

Prediction of maximal heart rate in children and adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify a method to predict the maximal heart rate (MHR) in children and adolescents, as available prediction equations developed for adults have a low accuracy in children. We hypothesized that MHR may be influenced by resting heart rate, anthropometric factors or fitness level.

Design: Cross-sectional study

Setting: Sports medicine center in primary care

Participants: Data from 627 treadmill maximal exercise tests performed by 433 pediatric athletes (age 13.7 ± 2.1 years, 70% males) were analyzed.

Independent variables: Age, sex, sport type, stature, body mass, BMI, body fat, fitness level, resting and MHR were recorded.

Main outcome measures: To develop a prediction equation for MHR in youth, using stepwise multivariate linear regression and linear mixed model. To determine correlations between existing prediction equations and pediatric MHR.

Results: Observed MHR was 197 ± 8.6 b \cdot min⁻¹. Regression analysis revealed that resting heart rate, fitness, body mass and fat percent were predictors of MHR ($R^2=0.25, p<0.001$), while age was not. Resting heart rate explained 15.6% of MHR variance, body mass added 5.7%, fat percent added 2.4% and fitness added 1.2%.

Existing adult equations had low correlations with observed MHR in children and adolescents ($r=-0.03-0.34$).	25
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<u>Conclusions</u> : A new equation to predict MHR in children and adolescents was developed, but was found to have low predictive ability, a finding similar to adult equations applied to children.	28
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<u>Clinical relevance</u> : Considering the narrow range of MHR in youth, we propose using $197 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ as the mean MHR in children and adolescents, with $180 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ the minimal threshold value (-2 standard deviations).	32
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<u>Key words</u> : athlete; exercise; heart rate; pulse; youth	36

INTRODUCTION

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Exercise tests are widely used in the pediatric age group. There are several common indications for pediatric exercise testing, in both healthy children and in those with various health conditions. These include assessment of functional capacity, mainly of the cardiac and pulmonary systems, and an evaluation of signs or symptoms that are induced or worsened by exercise.[1]

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During an electrocardiographic exercise test, gaseous exchange during exercise is not usually measured, in contrast to a cardiopulmonary exercise test. In order to evaluate whether the tested individual had obtained a maximal or even a near-maximal effort during the exercise test, several objective and subjective signs are used e.g., a subjective feeling that the tested individual has performed a maximal effort; physical signs of intense effort (facial flushing, sweating, unsteady gait or uncoordinated movements); and the achievement of the predicted maximal heart rate (MHR).[1,2] In the absence of gaseous exchange measurements, attainment of MHR is the only objective sign.

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In a progressive exercise test, heart rate rises in an almost linear fashion, and reaches its maximal value at peak VO_2 . [3] Therefore, MHR commonly serves as a surrogate marker of peak performance in the exercise test. Yet in order to assess whether maximal performance had indeed been obtained, the actual MHR achieved by an individual should be compared against a normal reference value. Numerous MHR prediction equations had been developed for adults in the last three decades. These were based on data from tens of thousands of participants and from a wide age range (20-70 years old), various ethnicities, and different fitness and activity levels.[4-6] The equation of Tanaka et al., [4] based on a meta-analysis of 351 studies on 18,712 adult participants, has a high accuracy ($r=-0.90$). The rate of decline and

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the y intercepts were not significantly different between men, women, sedentary, 62
active, or endurance-trained participants. In a prospective, laboratory-based part of 63
that study in 514 healthy individuals, a similar equation was obtained, with standard 64
deviations ranging from 7 to 11 b·min⁻¹ in the entire age-range [4]. 65

In contrast to adults, data regarding MHR prediction in the pediatric population 66
is scarce and controversial. The predictive ability of the two most commonly-used 67
adult MHR equations (220 - age [7] and 208 - 0.7*age [4]) had been examined in the 68
pediatric population in two small studies recently, with limited sample sizes;[8,9] the 69
data show that although the Tanaka equation [4] performed better, those adult 70
equations do not adequately explain the observed MHR variance in children. 71
Previous studies showed the MHR is age-independent in both children and teens, 72
[3,10,11] while others suggested the MHR may be age-independent only until 73
puberty.[2] One study found that MHR during a cycle exercise test was significantly 74
lower in overweight as compared with normal-weight adolescents, despite a similar 75
maximal oxygen consumption,[12] suggesting that body mass may affect MHR. 76
Finally, the possibility that MHR in the pediatric age range may just have one 77
constant, average value around 200 b·min⁻¹, had also been suggested.[1,13,14] 78
Collectively, it appears that there is no well-defined prediction equation, or an 79
accepted cutoff value, for MHR in children and adolescents. 80

