Selenium in cancer prevention: a review of the evidence and mechanism of action

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Se is an unusual trace element in having its own codon in mRNA that specifies its insertion into selenoproteins as selenocysteine (SeCys), by means of a mechanism requiring a large SeCys-insertion complex. This exacting insertion machinery for selenoprotein production has implications for the Se requirements for cancer prevention. If Se may protect against cancer, an adequate intake of Se is desirable. However, the level of intake in Europe and some parts of the world is not adequate for full expression of protective selenoproteins. The evidence for Se as a cancer preventive agent includes that from geographic, animal, prospective and intervention studies. Newly-published prospective studies on oesophageal, gastric-cardia and lung cancer have reinforced previous evidence, which is particularly strong for prostate cancer. Interventions with Se have shown benefit in reducing the risk of cancer incidence and mortality in all cancers combined, and specifically in liver, prostate, colorectal and lung cancers. The effect seems to be strongest in those individuals with the lowest Se status. As the level of Se that appears to be required for optimal effect is higher than that previously understood to be required to maximise the activity of selenoenzymes, the question has been raised as to whether selenoproteins are involved in the anti-cancer process. However, recent evidence showing an association between Se, reduction of DNA damage and oxidative stress together with data showing an effect of selenoprotein genotype on cancer risk implies that selenoproteins are indeed implicated. The likelihood of simultaneous and consecutive effects at different cancer stages still allows an important role for anti-cancer Se metabolites such as methyl selenol formed from γ-glutamyl-selenomethyl-SeCys and selenomethyl-SeCys, components identified in certain plants and Se-enriched yeast that have anti-cancer effects. There is some evidence that Se may affect not only cancer risk but also progression and metastasis. Current primary and secondary prevention trials of Se are underway in the USA, including the Selenium and Vitamin E Cancer Prevention Trial (SELECT) relating to prostate cancer, although a large European trial is still desirable given the likelihood of a stronger effect in populations of lower Se status.

Selenium: Cancer: Mechanism: Selenomethyl-selenocysteine: Selenoprotein single-nucleotide polymorphism

Se is an essential trace element like no other. Its unique redox chemistry has been exploited by biological systems since the advent of dioxygen in the earth’s environment created a requirement for a two-electron detoxification system for dealing with peroxides (Frausto da Silva & Williams, 2001). Its crucial role is underlined by the fact that it is the only trace element to be specified in the genetic code (RJP Williams, personal communication), as selenocysteine (SeCys; the 21st amino acid), which when incorporated into selenoproteins, protects tissues and membranes from oxidative stress and controls cell redox status (Rayman, 2000). As will be seen later, SeCys is ‘dramatically different from the other twenty amino acids in the mode of its incorporation and basic biosynthetic steps’ (Hatfield & Gladyshev, 2002) and this complex insertion machinery for selenoprotein production has implications for the Se requirements for cancer prevention.

Abbreviations: GPx, glutathione peroxidase; HR, hazard ratio; MnSOD, Mn superoxide dismutase; NPC, Nutritional Prevention of Cancer; OR, odds ratio; RR, relative risk; SeCys, selenocysteine; SeMe, selenomethyl; Sep15, 15 kDa selenoprotein; SECIS, SeCys-insertion sequence; SNP, single-nucleotide polymorphism.

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Evidence is accruing, some of which will be presented, that the level of intake of Se affects the risk of cancer and may even inhibit its spread from a primary tumour. Since UK deaths from cancer in adults now outnumber deaths from IHD and stroke, and approximately one in three of UK deaths from cancer in adults now outnumber deaths from cancer. These issues will be addressed.

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Selenoproteins

**Biosynthesis**

Unlike the other twenty amino acids, SeCys is biosynthesized on its own tRNA, Sec tRNA[Ser]Sec, from selenophosphate as the Se source. Sec tRNA[Ser]Sec has many unusual features, including its long length (Hatfield & Gladyshev, 2002). The insertion of SeCys is specified by the UGA codon in mRNA. However, as UGA is also a stop codon features, including its long length (Hatfield & Gladyshev, 2002). The insertion of SeCys is specified by the UGA codon in mRNA. However, as UGA is also a stop codon features, including its long length (Hatfield & Gladyshev, 2002). The insertion of SeCys is specified by the UGA codon in mRNA. However, as UGA is also a stop codon features, including its long length (Hatfield & Gladyshev, 2002). The insertion of SeCys is specified by the UGA codon in mRNA. However, as UGA is also a stop codon, it is timely to consider the potential of Se for cancer reduction.

