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MORALS, MOLECULES AND MOTION: EXPLORING HUMAN ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND MOLECULAR BIOLOGY METHODS IN *ZEBRAFISH* MODELS EXPOSED TO VIBRATION-INDUCED OXIDATIVE STRESS

Ahmed Adel Mansour KAMAR[1]*, Alin-Stelian CIOBÎCĂ[3], Ioannis MAVROUDIS[4], Manuela PĂDURARIU[2]

[1] Medical Department Head, MD Orthopedics Specialist, GUPCO – Cairo office, Egypt; Medical Resident, Department of Orthopedics and Traumatology, Spitalul Clinic de Recuperare, Iaşi, Romania; PhD Candidate, Faculty of Biology, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iaşi, Romania

[2] MD, „Socola" Psychiatry Institute, Iaşi, Romania

[3] Professor, PhD, Department of Research in Neurobiology, Faculty of Biology, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University; "Ioan Hăulică" Institute, "Apollonia" University of Iaşi, Romania

[4] Professor, MD, PhD, FRCP, MRCP Consultant Neurologist, Leeds teaching Hospitals, University of Leeds, UK, *Expert in neurodegeneration, oxidative stress, and translational neuroscience*, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), Greece

*Corresponding author e-mail: ahmed81kamar@gmail.com

Abstract. *Vibration exposure represents a complex mechanical stressor capable of triggering oxidative imbalance, inflammation, and neurophysiological alteration. The zebrafish (Danio rerio), with its strong genetic homology to humans and experimental versatility, offers an ethically responsible and translational model for investigating these molecular effects. This review synthesizes current evidence on vibration-induced oxidative stress while highlighting the ethical frameworks that must accompany such investigations. Within the molecular domain, recent studies demonstrate that controlled vibration activates redox pathways involving mitochondrial dysfunction, reactive oxygen species generation, and Nrf2-mediated antioxidant responses. Advances in molecular assays and omics technologies now permit detailed mapping of these biochemical events at organismal resolution. Parallel to these scientific developments, the moral dimension of zebrafish experimentation demands adherence to the principles of Replacement, Reduction, and Refinement (3Rs), together with transparent welfare monitoring and humane endpoints. Integrating ethical responsibility with molecular precision defines a new paradigm in vibration research—one that unites biological insight with moral accountability and strengthens the translational bridge between laboratory discovery and human occupational health.*

Keywords: Zebrafish, oxidative stress, vibration exposure, bioethics, ROS, Nrf2, molecular-biology methods, translational research

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Introduction

Vibration, as a physical and biological stressor, represents a dynamic intersection between **mechanical energy and molecular physiology**. Chronic or occupational whole-body vibration (WBV) exposure has been increasingly associated with oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, and inflammatory activation. These cellular perturbations link physical oscillation to biochemical injury and have prompted new interest in experimental models that can reproduce the subtle effects of vibration-induced oxidative imbalance. [7, 11]

Among vertebrate systems, the **zebrafish (***Danio rerio***)** has emerged as an ethically responsible and scientifically versatile model for investigating the consequences of WBV exposure. Its small size, optical transparency, and high genomic homology with humans facilitate simultaneous evaluation of molecular, histological, and behavioral endpoints [4]. Recent studies demonstrate that controlled vibration paradigms in zebrafish induce measurable oxidative stress characterized by reactive oxygen species generation, lipid peroxidation, and altered antioxidant enzyme activity—phenomena closely paralleling human responses to prolonged mechanical load. This translational relevance positions zebrafish as a key organism for dissecting the molecular mechanisms of vibration toxicity. [2, 3, 10]

Equally important, the **ethical foundation** of such research defines its scientific legitimacy. The rapid expansion of zebrafish use in biomedical experimentation necessitates strict adherence to internationally recognized frameworks such as the **European Directive 2010/63/EU** and the principles of **Replacement, Reduction, and Refinement (3Rs)** which aims to reduce the number of animals used in preclinical studies as well as to reduce their suffering. Ethical responsibility extends beyond compliance: it requires deliberate design of vibration protocols that minimize distress, transparent reporting, and continuous welfare monitoring. [1, 4, 15, 16]