The aims of the present study were to identify factors that contribute to MHR 81
in the pediatric population; to develop a prediction equation for MHR using clinical 82
and anthropometric data; and to compare the performance of relevant adult 83
prediction equations in children and adolescents. We hypothesized that MHR in 84
children would be age- and sex-independent, but may be influenced by resting heart 85
rate, anthropometric factors or fitness level. 86

METHODS

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Setting and participants

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The data for this cross-sectional study were obtained from a sports medicine center in Israel, where amateur and competitive athletes of all ages routinely undergo pre-participation examinations, frequently including exercise testing. Computerized records in this center were used from 2007; all available data until November 2014 were collected. Data extracted from the records were age, sex, sport discipline, stature, body mass, body-mass index (BMI), body fat percent, maximal metabolic equivalents (METs) obtained, ergometer type, blood pressure and resting and maximal heart rate. Stature, body mass and BMI were transformed to age- and sex-specific percentiles according to the reference curves of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), using the modified LMS approach.[15]. We categorized the study population by estimated pubertal status, using 14 years for females and 16 years for males as post-pubertal threshold values [16].

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Inclusion criteria were age under 18 years and performance of an exercise test on a motorized treadmill in order to obtain the highest MHR possible, as cycle ergometers might produce a lower MHR.[17,18] The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Sheba Medical Center, Tel Hashomer, Israel, and conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

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The primary outcome of this study was the predicted maximal heart rate. Predictors used were age, sex, stature, body mass, BMI, body fat percent, fitness, and resting heart rate.

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Anthropometric variables 110

Stature was measured using a wall-mounted stadiometer (Seca 206, Seca 111
gmbh, Hamburg, Germany), to the nearest 0.1 cm. Body mass was measured using 112
an electronic scale (Seca 700M, Seca gmbh, Hamburg, Germany) to the nearest 0.1 113
kg and BMI was calculated. Body fat percent was calculated from the sum of two 114
skinfolts (triceps, measured vertically on the back of the right arm, midway between 115
the top of the acromion process and the olecranon process, and calf, measured in 116
the right lower leg at the greatest calf girth), measured using a Skyndex Electronic 117
Skinfold Caliper (Caldwell, Justiss & Co., Inc., Fayetteville, AR, USA), and using the 118
built-in Slaughter-Lohman formula.[19]. We calculated the amount of fat free mass 119
from body fat percent and body mass, and calculated the fat free mass index (fat free 120
mass in kg divided by stature squared, kg/m^2). 121

Exercise testing protocols 122
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All participants routinely underwent inspiratory and expiratory spirometry prior 124
to exercise testing by a computerized analyzer (ZAN ErgoSpiro 680, nSpire Health, 125
Inc. Longmont, CO, USA). Participants with evidence of restrictive or obstructive 126
flow-volume loops were excluded from analyses (n=11). 127

Participants performed a graded exercise test on a treadmill (Run MED, 128
Technogym SpA, Cesena, Italy) using one of several protocols, according to the 129
participant's age and anticipated fitness level. In general, the maximal speed was 10- 130
11 $\text{km}\cdot\text{h}^{-1}$ for males and 8-10 $\text{km}\cdot\text{h}^{-1}$ for females, after which inclination of the 131
treadmill would rise at a rate of 1% per minute until volitional fatigue. The exercise 132
tests were symptom limited, and terminated when the participant asked to stop, while 133
reporting maximal ability and showing clinical signs of intense effort. A standard 12- 134

lead electrocardiogram was used to analyze cardiac rhythm in the supine position at rest and throughout the exercise test. At the end of the test, electrocardiogram tracings at peak exercise were reviewed by the exercise technician and MHR was manually measured, in order to verify the automatic calculation provided by the system. In case of discrepancy, the manual measurement was used. Maximal METs were automatically calculated by the system using the maximal grade and inclination achieved by the tested individual.

Statistical analysis

Continuous variables were described using mean and standard deviation. Categorical variables were described as frequency and percentage. In participants that performed several exercise tests (e.g., on an annual basis), the primary analyses included only data from the first test performed, in order to avoid over-sampling of these recurring children. The relationships between MHR and continuous variables were evaluated using Pearson's correlation coefficient.

