Kaizen: What the Research Says

Nov 4, 2026 · @Melissa

How the journal makes kaizen work

Kaizen (改善) means "change for the better": continuous improvement through small, repeated steps. The journal is built around the factors research links to lasting change, starting with the biggest one: time.

- **Built for years, not weeks.** The journal follows a long horizon: seven years to rebuild, ten years to master, and a lifetime to maintain. Studies show the benefits of small changes can fade within a year or two; a multi-year structure is designed to prevent that drop-off.
- **One small step at a time.** Each change is sized to fit everyday life, the approach research finds easier to sustain than big overhauls.
- **Progress you can see.** Regular tracking keeps improvement visible, because motivation drops when people stop seeing results.
- **Regular review and renewal.** Each change is revisited and refined, the heart of kaizen.

Bottom line

Kaizen's small-steps approach is supported by both healthcare and personal health research. Hospitals using kaizen and related Lean methods have improved care across a wide range of settings, and staff stay motivated when they see their ideas put into action. In personal health trials, small daily changes to eating and movement produced measurable benefits. The main limitation is time: in studies lasting one to two years, early gains faded. Sustained, long-term practice is the missing ingredient.

What the research shows

Kaizen improves healthcare delivery

A realist review of Lean thinking in healthcare, the system kaizen belongs to, found it had been applied successfully in a wide variety of healthcare settings (Mazzocato et al., 2010). Most reported uses were narrow fixes rather than organization-wide change, which the authors saw as untapped potential.

Visible progress keeps people motivated

Interviews with 30 nurses at two Swiss hospitals found most experienced kaizen as positive, giving them a real voice in improving their work (Shatrov et al., 2021). Motivation dropped when suggestions did not lead to visible change. Support, resources and team cohesion shaped success.

Small daily changes add up

A meta-analysis of 21 randomized trials tested small daily changes, such as walking 1,000 more steps or eating 100 fewer calories a day (Graham et al., 2022). In trials focused on maintaining health, small-change groups did measurably better than comparison groups. The benefit came from steady maintenance rather than dramatic change. Only 2 of 21 trials had a low risk of bias, so more rigorous research is needed.

Short programs fade over time

In a 3-year randomized trial of 320 adults, a small-change group did better than a comparison group for the first 15 months, but the advantage was gone by years two and three (Ross et al., 2022). The trial's main measure was body weight. The takeaway: small changes need years of ongoing attention, not a one-time program.

Disclaimer

This summary is for educational purposes only and is not medical advice. It describes published research on the principles behind the journal; the journal itself has not been tested in a clinical study. Talk with a qualified healthcare provider before making changes to your diet, activity or health routine.

References

All sources are peer-reviewed and indexed in PubMed.

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