Finally, this review emphasizes the **molecular biology methodologies** that illuminate vibration-induced oxidative pathways. Modern analytical techniques—including redox biomarker quantification, gene and protein expression assays, and omics-based profiling—offer detailed insight into the mechanistic links between physical motion and cellular response. Together, these three perspectives—**ethics, WBV-exposure, and molecular biology methods**—form the conceptual core of this paper. Their integration defines a balanced scientific and moral framework for advancing knowledge on vibration-induced oxidative stress while maintaining respect for the living systems that enable discovery. [3, 15]

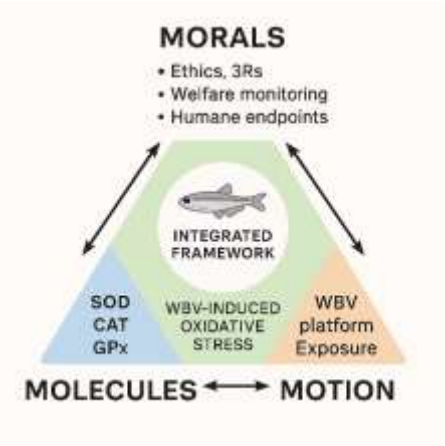

Figure 1. The "Morals–Molecules–Motion" triangular model illustrating the integration of ethical principles (Morals), molecular biology methods (Molecules), and whole-body vibration exposure (Motion) in zebrafish research on oxidative stress. Figure made by the author using an AI-assisted design tool.

Methodology

This review employed a structured **literature-based** approach integrating ethical, experimental, and molecular perspectives on vibration-induced oxidative stress in *Danio rerio*. Peer-reviewed publications from 2000–2025 were retrieved from PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar using keywords such as *"zebrafish vibration exposure," "oxidative stress," "Nrf2 pathway," "molecular biomarkers," "3Rs,"* and *"bioethics in animal research."*

Studies were included if they examined (i) vibration or mechanical stress in zebrafish or related vertebrates, (ii) oxidative, mitochondrial, or inflammatory responses, or (iii) ethical and regulatory principles in biomedical research. Non-scientific reports, duplicate data, and papers lacking methodological clarity or ethical approval were excluded. Given the heterogeneity of study designs, the synthesis emphasized conceptual integration rather than meta-analysis. Findings were organized into thematic domains covering vibration-induced oxidative mechanisms, biomarker identification, ethical frameworks, and translational implications for human occupational health. No new experiments were conducted; all data were derived from previously published, ethically approved studies.

Background of vibration-induced oxidative stress in *Zebrafish* models

Vibration is a complex mechanical phenomenon capable of influencing living tissues at structural and molecular levels. In both occupational and experimental contexts, whole-body vibration (WBV) can provoke a cascade of physiological responses beginning with mechanical deformation of cells and culminating in oxidative and inflammatory stress. Repetitive oscillatory forces alter membrane

fluidity, modulate calcium influx, and disturb mitochondrial respiration, collectively promoting the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS). When this redox imbalance persists, oxidative stress develops, initiating lipid peroxidation, protein oxidation, and mitochondrial DNA damage—key early events in cellular degeneration. [2, 10]

The zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) offers a distinctive vertebrate platform for exploring these mechanisms under controlled laboratory conditions. Owing to its transparent embryonic development, rapid life cycle, and approximately 70% genetic homology with humans, it enables direct observation of oxidative and neurobehavioral effects following vibrational exposure. Recent studies report that chronic low-frequency vibration in zebrafish elicits measurable increases in ROS production and antioxidant enzyme modulation, supporting the concept that mechanical stress can translate into biochemical toxicity. These effects parallel human findings in chronic vibration exposure, strengthening the translational value of the model. [4, 7]

Zebrafish possess well-defined mechanosensory and redox regulatory systems, including the Nrf2/Keap1-ARE pathway, which orchestrates cellular antioxidant defense. Moreover, behavioral endpoints such as altered locomotor activity and startle response provide functional correlates to biochemical stress. Such integration of physiological and molecular responses makes zebrafish an efficient model for investigating how mechanical energy is converted into oxidative and inflammatory signaling. [5,10]

