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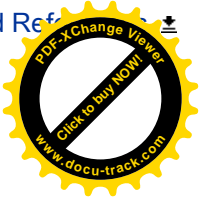
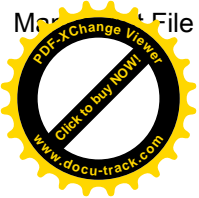
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# Differential Control of Blood Flow in Masseter and Biceps Brachii Muscles During Stress

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## ABSTRACT

1 *Objective:* Stress and sympathetic activity have been implicated in the development  
2 of muscle pain, also in head and neck muscles. However, sympathetic outflow may  
3 differentially affect different body areas, also depending on the type of stressor. To  
4 compare sympathetic hemodynamic effects in masticatory and limb muscles in  
5 response to different stressors.  
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7  
8 *Design:* Twelve healthy participants were subjected to a randomized series of  
9 stressors, including cold pressor test (CPT), mental arithmetic test, apnea, isometric  
10 handgrip (IHG) and post-handgrip muscle ischemia (PHGMI), while in the supine  
11 position. Spatially-resolved near-infrared spectroscopy was used to measure relative  
12 changes in blood volume and oxygenation (TOI) of the resting masseter and biceps  
13 muscles. Cardiac output, heart rate and arterial blood pressure (ABP) were also  
14 monitored.  
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18 *Results:* Except apnea, all tests increased ABP. Different response patterns were  
19 observed in the 2 muscles: TOI significantly increased during contralateral IHG ( $1.24$   
20  $\pm 1.17\%$ ) but markedly decreased during CPT ( $-4.84 \pm 4.09\%$ ) and PHGMI ( $-6.65 \pm$   
21  $5.31\%$ ) in the biceps muscle, while exhibiting consistent increases in the masseter  
22 ( $1.88 \pm 1.85\%$ ;  $1.60 \pm 1.75\%$ ;  $1.06 \pm 3.29\%$ , respectively) ( $p < 0.05$ ).  
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25 *Conclusions:* The results allow us to infer differential control of blood flow in head and  
26 limb muscles. In general, the masseter appears more prone to dilatation than the  
27 biceps, exhibiting opposite changes in response to painful stimuli (CPT and PHGMI).  
28 Several mechanisms may mediate this effect, including reduced sympathetic outflow  
29 to the extracranial vasculature of the head, generally exposed to lower hydrostatic  
30 loads than the rest of the body.  
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### 34 *Keywords:*

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36 Blood flow, oxygenation, masseter, biceps, muscle, stress  
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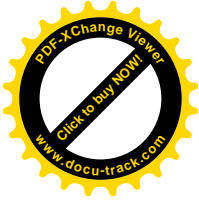
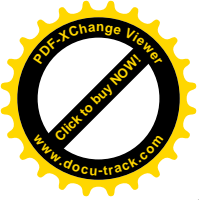
## 1 Introduction

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2 Sympathetic activation generally increases heart rate and contractility as well as the  
3 total peripheral resistance, which then results in increased arterial blood pressure  
4 (ABP). However, different patterns of sympathetic activation may be elicited by  
5 different stressors (stressor-specificity), (Pacák & Palkovits, 2001; Roatta et al., 2011)  
6 with differential activation to the various organs and tissues (Vissing, 1997). In  
7 addition, there is evidence that sympathetic outflow also varies depending on the body  
8 area, e.g., with upper and lower limbs. In some cases, opposite vascular effects have  
9 been reported, e.g., during unilateral handgrip, dilatation in the contralateral forearm  
10 and vasoconstriction in legs has been reported, and similar effects were observed  
11 during cognitive tasks (Eklund & Kaijser, 1976; Rusch et al., 1981). Along the same  
12 line, Carter et al. (Carter et al., 2005) report a less marked dilatation in legs than in  
13 arms during mental stress. It was hypothesized that these differences in the vascular  
14 control between arms and legs could be related to the different hydrostatic gradients  
15 that affect blood vessels in the two areas (Jacob et al., 2000).

16  
17 In this respect, the head is a peculiar body area: because of its position above  
18 heart level (whenever the body is sitting or standing), its vascular networks are  
19 affected by low hydrostatic load and lower perfusion pressure, compared to other body  
20 regions. Interestingly, a different vascular control has been reported for cutaneous  
21 tissues of the head as compared to the limbs'. In general, the studies evidenced  
22 dilatatory rather than constrictory responses in the facial districts, e.g., during verbal  
23 tasks, public speech and mental stress (Vassend & Knardahl, 2005). Whether a  
24 differentiated hemodynamic response to stress also concerns the skeletal muscles of  
25 the head is unclear. Only a few studies investigated vascular stress responses in head  
26 muscles, reporting an increase in tissue oxygenation in the masseter muscle during  
27 both mental stress (Hidaka et al., 2004b; Tanosoto et al., 2012) and cold pressor test  
28 (Maekawa et al., 1998). However, standard NIRS measurement could have been  
29 affected by the concomitant increase in skin blood flow, as has now been  
30 demonstrated in many different experimental conditions (Canova et al., 2011; Messere  
31 & Roatta, 2013; Tew et al., 2010). Moreover, sporadic contractions and increase in  
32 muscle tone, which are a specific component of the stress response (Hidaka et al.,  
33 2004a, 2004b; Sjøogaard et al., 2000) may affect hemodynamics in the relevant  
34 muscles.

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36 To our knowledge, comparative studies based on the simultaneous recording from  
37 head and limb muscles have never been reported in humans and the few available  
38 animal studies do not clarify the issue, reporting no difference in the vascular response  
39 of masseter and quadriceps muscles to adrenaline continuous infusion, (Terakawa &  
40 Ichinohe, 2012) but stronger vascular constriction in the quadriceps, in response to  
41 hypercapnia (Ichinohe et al., 2020).