The nature of the Se species involved in anti-cancer processes is still a matter of speculation and much ongoing experimental work. Whether the selenoproteins are crucial to the anti-cancer effects requires some understanding of the biosynthetic machinery involved and of the function of some of the selenoproteins most likely to be relevant to cancer. These issues will be addressed.

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**Selenoproteins of particular relevance to cancer**

The functions of many of the twenty-five human selenoproteins are as yet unknown, although they generally participate in antioxidant and anabolic processes (Hatfield & Gladyshev, 2002). Selenoproteins that may be relevant to cancer risk are described in Table 1 and include a number from the glutathione peroxidase (GPx) family, the 15 kDa selenoprotein (Sep15), selenoprotein P and the thioredoxin reductases, although a beneficial role of the thioredoxin reductases in cancer prevention is doubtful.

**Selenium intakes and status of adults in different countries**

If Se may protect against cancer, an adequate intake of Se is desirable. Whether the intake of Se is adequate is, however, questionable in much of Europe and some other parts of the world. Mean intake levels in a number of countries (Combs, 2001; Rayman, 2004) are shown in Fig. 1, which also indicates the range of Se intake believed to be required for optimal activity of plasma GPx (Thomson et al. 1993; Duffield et al. 1999). It is clear that the level of intake in Europe and some parts of China is not adequate for full expression of GPx. (According to Combs (2001), the same may be true of other parts of the world, as there is little or no information on Se intake or status for most of Africa, South America and central and south Asia.) Furthermore, an updated study of Se requirements by Burk’s group in collaboration with Chinese colleagues (Xia et al. 2005) has shown that full expression of selenoprotein P requires a greater Se intake than that required.

### Table 1. Some selenoproteins of particular relevance to cancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Selenoprotein</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glutathione peroxidases (GPx; particularly GPx1, cytosolic; GPx2, gastrointestinal; GPx4, phospholipid)</td>
<td>Antioxidant enzymes: remove H2O2, lipid and phospholipid hydroperoxides thereby maintaining membrane integrity, modulating eicosanoid synthesis, modifying inflammation and the likelihood of propagation of further oxidative damage to biomolecules</td>
<td>Spaillholz et al. (1990), Diplock (1994), Sunde (1997), Allan et al. (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 kDa selenoprotein</td>
<td>Associated with the endoplasmic reticulum: may be involved in the regulation of protein folding</td>
<td>Korotkov et al. (2001)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gene located in a region often altered in human cancers</td>
<td>Hu et al. (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expressed at high levels in normal liver and prostate but at reduced levels in the corresponding malignant organs; may protect prostate cells against development of carcinoma</td>
<td>Behne et al. (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selenoprotein P</td>
<td>Found in plasma and associated with endothelial cells. Antioxidant and transport functions</td>
<td>Burk et al. (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Scavenger of peroxynitrite, particularly at the endothelium</td>
<td>Arteel et al. (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Is down regulated in human tumours</td>
<td>Calvo et al. (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thioredoxin reductases (1, 2 and 3)</td>
<td>NADPH reduction of thioredoxin and other substrates; reduction of nucleotides in DNA synthesis; regeneration of antioxidant systems; maintenance of the intracellular redox state, critical for cell viability and proliferation; regulation of gene expression by redox control of binding of transcription factors to DNA</td>
<td>Allain et al. (1999)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More highly expressed in cancer cells than in normal cells and its expression is repressed by p53</td>
<td>Gladyshev et al. (1998)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
for full expression of plasma GPx. Thus, it is even more likely that current intakes are inadequate for optimising the protective effects of the selenoproteins. Indeed, there is evidence that will be outlined that suggests that levels of Se intake that are supra-nutritional may be required to reduce cancer risk (Combs, 2001; Rayman, 2002).