Understanding this biological continuum is essential for interpreting the broader implications of vibration-induced stress. It provides a foundation for developing molecular biomarkers, refining experimental ethics, and establishing translational connections to human occupational health—core themes expanded in the following sections. [15,16]

Biological response to vibration-induced stress

Exposure to mechanical vibration initiates a coordinated biological response that extends from molecular signaling to systemic adaptation. In zebrafish, controlled WBV experiments have revealed that even moderate oscillatory forces can influence endocrine regulation, behavior, and cellular metabolism. The immediate response involves activation of mechanosensitive ion channels and stress-related kinases, leading to calcium fluxes and energy redistribution. These rapid adjustments are part of a protective reaction that aims to restore homeostasis under mechanical strain. [2, 7, 20]

At the organismal level, zebrafish subjected to repeated vibration show characteristic changes in locomotor behavior, schooling patterns, and startle

reflexes. These behavioral indicators parallel neuroendocrine activation, particularly elevated cortisol and catecholamine levels, which reflect a general stress response comparable to that observed in mammals. Chronic or high-intensity exposure, however, may overwhelm compensatory systems, promoting oxidative imbalance, mitochondrial fatigue, and inflammation. Such progression from adaptation to injury defines the physiological threshold between reversible stress and tissue damage. [11, 20]

The systemic effects of vibration are not confined to neural tissue. Cardiovascular, muscular, and epithelial structures exhibit increased metabolic demand and transient oxidative load, suggesting that vibration acts as a multisystem stressor rather than a localized mechanical challenge. In zebrafish embryos and larvae, prolonged exposure disrupts developmental timing and vascular patterning, providing further evidence of whole-organism sensitivity to vibrational energy. [5, 7]

Despite these potential risks, mild or short-term vibration can also elicit adaptive benefits through **hormetic responses**—low-level stress that enhances antioxidant defenses and promotes mitochondrial resilience. This duality highlights the importance of defining precise exposure parameters to differentiate between physiological adaptation and pathological stress. Understanding these graded biological responses in zebrafish contributes directly to refining WBV research design and establishing safer, ethically sound vibration thresholds for both animal experimentation and human occupational environments. [10, 15]

Oxidative stress and cellular defense mechanisms

Oxidative stress represents a fundamental mechanism underlying the biological effects of whole-body vibration (WBV) exposure. It arises when the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) exceeds the cellular antioxidant capacity, leading to damage of lipids, proteins, and nucleic acids. In zebrafish (*Danio rerio*), as in other vertebrates, mechanical vibration disturbs mitochondrial respiration and activates enzymes such as NADPH oxidase, resulting in the accumulation of ROS and secondary reactive nitrogen species. These reactive molecules initiate peroxidation of membrane lipids and modification of structural proteins, impairing cellular function and signaling integrity. [2, 7]

To maintain redox balance, cells rely on an intricate antioxidant defense network. Key enzymatic components include **superoxide dismutase (SOD)**, which converts superoxide radicals to hydrogen peroxide; **catalase (CAT)**, which decomposes hydrogen peroxide into water and oxygen; and **glutathione peroxidase (GPx)**, which detoxifies both hydrogen peroxide and lipid peroxides. Non-enzymatic antioxidants such as **vitamin E, vitamin C, and glutathione (GSH)** further reinforce cellular protection. Experimental studies in zebrafish

demonstrate that vibration exposure alters the activity of these enzymes in a time- and intensity-dependent manner, indicating that oxidative stress and antioxidant defense are dynamically regulated in response to mechanical load. [3, 9]

A central regulator of this adaptive process is the **Nrf2/Keap1-ARE signaling pathway**, which controls the transcription of genes encoding antioxidant and cytoprotective proteins. Under basal conditions, the transcription factor Nrf2 is retained in the cytoplasm by Keap1. Upon oxidative challenge, Nrf2 is released and translocates into the nucleus, where it binds to the antioxidant response element (ARE) and activates genes such as *HO-1, NQO1, GCLC,* and *GST*. Activation of this pathway has been confirmed in zebrafish models exposed to oxidative agents and mechanical stress, underscoring its conservation across vertebrates. Quantifying Nrf2 activity through gene expression analysis, immunoblotting, or reporter lines provides a sensitive molecular approach for evaluating redox adaptation in vibration research. [3, 10, 21]