42  
43 The study aimed to test the hypothesis that blood flow of head and limb muscles  
44 is differentially controlled, in a stressor-dependent way. Major confounding factors  
45 were addressed as follows: 1) continuous surface electromyography (EMG)  
46 monitoring was implemented, to detect any possible involuntary muscle contraction;  
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1 2) Spatially-resolved near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS), was employed to specifically  
2 focus the measurement in the deep skeletal muscle tissue while excluding the possible  
3 influence of the cutaneous circulation; 3) systemic cardiovascular variables were  
4 monitored to check the actual extent of sympathetic activation; 4) subjects were  
5 investigated in a supine position, to exclude differences in hydrostatic gradients  
6 between head and limbs; 5) 5 different stress tests were implemented to address  
7 stressor-specificity.  
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## 10 **2 Methods**

### 11 **2.1 Subjects**

12 Twelve (9 males, 3 females) healthy volunteers (age:  $26 \pm 3$  years; weight:  $68 \pm 11$  kg;  
13 height:  $175 \pm 9$  cm) were enrolled in this study. All of them were non-obese and  
14 normotensive (resting blood pressure  $<140/90$  mmHg).  
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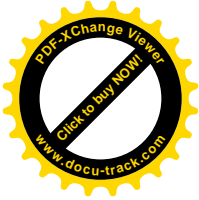
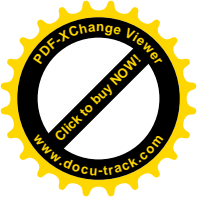
### 20 **2.2 Ethical approval**

21 This study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was  
22 approved by the Institutional Ethical Committee of the University of Turin (prot. 60195).  
23 All subjects signed informed consent before participating in the study.  
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### 27 **2.3 Measurements**

28 A continuous-wave near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS) device (NIRO-200NX,  
29 Hamamatsu Photonics, Hamamatsu, Japan) was used to measure changes in tissue  
30 haemoglobin index (THI) and tissue oxygenation index (TOI). The device implements  
31 both the classical modified Beer-Lambert method and the spatially-resolved  
32 spectroscopy (Grassi & Quaresima, 2016). Based on our previous experience we  
33 focused our attention on spatially-resolved parameters which, being less affected by  
34 cutaneous circulation, (Canova et al., 2011) provide a more specific monitoring of  
35 muscle tissue hemodynamics (Messere et al., 2018a; Messere & Roatta, 2013). In  
36 particular, the TOI estimates the percentage ratio of oxygenated to total hemoglobin.  
37 However, since NIRS cannot discriminate between myoglobin and hemoglobin, all  
38 measurements refer to the whole (myoglobin + hemoglobin) concentration (Messere  
39 et al., 2018a). In addition, THI detects changes in (hemoglobin + myoglobin)  
40 concentration. Since no change in myoglobin concentration is expected to take place  
41 in the short term it is employed to detect changes in blood volume (within the sample  
42 volume). Since this variable reveals relative changes with respect to a reference level  
43 it is generally normalized to the basal value (taken in resting conditions). The device  
44 has two probes: one was placed over the biceps brachii short head muscle of the left  
45 arm, and the other over the right superficial masseter muscle, EMG electrodes over  
46 the left masseter not leaving enough room for the NIRS probe over the same muscle  
47 (see below).  
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57 Continuous surface electromyography (EMG, Quattro, OT Bioelectronics, Turin,  
58 Italy; gain=1200; bandwidth: 10 – 500 Hz) is used to detect any possible involuntary  
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1 muscle contraction during the tests. Two differential recordings were collected from  
2 bipolar adhesive electrodes (inter-electrode distance 2.3 cm; Flab, Italy) from the left  
3 masseter and biceps brachii muscles. The electrodes were placed on the masseter  
4 symmetrically to the NIRS probe and on the biceps just aside of the NIRS probe, in  
5 both cases, the inter-electrode axis being parallel to orientation of muscle fibers.  
6

7 The HR, ABP and CO were measured by continuous finger-pulse  
8 photoplethysmography (CNAP Monitor 500, CNSystems Medizintechnik GmbH, Graz,  
9 Austria). Calibration of ABP was periodically performed using a regular pneumatic cuff  
10 at the right arm.  
11

12 Handgrip force was measured by a custom-made device based on two flexiforce  
13 sensors (Tekscan, Inc. Massachusetts, USA), previously calibrated (Testa et al.,  
14 2016).  
15

16 All signal were continuously digitally sampled (CED Micro 1401, Cambridge  
17 Electronic Design, Cambridge, UK) at 100 Hz, except EMG which was sampled at 2  
18 kHz and stored on the computer. The Spike2 software (Version 9.14, Cambridge  
19 Electronic Design, Cambridge, UK), was used for both data acquisition and analysis.  
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## 23 **2.4 Experimental procedures**

24 The experiments were performed in a quiet room with a constant ambient temperature  
25 of about 21–23°C. Before starting the recordings, the maximum voluntary contraction  
26 (MVC) has been measured and the visual feedback has been provided to the  
27 participant.  
28

29 The participants were asked to relax while staying in a supine position. After all  
30 signals reached a stable condition, a 10 mins baseline period was recorded, after  
31 which participants completed a sequence of 5 different tasks, described below.  
32

33 The subjects were periodically reminded to maintain relaxed all muscles,  
34 particularly the jaw and left arm muscles. The tasks were separated by a minimum of  
35 5-mins rest (with additional time if required) to ensure that all variables were stable  
36 before starting the next task and were performed in a randomized order, except post-  
37 handgrip ischemia, which immediately followed isometric handgrip.  
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### 44 **2.4.1 Cold pressor test (CPT)**

45 The subject was asked to immerse the right hand for 2 min into a bucket filled with  
46 cold water (8°C, measured by a digital thermometer: Omega 450-ATH, OMEGA  
47 Engineering, Stanford, USA). After the task, participants were asked to report the peak  
48 pain level experienced by the visual analogue scale: 0 corresponding to 'no pain' and  
49 10 corresponding to 'the worst pain imaginable'.  
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### 54 **2.4.2 Mental arithmetic test (MAT)**

55 The subject was asked to progressively subtract the odd numbers (1, 3, 5, etc.) from  
56 1000 for 2 min, writing each result on a paper with the right hand. One operator  
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standing behind the subject monitored the outcome, promptly asking the subject to repeat the calculation in case of a mistake.

### 2.4.3 Apnea (AP)

The subject was asked to hold their breath as long as possible. All subjects were able to sustain the apnea for at least 40 s.

### 2.4.4 Isometric handgrip (IHG)

The subject was requested to grip the handgrip dynamometer at 50% of their MVC for 1 min, with the right hand. Visual feedback of the exerted force was provided on a computer screen, a horizontal cursor placed at 50% MVC indicating the target force level.

### 2.4.5 Post-handgrip muscle ischemia (PHGMI)

Ten seconds before the cessation of the isometric handgrip, a blood pressure cuff (Gima, Gessate, Italy) was wrapped around the right arm and inflated to a supra-systolic pressure of 250 mmHg and maintained at this level for 2 min to occlude blood flow to the forearm muscles. After the task, the subject was asked to report the peak pain intensity during the test according to a visual analogue scale.