MHR was compared between males and females using unpaired t-tests. Multivariate linear regression using the stepwise method was used to identify predictors for max HR, after verifying the regression assumptions (multi-collinearity, homoscedasticity, and normal distribution of the residuals). The regression and other available adult prediction equations were evaluated using scatterplots and Pearson's correlation. Analyses such as concordance correlation coefficient or intraclass correlation coefficient were not used, because of low Pearson's correlation coefficients found.

Interactions that were found in previous prediction equations or were assumed as relevant in our sample were also evaluated (e.g. age X sex, age X resting heart

rate). Finally, a linear mixed model was used to evaluate the association between MHR and the predictors identified by the linear regression, while also including data from the whole sample (i.e., including repeated exercise tests performed by same individuals annually). Root mean squared error (RMSE) was used to evaluate the goodness-of-fit of the model.

IBM SPSS Statistics software version 21 was used for data analysis. A two-tailed p value of <0.05 was considered as statistical significance.

RESULTS

The database included 627 maximal exercise tests. Examination of identification numbers disclosed that the exercise tests were performed by 433 different participants, of which 305 were males (70.4%). Demographic and anthropometric measures of the 433 study participants are presented in Table 1. Twenty-five percent of the tests were performed by post-pubertal participants. Participants trained in 27 different sport types, most frequently being middle-school competitive sports class (n=95, 21%), basketball (n=76, 17%), swimming (n=65, 14%), tennis (n=50, 11%) and triathlon (n=34, 8%). Other sport disciplines included various types of martial arts, gymnastics, soccer, handball, water polo, equestrian, sailing and surfing. No participant had abnormal blood pressure or electrocardiogram tracing at rest, during exercise or during recovery.

The measured mean MHR was $197 \pm 8.6 \text{ b} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$, range 170-218 $\text{b} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$. A MHR of $180 \text{ b} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$ was obtained by 97.2% of the participants, both when examining first-test only conditions (n=433) and the whole dataset of exercise tests (n=627). There was a small but significant mean sex difference of $2.5 \text{ b} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$ (males $196.0 \pm 8.9 \text{ b} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$, females $198.5 \pm 7.7 \text{ b} \cdot \text{min}^{-1}$, $p=0.005$). Table 2 presents Pearson's

correlation coefficients between MHR and the various continuous variables. In 185
general, despite statistical significance in most cases, no single variable had a strong 186
correlation with MHR and could only be described as weak correlates. 187

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MHR prediction equation 189

Multivariate linear regression revealed that only resting heart rate, fitness 190
level, body mass and fat percent were identified as predictors of MHR. Resting heart 191
rate explained 15.6% of the variance in MHR, body mass added 5.7%, fat percent 192
added 2.4%, and fitness level added 1.2%. 193

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The prediction equation obtained was: 195

$$(1) \text{ MHR} = 168 + 0.259 \times \text{resting HR} - 0.156 \times \text{body mass (kg)} + 0.891 \times \text{METs} + 0.256 \times \text{body fat percent} \quad 196$$

$$(\text{R}^2=0.250, \text{p}<0.001, \text{standard error of the estimate (SEE) } 7.54). \quad 197$$

$$\quad 198$$

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The error range of prediction equation number (1) ranged from -25 to +20 200
 $\text{b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$, which are -13% to +10% from the mean observed MHR. The difference 201
between the measured and predicted MHR using this equation had a standard 202
deviation of $7.5 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$. Figure 1 shows the relationship between observed MHR and 203
predicted MHR using equation number (1). It was found that the equation 204
overestimates MHR in the lower values, and underestimates MHR in higher values. 205

Since MET level and body fat percent are not always readily available, and 206
may vary by measurement methods, a more simplified prediction equation without 207
these two parameters was also developed: 208