When the adaptive antioxidant response fails to compensate for excessive ROS production, oxidative damage becomes irreversible, leading to mitochondrial dysfunction, apoptosis, and inflammatory activation. Thus, evaluating both oxidative markers and defense mechanisms in zebrafish provides valuable insight into the balance between stress adaptation and cellular injury. This molecular understanding forms the foundation for developing objective biomarkers and ethical exposure limits, linking the biochemical study of oxidative stress to practical applications in both research and occupational health. [6, 15]

Redox marker sources and biomarker development

The assessment of oxidative stress relies on the accurate identification of biochemical markers that reflect the balance between pro-oxidant and antioxidant forces. In zebrafish models exposed to whole-body vibration (WBV), several molecular indicators have been validated to quantify redox disturbances and evaluate the efficiency of cellular defense mechanisms. [18] These biomarkers are essential not only for understanding pathophysiology but also for establishing standardized experimental endpoints that respect ethical constraints and reduce animal use. [14, 15]

Reactive oxygen species (ROS) represent the primary signal of oxidative disturbance and can be measured using fluorescent probes such as 2′,7′-dichlorofluorescin diacetate (DCFH-DA) for general ROS detection or MitoSOX Red for mitochondrial superoxide. **Lipid peroxidation** is commonly evaluated through malondialdehyde (MDA) or 4-hydroxynonenal (4-HNE) quantification, using spectrophotometric or chromatographic assays. **Protein oxidation** can be determined by detecting carbonyl groups or nitrotyrosine residues, while **DNA oxidation** is indicated by 8-hydroxy-2′-deoxyguanosine (8-OHdG) formation.

Together, these parameters offer a comprehensive biochemical profile of oxidative injury. [2, 9, 21]

Parallel evaluation of **antioxidant enzyme activities**—including superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase (CAT), and glutathione peroxidase (GPx)—and of non-enzymatic systems such as reduced glutathione (GSH) provides an integrated measure of redox balance. The **GSH/GSSG ratio** in particular is a sensitive indicator of cellular redox status and mitochondrial health. Advanced molecular assays, such as real-time PCR and Western blotting, allow quantification of antioxidant gene and protein expression, including members of the Nrf2/ARE signaling pathway, thereby linking biochemical findings to gene regulatory mechanisms. Recent developments in **omics technologies**—transcriptomics, proteomics, and metabolomics—have expanded the biomarker landscape in zebrafish. These approaches enable global profiling of stress-related pathways, revealing early molecular signatures of oxidative imbalance. Additionally, transgenic zebrafish lines expressing fluorescent reporters under oxidative stress–responsive promoters, such as (*gstp1: GFP)* or (*nrf2a: luc)*, permit non-invasive, real-time visualization of redox dynamics. Such innovations enhance experimental precision and embody the ethical principle of Refinement by reducing the number of animals required and the invasiveness of measurements. [3, 21]

Integrating biochemical, genetic, and imaging biomarkers establishes a robust molecular framework for evaluating vibration-induced oxidative stress. These measurable indicators not only improve reproducibility and cross-study comparison but also form the scientific basis for defining safe exposure thresholds. In this way, biomarker development connects molecular biology with ethical responsibility and translational value, guiding both experimental design and preventive strategies in human vibration research. [10, 16]

Zebrafish model and translational significance

The zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) has become a cornerstone of modern biomedical research, offering a rare balance between genetic relevance, experimental accessibility, and ethical manageability. As a small vertebrate with transparent development, rapid reproduction, and well-characterized physiology, it provides a versatile model for studying systemic and cellular consequences of whole-body vibration (WBV) exposure. The zebrafish genome shares extensive homology with humans, particularly in oxidative stress–related and inflammatory signaling pathways, including those regulated by the Nrf2/ARE system, which underscores its value for translational redox biology. WBV-exposed zebrafish exhibit both biochemical and behavioral changes consistent with human responses to mechanical stress. Altered locomotor activity, startle reflex sensitivity, and

metabolic rate have been observed in parallel with increases in oxidative biomarkers such as reactive oxygen species (ROS) and malondialdehyde (MDA). These findings demonstrate the capacity of zebrafish to integrate physiological, behavioral, and molecular endpoints, making it a powerful organism for studying how mechanical forces influence redox homeostasis and neurobehavioral adaptation. [3, 7]