**Evidence for an effect of selenium on cancer risk**

The evidence for Se as a cancer preventive agent has been reviewed ably by a number of researchers (for example, see Combs & Grey, 1998; Ip, 1998; Combs & Lü, 2001; Knekt, 2002; Whanger, 2004; Combs, 2005), and includes findings from *in vitro*, animal, geographic (ecological) and prospective studies, and from interventions with Se. Such evidence will be summarised and updated, although *in vitro* studies and studies on Se compounds that cannot arise from food sources will only be referred to briefly (for more detail, see Combs & Grey, 1998; Ip, 1998; Combs & Lü, 2001; Knekt, 2002; Whanger, 2004; Combs, 2005). Case–control studies will be excluded as it is not possible to distinguish between Se concentration as an indicator of cancer risk and Se concentration that is a consequence of the disease process (Overvad, 1998).

**Animal studies**

Extensive experimental evidence indicates that Se supplementation reduces the incidence of cancer in animals (Medina & Morrison, 1988; Combs & Gray, 1998; Combs & Lü, 2001). However, it is difficult to generalise from such studies and extrapolate to the human situation, as animal studies have generally used doses at least ten times greater than those required to prevent clinical signs of deficiency, which, on a per unit body-weight basis, are considerably higher than most human Se intakes. However, it is worth describing a supplementation study on male beagle dogs, a species that develops spontaneous prostate cancer, as the lower dose given is reasonable for man. Supplementation of the diet of sexually-intact elderly male dogs with Se, as selenomethionine or high-Se yeast, at 3 or 6 mg/kg body weight per d for 7 months was found to reduce DNA damage and up-regulate epithelial cell apoptosis in their prostates, while no such effects were seen in the dogs that were not supplemented (Waters *et al*. 2003).

It appears that Se sensitises prostate epithelial cells so that cells with extensive DNA damage undergo apoptosis *in vivo*.

**Geographical (ecological) studies**

Since as early as the 1960s geographical studies have shown a consistent trend for populations with low Se intakes to have higher cancer mortality rates (Shamberger & Frost, 1969; Schrauzer *et al*. 1977; Clark *et al*. 1991). In one such study (Schrauzer *et al*. 1977), inverse correlations were observed between apparent dietary Se intakes estimated from food-consumption data in twenty-seven countries and the cancer mortality rates.
countries and age-corrected mortality for a number of cancers, including that of the prostate. However, the value of evidence from this type of study is not rated very highly by epidemiologists.

Prospective and nested case–control studies

Knekt (2002) has tabulated the results of prospective studies of Se and cancer published up to the end of 1998. The following categories are included: all cancers; lung cancer; colo-rectal, gastrointestinal and stomach cancers; prostate cancer; female cancers; miscellaneous cancers that include cancers of the liver, bladder, mouth, pharynx, oesophagus and malignant melanoma. Of approximately seventy-two table entries, fifty entries show a lower risk associated with higher Se intake or status, although only in eighteen studies (25%) that included all cancers and cancers of the bladder, lung, ovary, prostate, stomach and thyroid is the risk significantly reduced.

More recent evidence that Se status can influence mortality from all cancers combined has been found in a cohort of 1389 male and female volunteers recruited in the Etude du Vieillissement Artériel (Akbaraly et al. 2005). Mean baseline plasma Se levels in the cohort were reported to be 86 μg/l, which is similar to levels in much of Europe. During the 9-year follow-up, 101 subjects died, fifty-five of them from cancer. The risk of mortality from cancer was shown to be increased fourfold in subjects in the bottom quartile of baseline plasma Se compared with those in the top quartile (relative risk (RR) 4·06 (95% CI 1·51, 10·92); P = 0·006).

The strongest evidence for a beneficial effect of Se from prospective studies appears to relate to lung cancer, oesophageal and gastric-cardia cancers and, most notably, prostate cancer. The risk of colo-rectal adenoma, a pre-cancerous condition, also seems to be affected.

