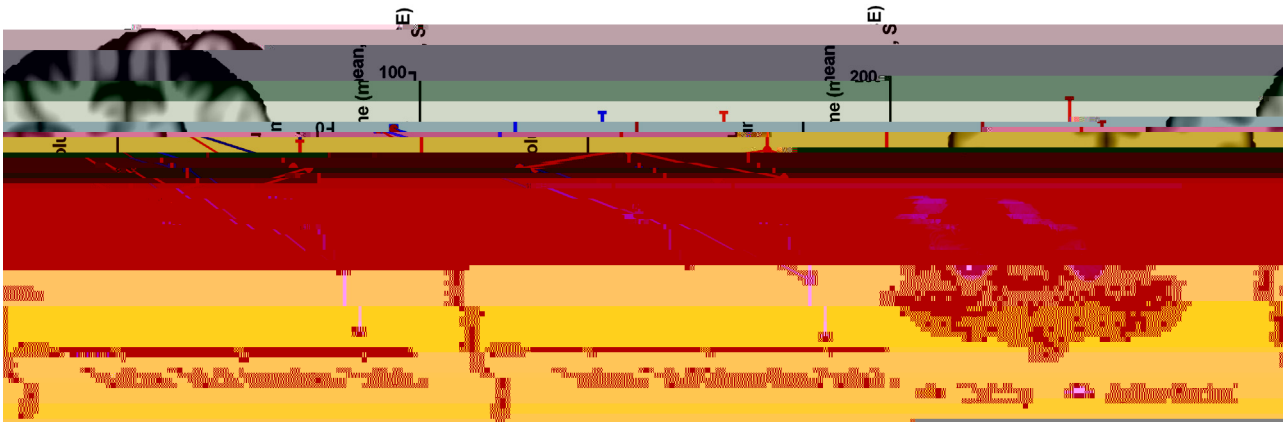


Fig. 3. Training effect on the hippocampal volume. The hippocampus was defined by FSL-in-house edge detection and segmentation toolbox (FIRST) following guidelines from FSL (<http://fsl.fmrib.ox.ac.uk>). No significant training effect on hippocampal volume was found in either hemisphere. Red lines represent the cognitive training group, and the blue lines represent the active control group.

no significant group \times time interaction was found. Similarly, in line with a recent study showing that cognitive training in MCI induced no improvement in baseline cognitive function [22], no training effect on WM integrity was found [23]. The cognitive training group did, however, exhibit significant increases in functional connectivity between the DLPFC.L and medial prefrontal cortex by the end of the intervention. Evidence from AD studies showed that the association between the DMN and ECN found in healthy adults was diminished in MCI and AD patients [14]. In agreement with the study found in the healthy elderly [15] and AD patients [24], our study suggests that this connectivity can be rebuilt by cognitive training [25]. Moreover, the connectivity change was significantly correlated with MoCA change, that is, a stronger association connectivity was linked with larger MoCA performance improvement in the training group than in the active control group. This in-network connectivity

change may suggest improvement in baseline cognitive function. The change in both MoCA and functional connectivity did appear a 6-month follow-up, possibly on account of the training duration having been too short to yield long-term effects, or, alternatively, make decisions about the effectiveness of the training based on a single VCIND collected by an exploratory analysis, highlighting the need for replication in an independent sample. The number of cognitive training days increased over the last few years [5]. Moreover, the neuro-psychological assessment, although a common clinical benefit of intervention. However, neuro-psychological evaluation does not yield insight into concomitant underlying neuro-psychological change. Moreover, AD studies have shown that the incorporation of biomarkers, especially those affecting the underlying neuro-psychological mechanism of AD progression, of intervention, in clinical trials could help to evaluate

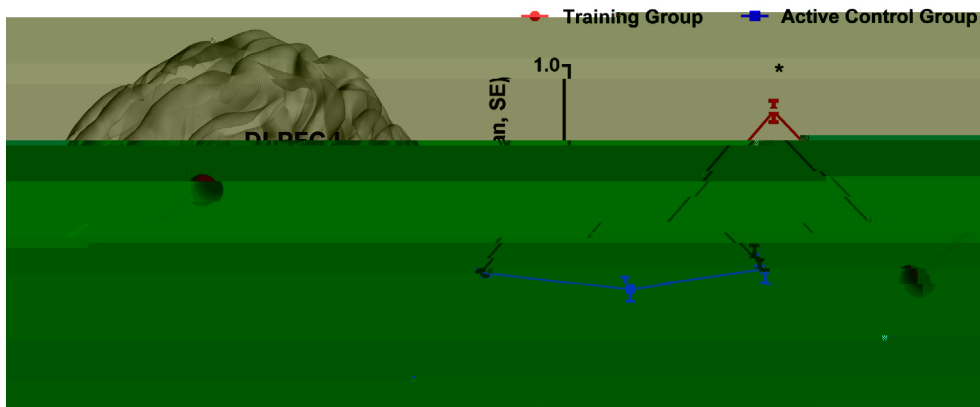


Fig. 4. Significant cognitive training effect on functional connectivity between DLPFC.L and MPFC. The association was rebuilt in the training group by the end of the 7-week intervention. *Main effect of group \times time interaction. Red lines represent the training group, and the blue lines represent the active control group. Abbreviations: DLPFC.L, left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex; MPFC, medial prefrontal cortex.