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(2) MHR=186 + 0.25 X resting HR – 0.14 X body mass	210
(R ² =0.214, p<0.001, SEE 7.69)	211
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The error range of this prediction equation number (2) ranged from -24 to +17	213
b·min ⁻¹ , which are -14% to +8%.	214
The equations obtained from the linear mixed models, which also included	215
data from 113 participants that performed several exercise tests, were very similar:	216
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(1a) MHR= 164 + 0.270 X resting HR – 0.155 X body mass (in kg) + 1.1 X	218
METs + 0.258 X body fat percent	219
(RMSE = 7.35)	220
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(2a) MHR=186 + 0.25 X resting HR – 0.13 X body mass	222
(RMSE = 7.55)	223
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Interactions between age and sex or age and resting HR were not associated	225
with MHR (p=0.56 and p=0.77, respectively).	226
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Comparing observed MHR with adult prediction equations	228
Table 3 presents Pearson's correlation coefficients between the MHR and	229
several existing adult MHR prediction equations. Using scatterplots (Figure 2), we	230
observed that at higher observed MHR values, all prediction equations	231
underestimated MHR in our sample; at lower heart rates, the prediction equations	232
overestimated MHR.	233
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DISCUSSION

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The aim of this study was to identify a method to predict MHR in children and adolescents. After examining several clinical and anthropometric variables, very few were found to be significantly associated with the observed MHR, and with only weak associations. The small between-sex difference seen of $2.5 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$, though statistically significant, has little clinical relevance and is much smaller than the variation observed in the whole cohort.

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Our findings are in general agreement with previous large studies in adults, which showed that MHR was independent of sex, race, physical activity, fitness level, or BMI.[4,18,24] The single factor that was repeatedly found to affect MHR in adults is age, as shown in Table 3. We, as well as others,[3,8,9,10,11] did not find that age, estimated post-puberty status or age-based equations had a high predictive ability for MHR in the pediatric age range (Figure 2 and Table 3). Interactions between age and sex or age and resting HR were also not associated with MHR. There are two main possible explanations to this lack of age-dependency of MHR in children, as opposed to the significant relationship between age and MHR in adults. Firstly, the relevant age range in studies of pediatric exercise testing is narrower than in adults, spanning only 10 years, from about 8 to 18 years. Adult studies have a much large age span, of 60 [4,26] and even 70 years.[24] Shargal et al.,[26] in a study of over 28,000 participants, showed that while MHR does decline significantly across a wide age range, it does so much less when the study population was divided by 10-year intervals. A second possible explanation is that in adults, MHR may decline from early adulthood to older age, as part of overall senescence seen in many body systems, as well as in aerobic fitness.[27] In marked contrast, youth is a time of growth, development and maturation, with constant and rapid changes in body size,

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body composition, physical fitness and athletic performance. Despite such significant 260
changes that occur during youth, aerobic fitness relative to body size remains fairly 261
constant in the pediatric age range in boys.[11] MHR may behave similarly in this 262
period. 263

The new MHR prediction equation developed for children and adolescents in 264
this study, based on a large dataset utilizing treadmill tests only, had a low correlation 265
with MHR, even after taking into consideration several clinical and anthropometric 266
factors. The single factor found to have the highest relationship with MHR was 267
resting heart rate. Of the several adult prediction equations examined, the one that 268
had the highest correlation coefficient was that developed by Mahon et al.,[9] which 269
includes the resting heart rate. The addition of resting heart rate to the MHR 270
prediction equation coincides with exercise intensity prescription in adults, which is 271
currently best described as percent of the heart rate reserve (i.e., the difference 272
between resting and maximal heart rate), rather than as percent of maximal heart 273
rate alone.[28] The percent of heart rate reserve accurately reflects the same 274
percentage as the VO_2 reserve, and thus parallels the intensity of cardiorespiratory 275
exercise.[28] 276

Collectively, our findings show that at present, there is no reliable prediction 277
equation for MHR in children and adolescents. Considering the narrow range of MHR 278
in youth, its independence from age, sex and body size, and the lack of accurate 279
prediction equations in both our study and others, we propose using $197 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ as 280
the mean MHR in children and adolescents, with $180 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ being the minimal 281
threshold value (-2 standard deviations, which represent the commonly-accepted 282
lower limit of normal values). The mean MHR found in our sample, and its standard 283
deviation, are nearly identical to that found in a large sample of 6,557 participants 284

aged 10-19.9 years that performed a maximal treadmill test ($196 \pm 7.6 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$).[26] 285
Further, attaining a heart rate of $195 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ was previously found to be the most 286
robust secondary criterion to verify achieving VO_2 max in children.[29] The suggested 287
minimal threshold of $180 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ was obtained by 97.2% of the participants, both 288
when examining first-test only conditions ($n=433$) and when examining the whole 289
dataset of 627 exercise tests. This approach, of using mean and standard deviations 290
as a normal range, thereby using a single cutoff value to define a normal limit, is 291
used in numerous other laboratory tests in medicine. In fact, there are very few 292
variables where prediction equations are used in research or clinical settings instead 293
of fixed threshold values. 294