From a translational perspective, the zebrafish offers a cost-effective and ethically responsible platform for preliminary mechanistic investigations before progressing to mammalian models. Its suitability for high-throughput analysis allows screening of vibration parameters, antioxidant compounds, and gene expression responses, thereby refining hypotheses and reducing the number of higher animals required. The model also enables visualization of oxidative dynamics through transgenic fluorescent reporters, bridging molecular assays with real-time physiological observation. By uniting biological relevance with methodological efficiency, the zebrafish model provides an essential link between laboratory investigation and human occupational health. Findings derived from WBV-exposed zebrafish contribute to understanding how prolonged mechanical vibration can promote oxidative injury and systemic dysfunction. These insights, supported by rigorous ethical frameworks, inform safer exposure limits and guide the development of preventive strategies against vibration-related pathologies in human populations. [11, 15]

Ethical considerations in *zebrafish* research

The ethical dimension of zebrafish experimentation forms an integral part of scientific rigor and social responsibility. As vertebrates with demonstrated nociceptive and behavioral complexity, zebrafish require ethical consideration equivalent to that afforded to higher animal models. In studies involving vibration exposure, where mechanical stress has the potential to induce discomfort or physiological strain, ethical planning is essential to ensure that research objectives are balanced with animal welfare. All experimental procedures must conform to internationally recognized guidelines, including the **European Directive 2010/63/EU** and the **principles of the 3Rs—Replacement, Reduction, and Refinement**. Replacement encourages the use of alternative models or in-silico approaches whenever possible; Reduction demands optimal study design and statistical justification to minimize animal numbers; and Refinement requires continuous improvement of housing, handling, and experimental protocols to alleviate distress. In the context of vibration studies, refinement also includes calibrating vibration intensity, exposure duration, and recovery intervals to avoid unnecessary suffering while maintaining experimental validity. [12, 15, 16]

Transparent methodological reporting constitutes another ethical obligation. Detailed documentation of vibration parameters, environmental conditions, and welfare monitoring allows reproducibility and prevents inadvertent overexposure in future studies. Furthermore, implementing randomization, blinding, and power analysis enhances both the ethical and scientific quality of research, ensuring that each experiment yields maximal knowledge with minimal animal impact. Ethical oversight extends beyond compliance with regulations; it reflects an ongoing moral dialogue within the scientific community. Researchers must continually evaluate whether the anticipated benefits of vibration studies justify the physiological burden placed on the organism. Incorporating regular welfare assessment, humane endpoints, and post-exposure recovery observation supports a compassionate and responsible research culture. [11, 14]

In this way, zebrafish studies on vibration-induced oxidative stress not only advance molecular understanding but also exemplify the integration of empathy and ethics within scientific innovation. The strength of such research lies not only in methodological sophistication but also in the moral integrity with which it is conducted. [13, 17]

Integrating molecular insights with human occupational health

The mechanistic understanding gained from zebrafish models of vibration-induced oxidative stress has direct implications for human occupational health. Workers chronically exposed to whole-body or hand–arm vibration, such as those operating heavy machinery or power tools, frequently experience fatigue, sensory disturbances, and neurovascular dysfunction. [19] Although these clinical manifestations have long been recognized, the underlying molecular events linking vibration exposure to tissue injury are only now becoming clearer through model-based research. Experimental findings in zebrafish have demonstrated that vibration triggers mitochondrial dysfunction, reactive oxygen species (ROS) accumulation, and activation of redox-sensitive transcription factors such as Nrf2. [8] These mechanisms mirror oxidative patterns observed in human studies, where chronic mechanical exposure correlates with increased lipid peroxidation, altered antioxidant enzyme activity, and systemic inflammatory markers. Such molecular parallels validate zebrafish as a translational system capable of revealing early biochemical indicators of vibration toxicity before irreversible pathology occurs. [2, 7]