engagement and identify evidence of disease modification [26], such as CSF A β_{1-42} and amyloid PET for an amyloid hypothesis [27]. Similarly, the incorporation of biomarkers; hold aloft be encouraged in cognitive training clinical trials, a bipartisan change is expected to underlie functional gains achieved by cognitive training [28]; the combined use of MRI and fMRI is a potential proxy of change in bipartisan efficacy [29]. Recently, clinical trials on cognitive training efficacy in AD have begun to consider the use of fMRI findings as markers of underlying clinical efficacy [24]. We hypothesize that MRI and fMRI indices predictively find to be associated with cognitive decline in dementia conversion; secondary outcome in the present study. We found that cognitive training increased functional connectivity between the DMN and ECN, which was significantly correlated with improvement in global cognitive function. Overall, the effects of cognitive training on cognitive decline; particularly in AD [30] but also in VCIND.

In addition to MoCA and TMT B-A, we analyzed the effect of intervention on the cognitive domain. Overall, it showed that cognitive training significantly improved language function as measured by BNT. While one meta-analysis reported that cognitive training had a beneficial effect on language function [20], another meta-analysis reported null findings on language function in patients with MCI [5]. Although these two meta-analyses had different levels of accuracy, they had similar effect sizes for language function (Hedges' $g = 0.511$ and 0.41 , respectively). The inconsistency level, a probably due to the high heterogeneity ($I^2 = 80.69\%$ for the null finding). However, in patients with cognitive impairment; specifically, computerized training improved global function as well as the BNT score [31], which supported the present finding.

Although cognitive training affected a significant improvement on MoCA, BNT, and in the network connectivity after the 7-week intervention, the improvement did appear by the 6-month follow-up. Regarding the efficacy of cognitive training gains, the literature is inconsistent. One previous investigation found that although cognitive training prevented memory decline of MCI patients during a 6-month intervention period, it had no impact by the 18-month follow-up [32]. By contrast, the Advanced Cognitive Training for Independence and Vital Elderly trial showed that, in cognitively normal older adults, 10–14 weeks of cognitive training with booster training indicated significant improvement in the trained domain; persisted up to 5–10 years [4]. Considered in the context of our findings, the maintenance of a training effect is likely among those with some degree of cognitive impairment. For bicoastal VCIND patients, our significant cognitive improvement, consistent with training is recommended.

The present study is a pilot study of a 7-week cognitive training program for patients with bicoastal VCIND. First, the significant maintenance of the improvement by the 6-month follow-up suggests that a longer intervention period is needed to observe potentially sustainable benefits of cognitive training. Second, although highly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria for bicoastal VCIND, we cannot rule out the possibility of mixed pathology, such as concomitant AD. By excluding individuals with indications of atrophy of the hippocampus on the initial cohort, we likely excluded individuals with advanced AD pathology; however, potential age-related amyloid load could not be excluded. Future designs targeting AD biomarkers are needed to rigorously evaluate the efficacy of cognitive training in patients with bicoastal VCIND and otherwise heterogeneous pathologies, especially differentially on cognitive training. Third, the fully randomized controlled study on the efficacy of computerized cognitive training in bicoastal VCIND, except for the mostly reduced primary outcome-global cognitive function, we also explored the training effect on the executive function in bicoastal VCIND. The effects of both MoCA and TMT B-A were a primary outcome. In the event of an ambiguous outcome of the study, it would have been preferable to declare a priori hypothesis regarding a specifically significant difference in any of the primary outcome would provide elimination of evidence of efficacy.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the computerized, multidomain, adaptive cognitive training improved global cognitive function and the connection between two cognitive-related networks, the DMN and ECN, in patients with bicoastal VCIND. The significant correlation between the observed connection and improved global cognitive function suggested that biomarkers of functional connectivity and proxy effects of bipartisan efficacy; hold to be incorporated as outcome in cognitive training trials. Although the efficacy and good safety profile of cognitive training in patients with bicoastal VCIND recommend its adoption, more clinical trials are needed for the evidence.

Acknowledgments

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Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.jalz.2019.01.009>.

RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

1. Sy: ema ic e iew: We: ea ched [ClinicalT iał .go](#) and WHO: In e na ional Clinical T ial Ređi y Pla fo m p o A g: 31, 2018, o iden ify andomized con olled iał . Sea ch e m we e “ a c la cogni i e impai men no demen ia OR mild a c la cogni i e impai men OR mild a c la cogni i e di o de ” AND “cogni i e aining OR cogni i e in e en ion.” The p e en : dy wa he only iden ified andomized con olled ial.
2. In e p e a ion: While he foc : of demen ia iał ha : hif ed o p e ymp oma ic and p edemen ia: age , m ch le: effo ha been applied o pa ien: wi h a c la cogni i e impai men no demen ia, which i a po en ial key: age o delay o p e en demen ia. Thi app oach i : imila o a nonpha macological in e en ion, a ac able and fea ible way o imp o e he q ali y of life of pa ien: wi h cogni i e di o de: . Excep fo he efficacy of comp e ized cogni i e aining in: bco ical a c la cogni i e impai men no demen ia, he p e en : dy ał o p o ide e idence fo he inco po a ion of b ain pla ici y bio- ma ke: in o cogni i e aining iał .
3. F e di ec ion: La ge, longe - e m iał a e needed fo f he e idence.

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