As with all studies, several limitations should be acknowledged. Our sample 295
size, although significantly larger than previous pediatric studies that developed or 296
examined MHR prediction equations, was still limited. For comparison, the Tanaka 297
prediction equation for MHR in adults was developed using data from 351 studies on 298
18,712 participants.[4] Second, we used data from an existing database obtained 299
from clinical measurements, and did not perform a designated laboratory-based 300
study. However, this setting truly reflects real-life conditions, of children coming to 301
perform a maximal treadmill exercise test for clinical reasons, and therefore our 302
findings can be directly translated to the clinical setting. It should be noted that in the 303
study by Tanaka et al.,[4] the regression equation obtained from their laboratory- 304
based study was virtually identical to that obtained from the meta-analysis of clinical 305
samples. Finally, as the study population consisted of relatively active children and 306
adolescents mostly of normal weight, its generalizability to sedentary or overweight 307
children might be limited. However, in their large study in adults, Tanaka et al. [4] 308
reported that there were no significant differences in MHR between sedentary, active 309

or endurance-trained participants. In our sample, we also found that MHR did not correlate with METs in the univariate analysis. In the linear regression, METs explained only 1.2% of the variance in MHR, which is only about 2 b·min⁻¹. Nevertheless, active children are usually the ones who undergo such maximal exercise testing and need heart rate-related exercise prescriptions. Our results, which were obtained from this exact population, can therefore be used with greater confidence in active children and adolescents than in sedentary ones.

The main strengths of our study were: 1) the relatively large number of participants, compared with previous pediatric-only studies; 2) the use of several clinical and anthropometric factors as possible predictors for MHR, for the first time in children and adolescents (age, sex, stature, body mass, BMI (and their age- and sex-specific percentiles), body fat percent, fitness level, and resting heart rate); 3) the two approaches of analyses using both the first-test only from each participant, and a mixed-model which included repeated tests by same individuals; 4) the inclusion of participants from a wide range of athletic activities and fitness levels; and 5) the use of data only from treadmill tests, which commonly produce a higher MHR than cycle ergometers.[17,18]

In summary, in this study of 627 maximal exercise tests performed by 433 children and adolescents, very few clinical and anthropometric variables were found to be significantly associated with MHR, and by a very small magnitude. A new prediction equation for MHR in the pediatric age range was developed, yet which had a low predictive ability, as did several relevant adult equations examined. Adding that numerous clinical and laboratory values in research and clinical practice do not have

prediction equations but single cut-off values, we suggest using $197 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ as the 335
mean MHR in children and adolescents, with $180 \text{ b}\cdot\text{min}^{-1}$ the minimal threshold value 336
for exercise treadmill testing. 337

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST AND SOURCE OF FUNDING 339

All authors report no conflicts of interest. No funding was obtained for this study. 340