## 2.5 Data analysis and statistics

The average response to each stressor was computed for all relevant variables: ABP, HR, CO, THI and TOI and presented graphically. Stress-induced changes were evaluated by comparing the time average over the last 10 s of stress exposure with the baseline, computed over the 10 s before. Average effects for the NIRS variables were calculated as follows:  $\Delta\text{THI} = (\text{THI}_{\text{stress}} - \text{THI}_{\text{baseline}}) / \text{THI}_{\text{baseline}} * 100$ , expressed as % of baseline;  $\Delta\text{TOI} = \text{TOI}_{\text{stress}} - \text{TOI}_{\text{baseline}}$ , expressed as % of oxygenated hemoglobin. Normality of data distribution was first verified by the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Statistical significance (with familywise alpha level of 0.05) of stress-induced changes in all these variables was then assessed by Student-t and Hochberg's tests, with Dunn/Sidak alpha correction method for multiple comparisons. Differences between masseter and biceps muscles in terms of  $\Delta\text{THI}$  and  $\Delta\text{TOI}$  were tested with the same procedure. The Student-t test was used to compare basal oxygenation levels in the biceps and masseter muscles. Statistical analysis was performed using MATLAB<sup>®</sup> Version R2020b (The MathWorks, Natick, Massachusetts, USA). Data in the Results section are presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation.

## 3 Results

During basal conditions, the TOI in the masseter muscle ( $80.0 \pm 2.6$  %) was higher than in the biceps ( $76.7 \pm 4.7$  %) in 9 out of 12 subjects ( $p = 0.058$ ).

Absence of relevant signs of EMG activation during baseline intervals and during the different tasks was verified by visual inspection of the recordings. An example of

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original recordings from a representative subject during the CPT test is given in Figure 1A. As a term of comparison, EMG activation and corresponding changes in NIRS variables evoked by short voluntary isometric contractions are shown in Fig. 1B.

### 3.1 Cold pressor test (CPT)

The average response to CPT is described by the average tracings of Figure 2A, and average effects for the different variables are reported in Figure 2B. The test significantly increased ABP (from  $90.1 \pm 14.0$  to  $101.6 \pm 15.9$  mmHg,  $p < 0.05$ ) while producing a non-significant decrease in HR (from  $69.1 \pm 11.9$  to  $68.2 \pm 9.8$  bpm,  $p < 0.05$ ) and CO (from  $68.2 \pm 13.7$  to  $67.2 \pm 13.6$  dL/min,  $p < 0.05$ ).

Notably, the CPT effects on NIRS variables were opposite in the two muscles, increasing in the masseter muscle ( $\Delta$ THI:  $9 \pm 9$  %,  $P < 0.05$ ; TOI: from  $79.5 \pm 2.9$  to  $81.1 \pm 2.2$  %,  $p < 0.05$ ) and decreasing in the biceps muscle ( $\Delta$ THI:  $-2 \pm 7$  %, n.s.; TOI: from  $75.6 \pm 4.2$  % to  $70.7 \pm 4.8$  %,  $p < 0.05$ ).

### 3.2 Mental arithmetic test (MAT)

The average response to MAT (Figure 3A and B) also exhibited a significant increase in ABP (from  $84.1 \pm 15.8$  to  $98.7 \pm 20.6$  mmHg,  $p < 0.05$ ) while producing a non-significant increase in HR and CO.

The masseter muscle exhibited a significant increase in oxygenation (TOI: from  $80.5 \pm 3.1$  to  $82.5 \pm 3.6$  %,  $p < 0.05$ ) and a non-significant increase in blood volume ( $\Delta$ THI:  $5 \pm 9$  %) while non-significant changes were observed in the biceps muscle.

### 3.3 Apnea (AP)

No significant changes were exhibited by the different variables during apnea (see Figures. 4A and B), although THI showed a tendency to increase in the masseter muscle ( $\Delta$ THI:  $14 \pm 21$  %, n.s.) that was not exhibited by the biceps ( $-2 \pm 5$  %).

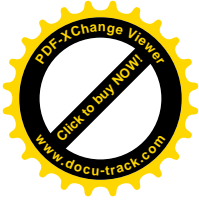
### 3.4 Isometric handgrip (IHG) and Post-handgrip muscle ischemia (PHGMI)

The average response to IHG and PHGMI is described by the average tracings of Figure 5A, and average effects for the different variables are reported in Figure 5B and C. With IHG, both HR (from  $72.4 \pm 12.8$  to  $85.5 \pm 12.6$  bpm;  $p < 0.05$ ) and in ABP (from  $86.9 \pm 21.2$  to  $106.5 \pm 22.1$  mmHg;  $p < 0.05$ ) were significantly increased. TOI similarly increased in both the masseter (from  $80.2 \pm 2.5$  to  $82.1 \pm 3.4$  %,  $p < 0.05$ ) and the biceps muscle (from  $76.5 \pm 5.0$  % to  $78.2 \pm 4.9$  %,  $p < 0.05$ ) while THI increased only in the masseter muscle ( $\Delta$ THI:  $7 \pm 7$  %,  $P < 0.05$ ) and significantly more than in the biceps muscle ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Compared to pre-IHG resting levels, PHGMI resulted in a marked increase in ABP (from  $86.9 \pm 21.2$  to  $103.0 \pm 18.1$  mmHg;  $p < 0.05$ ), accompanied by a decreasing trend in HR (from  $72.4 \pm 12.8$  to  $67.1 \pm 10.2$  bpm; n.s.) and a decrease in CO (from  $74.7 \pm 12.8$  to  $66.7 \pm 14.0$  dL/min;  $p < 0.05$ ). As with CPT, NIRS response to PHGMI produced

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1 significantly different responses in the two muscles, with significant increases in the  
2 masseter (TOI: from  $80.2 \pm 2.5\%$  to  $81.2 \pm 3.8\%$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\Delta\text{THI}$ :  $6 \pm 10\%$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) and  
3 decreases in the biceps (TOI: from  $76.9 \pm 5.0\%$  to  $70.3.2 \pm 5.5\%$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ;  $\Delta\text{THI}$ :  $-3 \pm$   
4  $7\%$ , n.s.).  
5

## 6 **4 Discussion**

7  
8 For the first time, to our knowledge, the study focused on the differential control of  
9 blood flow in head and limb muscles during stress. We hypothesized that the  
10 autonomic vascular control could be differentiated to these body areas, also  
11 depending on the type of stress.  
12

13 The results evidenced that: 1) all tests effectively activated the sympathetic  
14 nervous system as revealed by significant increases in ABP and/or HR, except apnea.  
15 2) in the masseter muscle TOI increased in all tests (although, non-significantly in  
16 apnea); 3) in the biceps muscle TOI exhibited both increases (in IHG) and marked  
17 decrease (in CPT and PHGMI) depending on the stressor. 5) THI changes were  
18 always concordant with TOI's, although generally less significant. As will be discussed  
19 below, these observations support the hypothesis that sympathetic outflow to skeletal  
20 muscles of the head and limbs is differentially controlled in a stressor-dependent way.  
21