The integration of zebrafish-derived biomarkers into occupational health monitoring could refine preventive and diagnostic strategies. For instance, measuring circulating oxidative stress markers or gene expression changes in exposed workers may enable early detection of redox imbalance and facilitate timely intervention. Similarly, antioxidant modulation strategies tested in

zebrafish may inform therapeutic or protective approaches aimed at reducing oxidative burden in vulnerable populations. [3, 4]

From an ethical perspective, translating animal data into human benefit fulfills the moral imperative that underpins biomedical research. Insights derived from zebrafish studies not only expand mechanistic understanding but also contribute to protecting human health—an outcome that ethically justifies the responsible use of animal models. In this sense, the interplay between molecular biology and occupational medicine exemplifies how laboratory discoveries can evolve into public health advancements guided by both scientific rigor and moral accountability. [12, 15, 16]

Bioethical and methodological challenges

Although zebrafish models have greatly advanced the understanding of vibration-induced oxidative stress, several bioethical and methodological challenges remain. One persistent limitation lies in the **lack of standardized vibration parameters**. Differences in exposure frequency, amplitude, and duration across studies complicate data comparison and hinder the establishment of reproducible thresholds for safe and ethically acceptable experimentation. Developing harmonized guidelines for vibration exposure will improve both scientific reliability and animal welfare. Another challenge concerns the **translation of molecular data to human relevance**. While zebrafish share extensive genetic and physiological similarities with mammals, differences in body structure, sensory processing, and environmental context necessitate caution when extrapolating findings. Integrating zebrafish data with mammalian and clinical research is therefore essential to confirm the universality of oxidative and inflammatory pathways identified in this model. From an ethical perspective, maintaining the balance between **scientific necessity and animal welfare** remains a central concern. Even though zebrafish represent a refinement compared to larger vertebrates, their sentience and stress sensitivity require careful consideration. Researchers must continually evaluate whether the scope of an experiment justifies the physiological burden imposed. Ethical refinement should also include enhanced welfare monitoring, improved recovery conditions, and the use of advanced imaging or molecular tools that reduce the need for invasive procedures. [11, 16]

Finally, ensuring **data transparency and reproducibility** is both a methodological and moral responsibility. Preregistration of experimental protocols, open sharing of datasets, and publication of negative results minimize redundant animal use and strengthen collective scientific integrity. Collaborative networks linking molecular biologists, ethicists, and occupational health specialists can further promote a culture of accountability that innovation

proceeds in parallel with ethical awareness. In summary, the ongoing challenge in zebrafish vibration research is to unite methodological precision with moral responsibility, ensuring that scientific advancement continues to respect the ethical framework that sustains it. [14, 15]

Conclusions

The study of vibration-induced oxidative stress in zebrafish provides a unique opportunity to integrate molecular precision with ethical responsibility. Through its genetic similarity to humans, experimental accessibility, and transparent physiology, the zebrafish (*Danio rerio*) serves as an effective vertebrate model for exploring how mechanical forces translate into biochemical and systemic effects. Evidence from recent research demonstrates that whole-body vibration (WBV) exposure disturbs redox homeostasis, activates mitochondrial and inflammatory pathways, and modulates antioxidant defenses through mechanisms governed largely by Nrf2/ARE signaling. The refinement of molecular biology techniques—ranging from biochemical assays and gene expression analysis to advanced imaging and omics profiling—has made it possible to identify specific biomarkers that link mechanical stimulation to oxidative damage. These approaches not only improve scientific accuracy but also reduce experimental invasiveness, exemplifying the ethical principle of Refinement within the 3Rs framework. At the same time, the moral dimension of vibration research remains inseparable from its scientific progress. Adherence to international welfare standards, transparent methodological reporting, and the pursuit of translational outcomes ensure that animal use is justified by tangible human benefit. The integration of ethical reflection with molecular discovery transforms experimental zebrafish studies into more than a technical exercise—it frames them as a responsible and purposeful contribution to modern biomedical science.

In conclusion, the convergence of **morals, molecules, and motion** defines a new paradigm for studying mechanical stress and oxidative biology. By aligning technological innovation with ethical consciousness, zebrafish research on vibration-induced oxidative stress advances both the frontiers of molecular understanding and the principles of humane science.

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