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A Scoping Review of Clinical Research Trends on Korean Medicine Treatments for Obesity among Middle-aged and Older Women

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Abstract

This study aimed to analyze the trends of clinical research on Korean medicine (KM) interventions for middle-aged and elderly female patients with obesity or overweight published in Korea from 2001 to 2025, using a scoping review methodology. Following the framework of Arksey and O'Malley, refined by Levac et al., and reported per the PRISMA-ScR guidelines, a comprehensive search was performed in 12 databases. Studies were selected based on the PCC framework, and data were analyzed using quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative mapping. A total of 11 studies were included, predominantly comprising retrospective chart reviews, before-after clinical trials, and randomized controlled trials. Interventions primarily consisted of herbal medicine (e.g., Gamitaeumjowee-tang, Gambi-tang), often integrated with fasting therapy, auricular acupressure, and pharmacopuncture. The most frequently prescribed herbal ingredient was Ephedrae Herba, followed by Coicis Semen and Rehmanniae Radix Preparata. Main outcomes consistently demonstrated significant improvements; for instance, KM interventions yielded average body weight reductions ranging from 3.28 kg (in 2-4 weeks) to 12.21 kg (in 24 weeks), alongside corresponding BMI decreases ranging from 1.36 to 4.61 kg/m². Beyond weight loss, treatments positively modulated gut microbiota (e.g., increasing Bifidobacterium), significantly reduced blood pressure, and improved sleep quality by extending total sleep duration. Adverse events were predominantly mild (Grade 1) and transient, with constipation, insomnia, nausea, and palpitations being the most frequently reported. In conclusion, KM interventions demonstrate significant efficacy and safety in managing obesity and alleviating associated metabolic symptoms in middle-aged and elderly women. Future large-scale, prospective studies are warranted to optimize protocols and monitor long-term factors like skeletal muscle preservation.

Keywords: Menopause; Gut microbiota; Body composition; Herbal medicine; Adverse event