### 22 **4.1 Interpretation of NIRS signals**

23 It is well known that NIRS does not provide a direct measurement of blood flow.  
24 However, if a condition of constant metabolism can be hypothesized (e.g., in  
25 completely relaxed muscles), changes in blood flow would be associated with  
26 concordant changes in tissue oxygenation and, consequently, changes in oxygenation  
27 may be used to detect changes in blood flow. This concept has been demonstrated in  
28 several studies in which a blood flow reduction induced by sympathetic  
29 vasoconstriction also resulted in decreased tissue oxygenation (Boushel & Piantadosi,  
30 2000; Fadel et al., 2004; Ogata et al., 2002, 2012). Conversely, the transient  
31 hyperemia produced by a short-lasting compressive stimulus, in relaxed muscles  
32 results in a consistent increase in tissue oxygenation (Messere et al., 2017, 2018b).  
33 Constriction/dilatation of blood vessels may also produce a slight reduction/increase  
34 in blood volume indices, (Ogata et al., 2002) unless this effect is hidden by a larger  
35 volume change of the venous compartment, e.g., due to vessel compression (Messere  
36 et al., 2017). Consistent with this concept, an increase in TOI was never associated  
37 with a decrease in THI, in the present study. On this basis, considering that both  
38 masseter and biceps muscles remained relaxed throughout the tests, as verified by  
39 continuous EMG monitoring, we can reasonably interpret changes in TOI as a  
40 consequence of corresponding changes in muscle blood flow. The responses to the  
41 different stressors will be here briefly individually discussed.  
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### 43 **4.2 Cold pressor test (CPT)**

44 The CPT is an established sympathetic activation test (Seals, 1991). Somatosensory  
45 stimulation induced by the cold stimulus increases blood pressure; impulses from  
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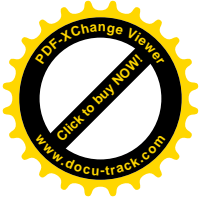


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receptors in the skin relay via afferent pathways to C1 cells in the rostral ventrolateral (RVL) reticular nucleus and are transmitted via efferent sympathetic neurons to peripheral blood vessels from thoracic spinal cord (Reis et al., 1989) evoking a general rise in total peripheral resistance with alpha-adrenergic vasoconstriction of upper and lower limbs, (Montoya et al., 1997; Wray et al., 2007) accompanied by decreased tissue oxygenation (Ogata et al., 2012). Few reports described effects of opposite signs in head muscles, i.e., increase in blood volume and oxygen saturation during CPT, suggesting increased blood flow in this area (Maekawa et al., 1998). As anticipated in the introduction the standard NIRS monitoring as used in these studies could have been affected by cutaneous circulatory changes. However, the present data are in agreement with this general picture: we confirm the occurrence of these opposite responses in head and limb muscles, consisting of increased perfusion of the masseter muscle and a strong decrease in the biceps muscle (Figure 2).

### 4.3 Mental arithmetic test (MAT)

As compared to CPT, the actively demanding situations such as information processing and problem-solving (MAT) are considered to be characterized by a beta-adrenergic dominance, i.e., they tend to elicit cardiovascular responses that are mediated by an increase in myocardial contractility and HR, increased ADR release, resulting in increased CO, with minor changes in total peripheral resistance (Goldberg et al., 1996; Montoya et al., 1997; Tidgren & Hjerdahl, 1989). Within this frame, vasodilation in skeletal muscle has also been reported (Carter et al., 2005; Linde et al., 1989; Rusch et al., 1981), besides reduced blood flow to the kidneys (Tidgren & Hjerdahl, 1989) and the skin (Marriott et al., 1990). As for the head muscles two early reports from a single group are available, based on standard Beer-Lambert NIRS, in which the effect of MAT on masseter tissue oxygenation was investigated. Again, the issue of skin contribution to the NIRS measurement is relevant, as skin blood flow is known to be affected by MAT and cognitive tasks (Drummond, 1994; Vassend & Knardahl, 2005). In the first study, an early decrease in TOI, assessed over a 10-s interval, was reported to occur in association with the beginning of sudomotor activity at the finger (Hidaka et al., 2004a). In the second study a persistent increase in TOI of the masseter muscle was observed in subjects exposed to a long-lasting (2 h) mental task, although, this stressful activity also increased basal EMG activity (significantly in the temporal muscle) (Hidaka et al., 2004b). More recently, using spatially-resolved NIRS Tanosoto et al. (Tanosoto et al., 2012) also reported increased TOI in the masseter muscle during a paced auditory mental task. The present results are compatible with the general response to MAT described above and clarify that a significant TOI increase takes place in the masseter muscle within a standard 2-min lasting test, in the absence of EMG activity, besides a non-significant increasing trend in the biceps (Figure 3).



#### 4.4 Apnea (AP)

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2 A complex circulatory response is generated by apnea, whereby the dilatory effects of  
3 hypoxia are counteracted by the constrictor sympathetic activation (Halliwill, 2003). In  
4 fact, an increased muscle sympathetic nerve activity as well as in circulating  
5 catecholamines has been reported (Leuenberger et al., 2001) along with decreased  
6 oxygenation in skeletal muscles of the limbs, (Bouten et al., 2020) while no indication  
7 about the effects on head muscles was found in the literature. In our experiments, we  
8 did not evidence a decrease in TOI in both masseter and biceps muscles, and weak  
9 and non-significant effects were reported also for the other variables. This is likely  
10 because the test was not pushed to maximal individual limits and that all responses  
11 were analysed at the shortest duration of 40 s, which certainly contributed to attenuate  
12 the effects. We only observe that a larger although a not significant increase in THI  
13 takes place in the masseter, compared to the biceps. We speculate that this is a  
14 consequence of increased venous pressure due to the increased intra-thoracic  
15 pressure provoked by the passive holding of the deep breath (similarly to the Valsalva  
16 manoeuvre). Since venous pressure would similarly affect both muscles, a larger  
17 effect in the masseter muscle could reveal a lesser constrictor tone.  
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#### 4.5 Isometric handgrip (IHG)

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27 Handgrip exercise is an established test for sympathetic activation, producing marked  
28 increases in ABP, HR, CO, and MSNA in general (Low, 2003). This results in a  
29 systematic increase in vascular resistance in muscles. However, a dilatory response  
30 is generally observed in the contralateral arm. Once attributed to sympathetic dilatory  
31 cholinergic fibers (Sanders et al., 1989) it appears now to be essentially a beta2  
32 adrenergic mechanism that also implicates endothelium-released nitric oxide (Joyner  
33 & Dietz, 2003). The description of vascular effects in head muscles during handgrip  
34 appears to be missing in the literature.  
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38 The response we observed fits with the current picture described above, in  
39 particular, the dilatory response of the contralateral arm is confirmed by the significant  
40 increase in TOI. In addition, the same response is exhibited by the masseter muscles,  
41 which also manifests an increase in THI.  
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#### 4.6 Post-handgrip muscle ischemia (PHGMI)