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FIGURE LEGENDS

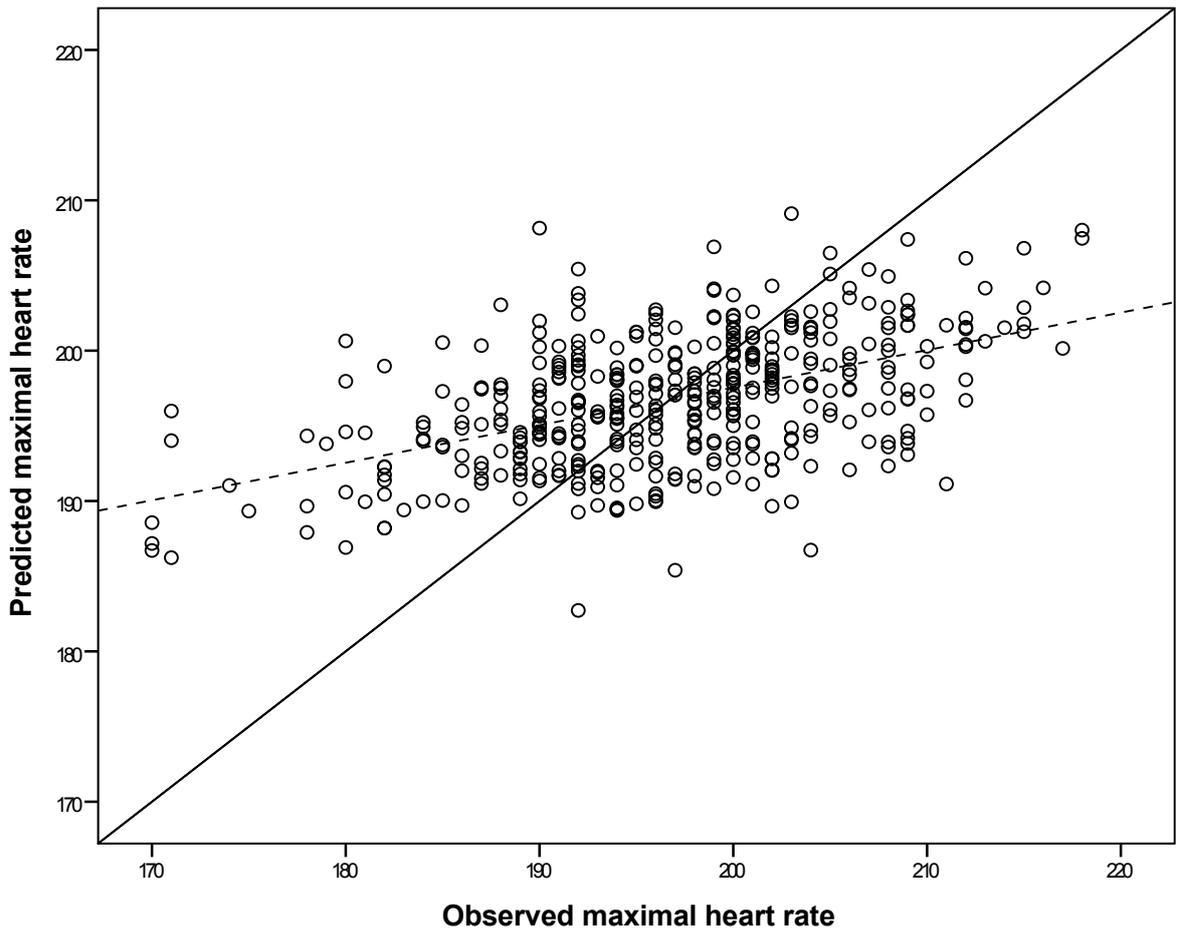
425

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Figure 1: The relationship between observed MHR and predicted MHR obtained 427
using the new prediction equation. The dashed line is the regression line ($R^2=0.250$, 428
 $p<0.001$). The diagonal 45° line represents a perfect potential agreement between 429
observed and expected values. 430

431

Figure 2: The relationship between observed MHR and predicted MHR obtained 432
using several adult prediction equations. 433