Lung cancer. A recent meta-analysis of existing epidemiological evidence from sixteen studies has shown a significantly decreased risk of lung cancer (summary RR 0·74) associated with higher Se exposure (Zhuo et al. 2004; Table 3). The effects were found to occur primarily in populations of low Se exposure (defined as serum Se <100 μg/l or intake <55 μg/d). In studies carried out in high-Se areas (defined as serum Se >100 μg/l or intake >55 μg/d) protective effects appeared on moving from the lowest Se category to the second-lowest Se category, but increasing Se exposure thereafter appeared to have little further effect, suggesting the existence of a threshold effect.

Oesophageal cancer and gastric-cardia cancer. In a nested study from the Nutrition Intervention Trial in Linxian, China, significant inverse associations were found between baseline serum Se concentration as a continuous variable and death from oesophageal squamous cell carcinoma (RR 0·83 (95% CI 0·71, 0·98)) and gastric-cardia cancer [RR 0·75 (95% CI 0·59, 0·95)] in 1103 subjects randomly-selected from the larger trial cohort and followed for 15 years (Wei et al. 2004). When the subjects were classified by quartile of baseline Se, those in the highest quartile had a 65% significant reduction in the risk of death from oesophageal squamous cell carcinoma (RR 0·35 (95% CI 0·16, 0·81)) and a 69% significant reduction in the risk of death from gastric-cardia cancer (RR 0·31 (95% CI 0·11, 0·87)) when compared with the subjects in the lowest quartile. The mean population serum Se concentration in the cohort (73 μg/l) was relatively low. It has been suggested by Wei et al. (2004) that population-wide Se supplementation in regions of China with low serum Se levels and high rates of these cancers merits serious consideration.

Prostate cancer. Results from large prospective studies of prostate cancer (Knekt et al. 1990; Yoshizawa et al. 1998; Helzlsouer et al. 2000; Nomura et al. 2000; Brooks et al. 2001; Goodman et al. 2001; van den Brandt et al. 2003; Li et al. 2004) are shown in Table 2. Those published in 2003 and 2004 were large studies with 540 (van den Brandt et al. 2003) and 586 (Li et al. 2004) cases. Of the eight prospective studies listed seven show a reduced risk of prostate cancer overall for the highest v. lowest category of Se status, the risk being significantly reduced in five studies. When the analysis is confined to subjects who had advanced prostate cancer or a baseline prostate-specific antigen of >4 ng/ml, six of the eight prospective studies show a significant reduction in prostate cancer in the subjects in the highest category of Se status.

Although the study of Knekt et al. (1990) in Finland showed no relationship between serum Se concentration and prostate cancer risk, Platz & Helzlsouer (2001) have noted that the participants had circulating levels almost three times lower than those reported in the other studies (approximately 50 μg/l v. 150 μg/l). Thus, it may be possible that the concentration of Se in this cohort was below the threshold at which Se can exert a protective effect on prostate cancer risk. This possibility is given credence by the study of Nomura et al. (2000), which has shown that there is a protective effect (odds ratio (OR) 0·5) mainly in subjects with serum Se concentrations >147 μg/l, with an OR of approximately 1 in lower quartiles of plasma Se.

In a number of these studies (Yoshizawa et al. 1998; Nomura et al. 2000; van den Brandt et al. 2003; Li et al. 2004) the protective effect of Se has been shown to be stronger for advanced prostate cancer, i.e. disease that has spread beyond the prostate, than for localised disease. Furthermore, when data from the Physicians’ Health Study were analysed according to baseline prostate-specific antigen level, the protective effect was found to be significant for all prostate cancers (both localised and advanced disease) but only in those with baseline prostate specific antigen >4 ng/ml (Li et al. 2004), again suggesting a major effect of Se on prostate cancer progression rather than initiation.