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47 PHGMI consistently results in a pressor response characterized by powerful peripheral  
48 vasoconstriction and decreased HR and CO (Boulton et al., 2018; Rusch et al., 1981).  
49 While tissue oxygenation decreases in the concerned muscles prior to exercise and  
50 subsequent ischemia, (Boushel & Piantadosi, 2000) the present observation of a  
51 marked TOI decrease in the contralateral biceps muscle (not concerned by the  
52 contraction and the ischemia) supports the occurrence of a general constrictor  
53 response during PHGMI, that was reported to concern both upper and lower limbs  
54 (Rusch et al., 1981). Surprisingly, this effect is not apparent in the masseter muscle,  
55 which exhibits instead a significant increase in oxygenation, again suggesting  
56 increased perfusion, during PHGMI. We further observe that the average pattern of  
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1 response to PHGMI qualitatively mimics the response to CPT. It is tempting to  
2 speculate that this represents the sympathetic response pattern to painful stimuli, even  
3 though the relevant somatosensory pathways are different for the two tests, originating  
4 mostly from cutaneous receptors for CPT, and from group III and IV muscle afferents  
5 for PHGMI. This possibility is further supported by the observation that muscle  
6 sympathetic nerve activity is not differently affected by skin or muscle pain produced  
7 by injection of hypertonic saline (Burton et al., 2009).  
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#### 10 **4.7 Peculiarity of the masseter muscle**

11 Several studies investigated the histological characteristics of jaw and limb muscles  
12 evidencing a richer composition of different fiber types, higher compartmentalization,  
13 and smaller average fiber size in the jaw than in limb muscles, which was interpreted  
14 as functional to implement a higher variability of tasks (speaking, chewing, singing,  
15 yawning, etc.), better force gradation and better adaptations to environmental  
16 constraints (English, 1985; Korfage et al., 2005; Österlund et al., 2011). One study  
17 specifically addressed differences in anatomical vascularization: capillary density was  
18 significantly higher in the head (orofacial and masseter) than in limb muscles (Stål et  
19 al., 1996). In particular, the authors found in the masseter the highest capillary density  
20 ever reported of 686-813 capillaries/mm<sup>2</sup>, which in the biceps muscle only reached  
21 440 capillaries/mm<sup>2</sup> (Stål et al., 1996). They interpreted this observation as due to a  
22 relatively higher demand of blood supply in orofacial and masticatory muscles,  
23 possibly related to 1) the high oxidative capacity of type II masseter fibers, and 2) a  
24 stronger control over facial blood flow, as may be necessary for the temperature  
25 regulation, of tissues more exposed to environmental challenges as compared to other  
26 body areas.  
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29 The presently observed weak or absent sympathetic constrictor action in the  
30 masseter muscle under a variety of stressful challenges fits with the idea that the head  
31 region is particularly protected against the risk of hypoperfusion and ischemia as  
32 indicated by histological reports.  
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35 One additional explanation could be that extracranial head districts are affected by  
36 a lower perfusion pressure, compared to other body areas situated at or below heart  
37 level, whenever the body is in an erect or sitting posture. The head is continuously  
38 exposed to this condition during the whole day, with basically the only exception of  
39 sleeping time. Increased vascularization and weakened constrictor action could be the  
40 results of an adaptation to this situation. Other data support this interpretation: 1)  
41 Increased vascularization is not limited to the jaw muscles but is shared by orofacial  
42 muscles in general, sharing the same hemodynamic situation, (Stål et al., 1996) 2) a  
43 similar difference, i.e., weaker sympathetic constrictor responses is reported in upper,  
44 compared to lower limbs, (Rusch et al., 1981) thereby indicating increased  
45 sympathetic tone to body areas affected by high hydrostatic pressure.  
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## 4.8 Mechanisms underlying differential sympathetic control

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2 Although the present study was not designed to identify the mechanisms underlying  
3 the differential sympathetic action to the two muscles, the different possibilities can be  
4 briefly discussed. While the general sympathetic action on vascular networks is known  
5 to be an alpha-adrenergic mediated vasoconstriction, a dilatatory response has often  
6 been reported in skeletal muscles and is considered to be mediated by beta-2  
7 adrenergic receptors. The alternative hypothesis of Ach-mediated dilatation (Sanders  
8 et al., 1989) has been dismissed since vascular cholinergic fibers have never been  
9 observed in human skeletal muscles (Joyner & Dietz, 2003). As such, a beta-2  
10 mediated-dilatation is likely to result from the action of circulating adrenaline (which  
11 has a higher affinity to beta2-ADR than noradrenaline) as far as the alpha-1 mediated  
12 constriction does not prevail. Exposure to a small amount of ADR produced dilatation  
13 in both masseter and quadriceps rabbit muscles, while higher doses produced  
14 vasoconstriction (Terakawa & Ichinohe, 2012). Thus, the net “beta” or “alpha” effect  
15 (Montoya et al., 1997) observed on a given muscle, may depend on several factors  
16 such as the density of beta- and alpha-ADRs in the muscle under study as well as on  
17 the relative concentrations of ADR and NA, resulting from a stressor-dependent  
18 hormonal vs. neural sympathetic outflow (Goldstein & Kopin, 2008; Roatta et al.,  
19 2011). The hyperemic responses to stress observed in the present study could result  
20 from a higher density of beta2-ADR in the masseter compared to the biceps muscle,  
21 but we could find no comparative study in the literature supporting this hypothesis.  
22 Alternatively, the increase in sympathetic outflow to head muscles could be generally  
23 lower than to limb muscles, but also in this case there is no direct support to the  
24 hypothesis, given that, to our knowledge, muscle sympathetic nerve activity has never  
25 been investigated in head muscles.

26  
27 It should also be observed that increased muscle perfusion may also take place  
28 during vasoconstriction if a concomitant and proportionally stronger increase in ABP  
29 also occurs. Irrespective of the underlying mechanisms the present results evidence  
30 a differential vascular effect in the two muscles pointing to a consistent dilatatory or a  
31 weaker constrictory action in the masseter compared to the biceps muscle.

## 4.9 Implications

32  
33 The reason for investigating the effect of sympathetic activation on facial and  
34 masticatory muscles has often been the possible implication of the SNS in painful  
35 muscle syndromes (Hidaka et al., 2004a, 2004b; Maekawa et al., 1998). In fact, the  
36 masseter muscle, is a common site for myofascial pain, more often localized in the  
37 deep part of the muscle (Fricton et al., 1985).

38  
39 Most investigations on the issue were carried out in the trunk and limbs, leading to  
40 several causative hypotheses (Jänig & Häbler, 2000; Sjøogaard et al., 2000). A major  
41 mechanism in the development/maintenance of the chronic syndrome is considered  
42 to be the ischemia or hypoperfusion leading to the increase in oxidative stress and  
43 inflammation and then to pain and tenderness to palpation (Simons & Mense, 1998).