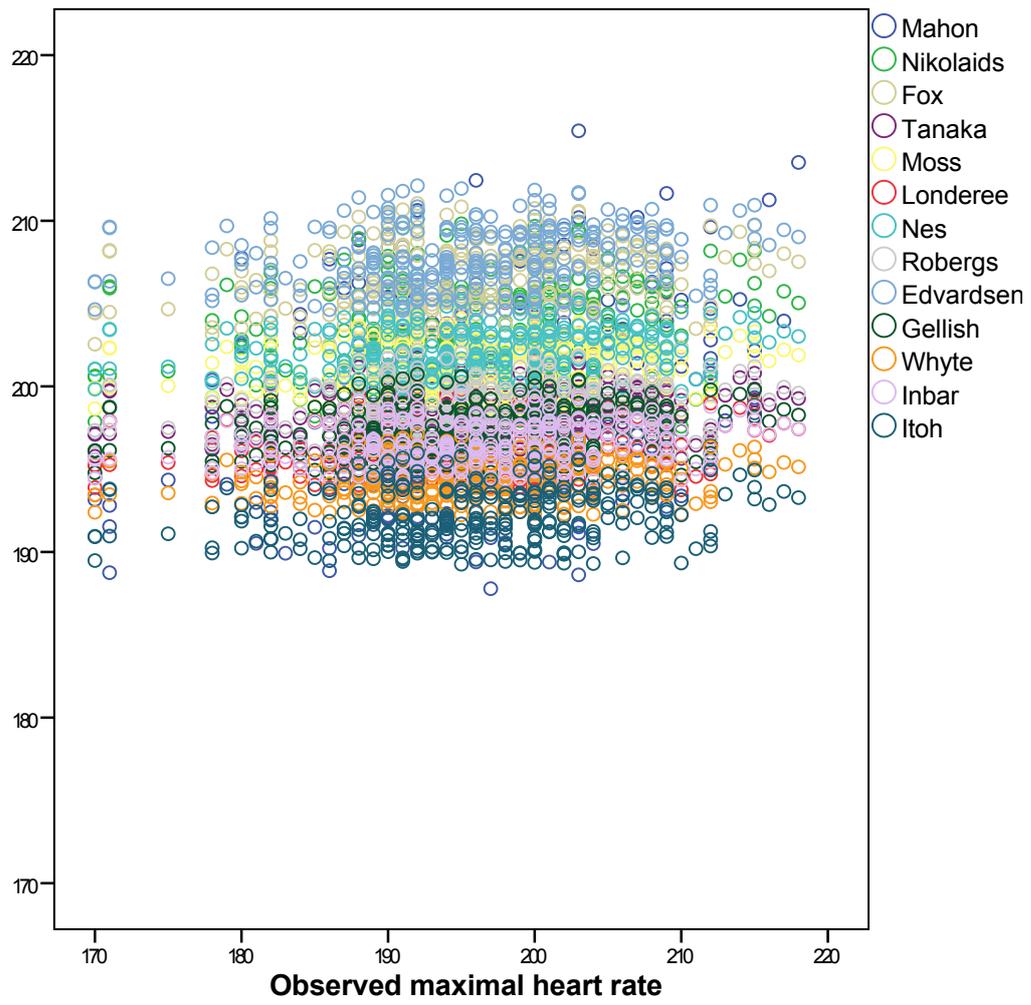


Table 1: Demographic and clinical characteristics of the study participants at first visit (n=433).

	Mean (SD)	Range
Age (years)	13.7 (2.1)	9.0-17.8
Body mass (kg)	53.5 (15.4)	25.0-112.0
Body mass (percentiles)	59.0 (27.8)	0.0-99.6
Stature (cm)	162.1 (13.5)	134.0-204.0
Stature (percentiles)	60.6 (28.4)	0.2-99.9
BMI (kg/m ²)	19.9 (3.4)	12.9-32.3
BMI (percentiles)	54.3 (27.6)	0.1-98.6
Body fat percent (%)	17.2 (6.4)	6.4-40.0
Fat-free mass index (kg/m ²)	16.6 (2.5)	10.5-26.0
METs	15.4 (2.1)	10.0-22.9

Table 2: Pearson's correlation coefficients between observed maximal heart rate and the continuous variables.

	Correlation coefficient	p value
Age (years)	-.278	<0.001
Stature (cm)	-.321	<0.001
Body mass (kg)	-.307	<0.001
BMI (kg/m ²)	-.190	<0.001
Stature (percentiles)	-.137	.004
Body mass (percentiles)	-.172	<0.001
BMI (percentiles)	-.107	.026
Body fat percent	.156	.001
Fat-free mass index	-.280	.026
Resting HR (b·min ⁻¹)	.395	<0.001
METs	-.045	.355

Table 3: Pearson's correlation coefficients between measured MHR and listed MHR prediction equations.

Source, year	Equation	Correlation coefficient	p value
Fox, 1971 [7]	220-Age	0.278	<0.001
Londeree, 1982 [18]	206.3-0.711*Age	0.278	<0.001
Inbar, 1994 [20]	M: 205-0.605*Age	0.207	<0.001
Moss, 2000 [13]	210-0.65*Age	0.278	<0.001
Tanaka, 2001 [4]	208-0.7*Age	0.278	<0.001
Robergs, 2002 [5]	208.754-0.734*Age	0.278	<0.001
Gellish, 2007 [21]	207-0.7*Age	0.278	<0.001
Whyte, 2008 [22]	M Athletes: 202-0.55*Age F Athletes: 216-1.09*Age	0.234	<0.001
Mahon, 2010 [9]	158.4+0.44*Rest HR+0.68*Age	0.335	<0.001
Edvardsen, 2013 [23]	M: 220-0.88*Age F: 208-0.66*Age	-0.023	0.63
Itoh, 2013 [16]	202.8-0.763*Age- 11.1*Sex+0.209*(Sex*Age)	-0.030	0.53
Nes, 2013 [24]	211-0.64*Age	0.278	<0.001
Nikolaidis, 2015 [25]	223-1.44*Age	0.278	<0.001