Two studies have suggested that smoking modifies the effect of Se. The Netherlands Cohort Study has shown by far the strongest effect of Se in ex-smokers (van den Brandt et al. 2003), while the inverse association between Se and prostate cancer was found to be mainly present in current or past cigarette smokers in the study of Nomura et al. (2000).

carried out a pooled analysis of data from three studies that could be considered as prospective studies of Se and risk of colo-rectal adenoma. The Wheat Bran Fiber Trial (Alberts et al. 2000), the Polyp Prevention Trial (Schatzkin et al. 2000) and the Polyp Prevention Study (Greenberg et al. 1994) were 3–4-year interventions in subjects that had recently undergone adenoma removal, 1763 of whom had baseline serum or plasma Se levels measured. The risk of adenoma recurrence was not affected by any of the interventions. Analysis of pooled data showed that the subjects with baseline serum or plasma Se in the highest quartile (median 150 µg/l), when compared with those in the lowest quartile (median 113 µg/l), had a significantly lower risk of adenoma recurrence (OR 0.66 (95% CI 0.50, 0.87). These results support previous findings that are suggestive of a beneficial effect of higher Se status on colo-rectal cancer risk (Jacobs et al. 2004).

Intervention studies including randomised controlled trials

**Chinese trials.** National Cancer Institute-sponsored trials in China for the prevention of oesophageal and gastric cancer have observed a reduction in total cancer mortality and a reduced incidence of oesophageal and gastric-cardia cancers in the intervention arm comprising Se, β-carotene and vitamin E (Blot et al. 1993; Mark et al. 2000). Although Se was not a single agent in these trials, it is likely to have been the most effective component, particularly in the light of subsequent studies (Wei et al. 2004). (As one of a number of agents in an Indian trial Se has also been shown to aid the remission of precancerous lesions of the oral cavity (Krishnaswamy et al. 1995; Prasad et al. 1995).)

Hepatocellular carcinoma is highly prevalent in China. In Qidong county, near Shanghai, its incidence is

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Study population</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>Indicator of exposure</th>
<th>Comparison: high v. low</th>
<th>RR†</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>P (for trend)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knekt et al. (1990)</td>
<td>Finland, general population</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Serum Quintile</td>
<td>1-15 –</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yoshizawa et al. (1998)</td>
<td>USA, health professionals</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>Toenails Quintile</td>
<td>0.35‡</td>
<td>0.16, 0.78*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nomura et al. (2000)</td>
<td>USA, Hawaii,</td>
<td>249</td>
<td>Serum Quintile</td>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>0.3, 0.9*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Helzlsouer et al. (2000)</td>
<td>USA, Washington County</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>Toenails Quintile</td>
<td>0-58</td>
<td>0.29, 1.18</td>
<td>0.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goodman et al. (2001)</td>
<td>USA, CARET</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>Serum Quartile</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.7, 1.6</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Brooks et al. (2001)</td>
<td>USA, Baltimore</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Plasma Quartile</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.08, 0.77*</td>
<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>van den Brandt et al. (2003)</td>
<td>The Netherlands, Cohort Study</td>
<td>540</td>
<td>Toenails Quintile</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.48, 0.99*</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Li et al. (2004)</td>
<td>USA, Physicians' Health Study</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>Plasma Quintile</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.54, 1.13</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| CARET, β-Carotene and Retinol Efficacy Trial; RR, relative risk; PSA, prostate-specific antigen.
| *The effect was significant.
| †Highest category v. lowest category.
| ‡Advanced disease.
| §Adjusted for BMI at age 21 years, education and interval (h) since last meal.

Table 2. Large prospective studies of prostate cancer or advanced prostate cancer using tissue indicators of exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Study population</th>
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<tr>
<td>Goodman et al. (2001)</td>
<td>USA, CARET</td>
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<td>0.48, 0.99*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Li et al. (2004)</td>
<td>USA, Physicians' Health Study</td>
<td>586</td>
<td>Plasma Quintile</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.54, 1.13</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Meta-analysis of existing epidemiological evidence from sixteen studies of selenium and lung cancer (Zhuo et al. 2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>Study population</th>
<th>No. of cases</th>
<th>Indicator of exposure</th>
<th>Comparison: high v. low</th>
<th>RR†</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
<th>P (for trend)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All subjects</td>
<td>0-74</td>
<td>0.57, 0.97</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Low-Se areas</td>
<td>0-72</td>
<td>0.45, 1.16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>High-Se areas</td>
<td>0-86</td>
<td>0.61, 1.22</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
particularly high. In this region approximately 15% of adults carry the hepatitis B surface antigen and these individuals are 200 times more likely to develop hepatocellular carcinoma. In a study in which 226 hepatitis B individuals were randomised to a Se (200µg)-enriched yeast tablet or a placebo, no case of hepatocellular carcinoma was reported to occur in the Se-supplemented group after 4 years, while seven subjects in the unsupplemented placebo group had developed hepatocellular carcinoma (Yu et al. 1997). However, as full details of the methodology of this study are not available, it is difficult to assess whether its protocol was sufficiently well-controlled or robust to be confident in its conclusions.