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1 In this respect, the vasoconstrictory sympathetic action is considered to worsen the  
2 situation (Koltzenburg, 1997; Passatore & Roatta, 2006; Queme et al., 2017).

3 Although blood flow reduction is commonly observed in response to electrical  
4 sympathetic stimulation in animal models (Roatta et al., 2009) or physiological  
5 stressful stimuli, (Ichinohe et al., 2020; Roatta et al., 2011) we could not find any report  
6 of sympathetic vasoconstriction in orofacial muscles in humans. Human studies based  
7 on NIRS investigations generally report increased blood volume and/or oxygenation  
8 in response to stress, suggestive of increased perfusion (Hidaka et al., 2004b;  
9 Maekawa et al., 1998). It was suggested that the lack of such dilatory response could  
10 be related to the occurrence of myofascial pain (Maekawa et al., 2002). Conversely,  
11 excessive dilatation in extra-cranial territories was also considered as a possible cause  
12 of pain (see (Shevel, 2011) for a review), while additional pathways not based on  
13 hemodynamic alterations have also been hypothesized (Inchiosa Jr, 2013). The  
14 present study confirms the general absence of vasoconstriction in the masseter  
15 muscle in response to a variety of different stressors but does not provide additional  
16 elements to clarify the mechanisms behind chronic muscle pain.  
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## 23 **5 Conclusion**

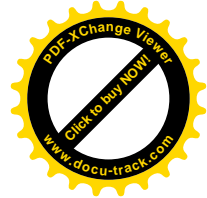
24 Simultaneous hemodynamic monitoring of head and limb muscles by SRS NIRS  
25 evidenced differential patterns of response to different stressors: while the biceps  
26 muscle exhibited both constrictory and dilatory responses, no evidence of constriction  
27 was ever observed in the masseter, often exhibiting a significant increase in tissue  
28 oxygenation and blood volume. In particular, clear-cut opposite changes were  
29 exhibited by the two muscles in response to painful stimuli (CPT and PHGMI). We  
30 speculate that this results from a general strategy aimed at preserving blood flow to  
31 the head region, which is generally perfused at a lower blood pressure because of the  
32 hydrostatic gradient associated with the erect posture.  
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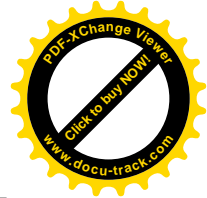
## 46 *Conflict of interest*

47 The authors declare no conflict of interest.  
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## FIGURE LEGENDS

1 **Fig. 1.** Original recordings from a representative subject during the cold pressor test  
2 (CPT) (A) and in response to voluntary isometric contractions of the masseter and the  
3 biceps muscles (B). Note that EMG recordings, which are magnified in A compared to  
4 B, effectively reveal even the smallest involuntary contractions, e.g., after the end of  
5 the CPT in the masseter muscle (black arrows, A) and that stronger contractions (black  
6 arrows, B) may produce visible hemodynamic changes in NIRS variables. Vertical  
7 dotted lines indicate start and end of CPT. ABP: arterial blood pressure, TOI: tissue  
8 oxygenation index, THI: total hemoglobin index (a.u.: arbitrary units),  
9 electromyograms from masseter and biceps muscles: EMGm and EMGb, respectively.

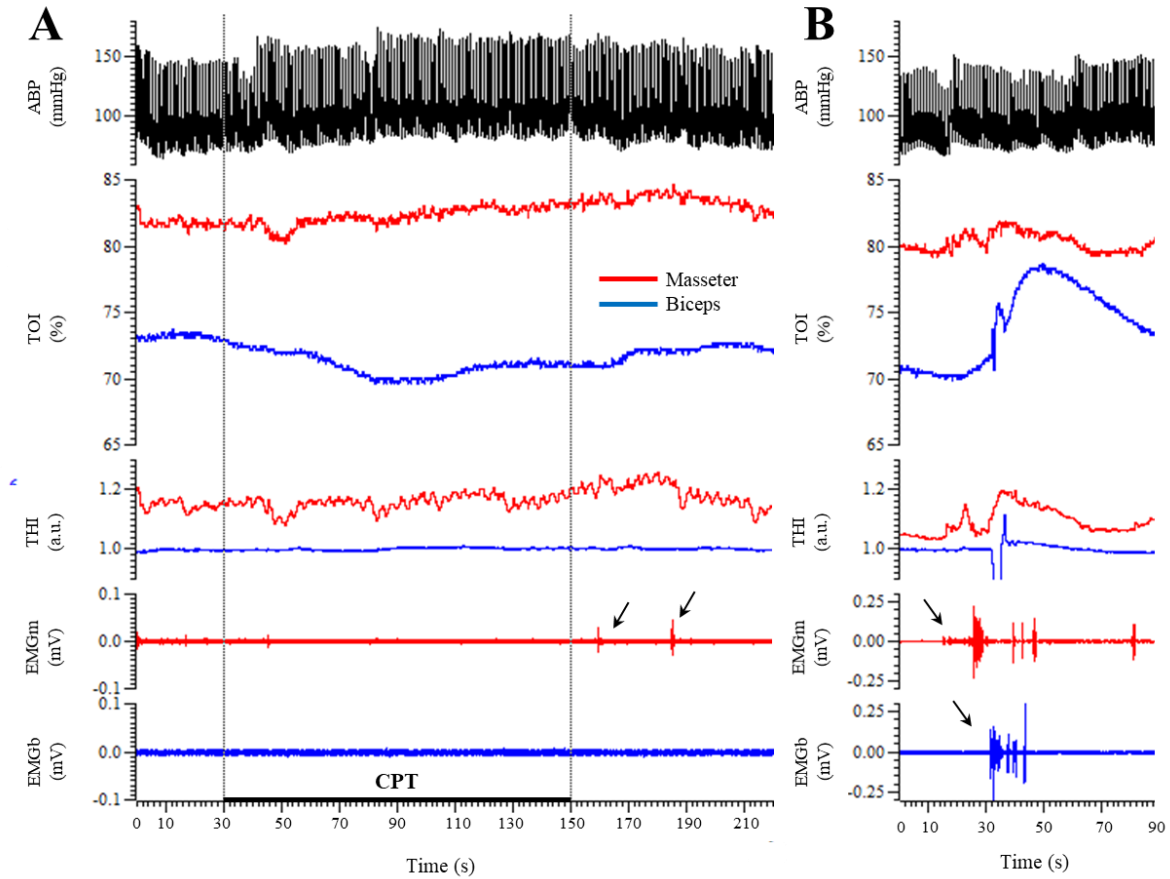
10 **Fig. 2.** Response to cold pressor test (CPT). Average response curves (A) and  
11 average effects (B) for the different variables. THI: total hemoglobin index (a.u.:  
12 arbitrary units); TOI: tissue oxygenation index; HR: heart rate; ABP: arterial blood  
13 pressure; CO: cardiac output. The black bar at the bottom indicates the duration of the  
14 CPT. Note the opposite effects on TOI and THI exhibited by the masseter and the  
15 biceps muscles. \*)  $p < 0.05$ ;  $n = 12$ .

16 **Fig. 3.** Response to mental arithmetic test (MAT). Average response curves (A) and  
17 average effects (B) for the different variables. Abbreviations as in Figure 1. The black  
18 bar at the bottom indicates the duration of the MAT. \*)  $p < 0.05$ ;  $n = 12$ .

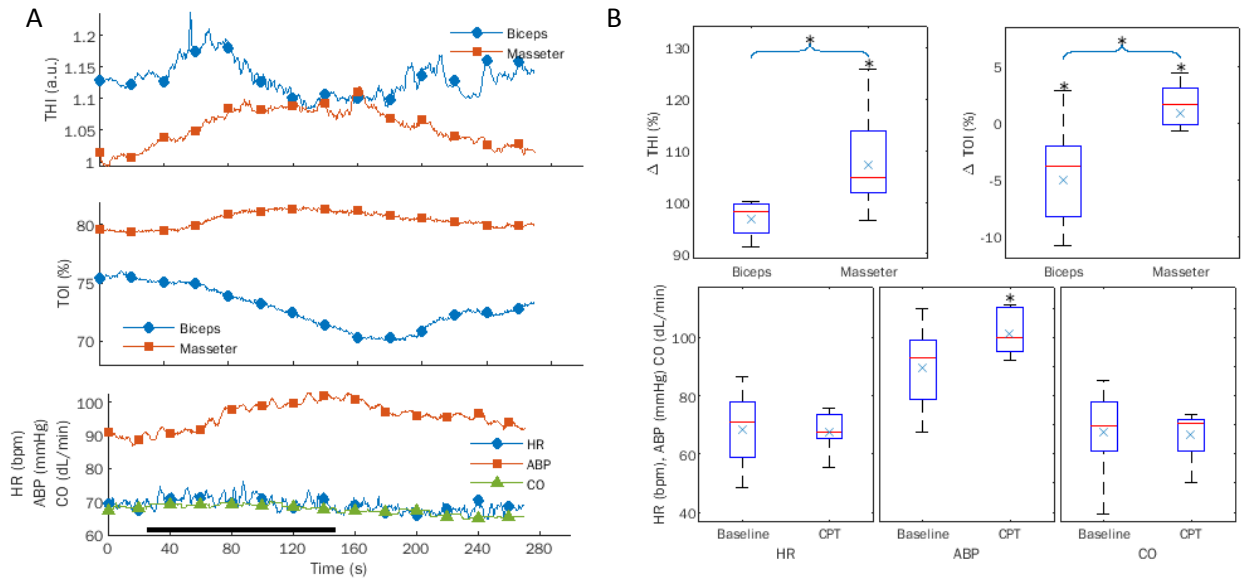
19 **Fig. 4.** Response to apnea (AP). Average response curves (A) and average effects  
20 (B) for the different variables. Abbreviations as in Figure 1. Duration of apnea lasted  
21 between 40 s (black bar) and 120 s (gray bar), in the different subjects;  $n = 12$ .

22 **Fig. 5.** Response to isometric handgrip (IHG) and post-handgrip muscle ischemia  
23 (PHGMI). Average response curves (A); average effects of IHG (B) and PHGMI (C)  
24 for the different variables. Abbreviations as in Figure 1. The black and grey bars at the  
25 bottom indicates the duration of IHG and PHGMI, respectively. Note that TOI exhibits  
26 opposite effects in masseter and biceps muscles during PHGMI but not during IHG. \*)  
27  $p < 0.05$ ;  $n = 12$ .

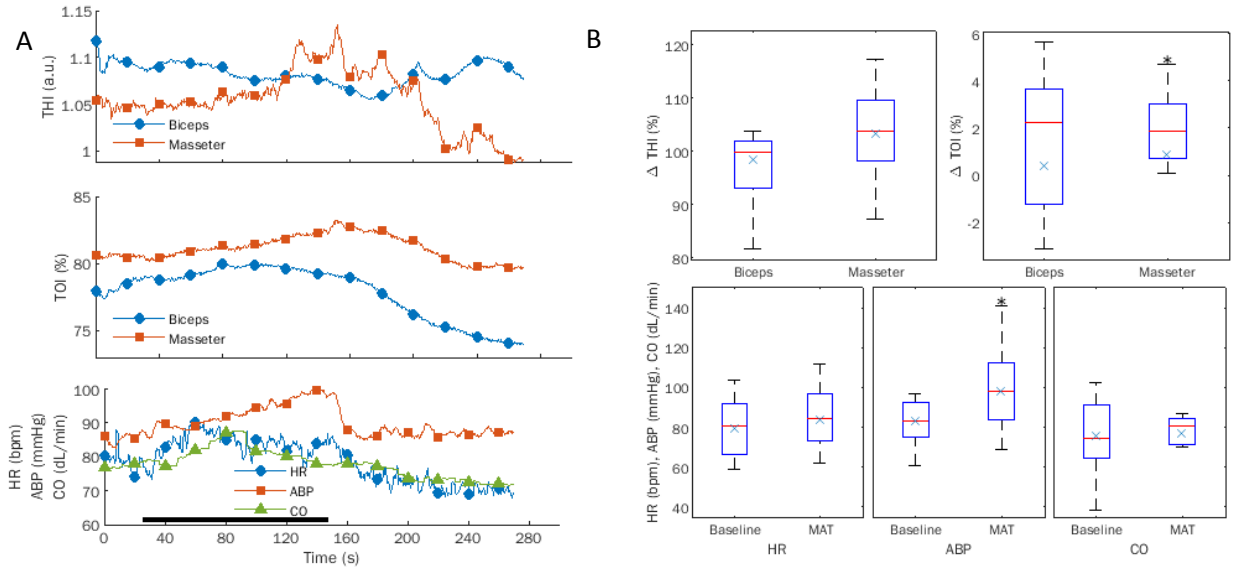
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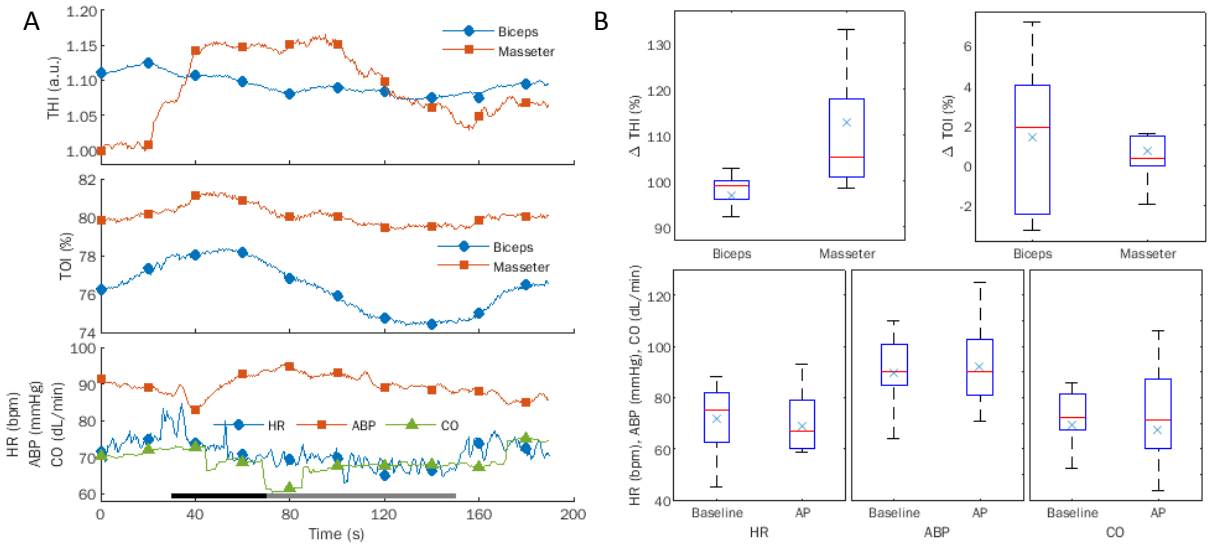
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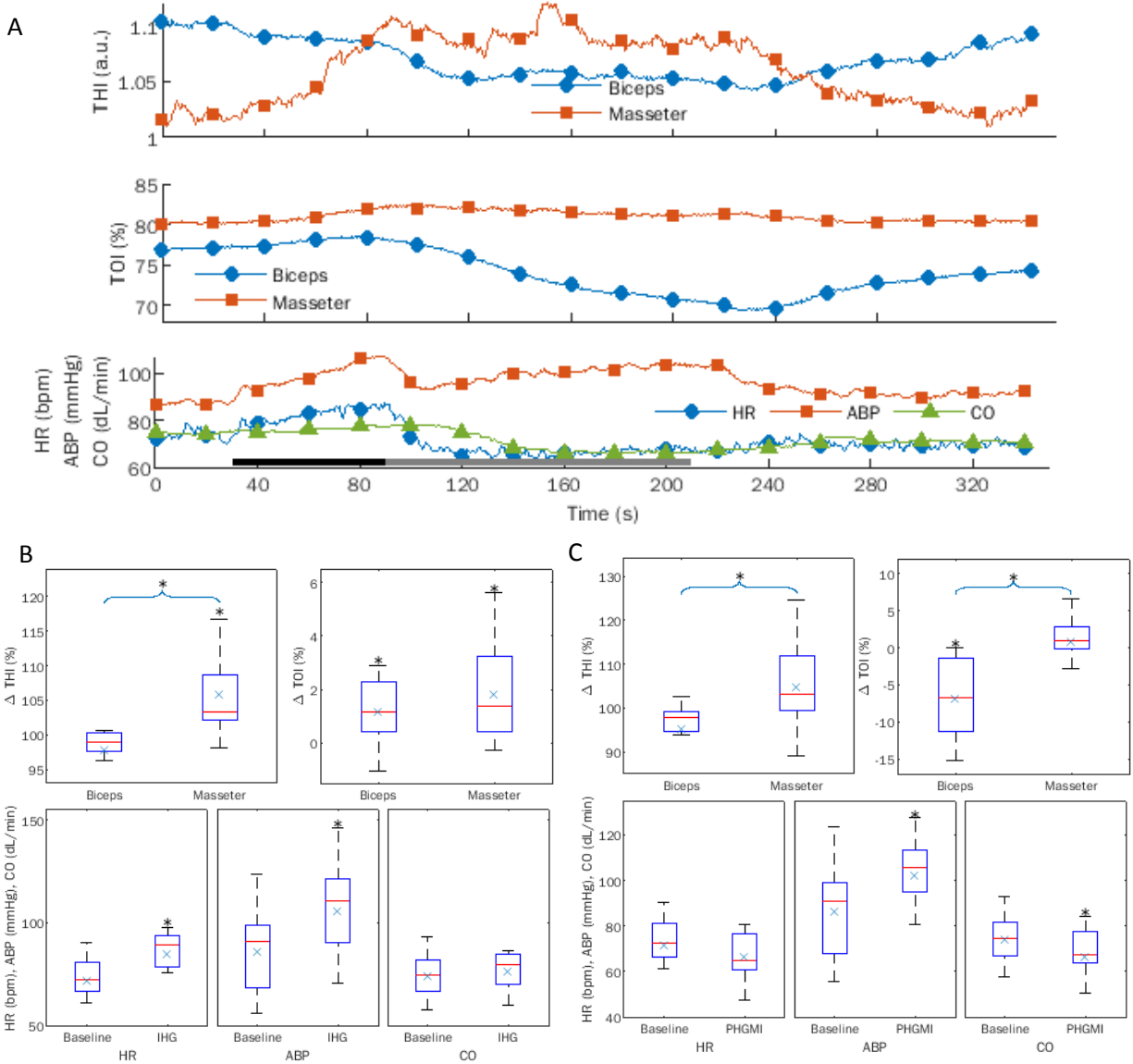
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**Fig. 3.** Response to mental arithmetic test (MAT). Average response curves (A) and average effects (B) for the different variables. Abbreviations as in Figure 1. The black bar at the bottom indicates the duration of the MAT. \*)  $p < 0.05$ ;  $n = 12$ .

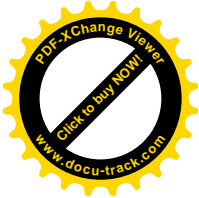


**Fig. 4.** Response to apnea (AP). Average response curves (A) and average effects (B) for the different variables. Abbreviations as in Figure 1. Duration of apnea lasted between 40 s (black bar) and 120 s (gray bar), in the different subjects; n=12.



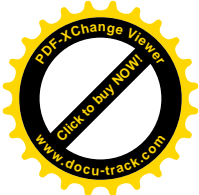
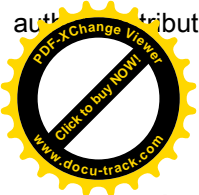
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*Conflict of interest*

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



*Authors' contributions*

*Not required when authors number is less than 4*