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis of antioxidant supplements for the prevention of gastrointestinal cancers has assessed the evidence for an effect of Se (Bjelakovic et al. 2004). Data from three Chinese trials were included, two of which used selenised yeast (Yu et al. 1997), while the third trial used Na2SeO3 (Li et al. 2000). Bjelakovic et al. (2004) concluded that, in contrast to other antioxidant nutrients, Se showed a significant beneficial effect, reducing the risk of hepatocellular carcinoma by 50% (RR 0.50 (95% CI 0.35, 0.71)).


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cancer</th>
<th>Follow-up until:</th>
<th>RR  95% CI</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>31 December 1993</td>
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<tr>
<td>All sites Mortality</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.31, 0.80</td>
<td>0.002</td>
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<td>1 February 1996</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.39, 0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All sites Incidence</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.47, 0.85</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1 February 1996</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.58, 0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lung Incidence</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.30, 0.98</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 February 1996</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.40, 1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colo-rectal Incidence</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.18, 0.95</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 February 1996</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.19, 1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostate Incidence</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.18, 0.71</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 February 1996</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.29, 0.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of treatment effect by initial plasma Se status in the NPC trial has shown that the strongest treatment effect was in subjects in the lowest tertile of plasma Se at baseline, i.e. those subjects whose plasma Se concentration was <106µg/l at entry to the trial (Duffield-Lillico et al. 2002). Se supplementation was found to reduce total cancer incidence in this tertile by 49% (HR 0.51 (95% CI 0.32, 0.81)) (Duffield-Lillico et al. 2002) and prostate cancer incidence by 86% (HR 0.14 (95% CI 0.03, 0.61); Duffield-Lillico et al. 2003a) in the follow-up analyses. Most UK and European populations would fall into this tertile.

A significant interaction between baseline plasma Se and treatment was detected such that those subjects in the top tertile (>121-6µg/l) that were supplemented with Se had a significantly increased risk of total cancer (HR 1.88 (95% CI 1.15, 3.05); P = 0.01; Duffield-Lillico et al. 2002).
Although this is a subgroup analysis of a secondary end-point analysis and must therefore be regarded with caution, it does raise queries about the advisability of supplementing individuals of already-adequate status (e.g. ≥120 µg/l) with Se.

**Insights from the evidence presented**

What lessons can be learned from the NPC trial? It would appear that plasma Se should reach approximately 120 µg/l to optimise the anti-cancer effect of Se. This level is higher than that previously understood to be required to maximise the activity or concentration of selenoenzymes such as GPx (Thomson et al. 1993; Duffield et al. 1999), although ideas for optimum levels have recently had to be revised upwards as a result of new findings on requirements for selenoprotein P (Xia et al. 2005). Does this outcome mean that the selenoenzymes are not relevant to the anti-cancer effects of Se, or do some individuals have a higher Se requirement, perhaps as a result of single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in their selenoprotein genes? This issue will be addressed as part of a general consideration of possible mechanisms by which Se may reduce cancer risk.

**Selenium anti-cancer mechanisms**

A number of mechanisms have been suggested to explain the anti-cancer effects of Se. These are summarised in Table 5. Although there is fairly general acceptance that methyl selenol (CH₃SeH) is involved in the anti-cancer effects of Se at supra-nutritional doses, as will be explained below, evidence is accruing, some from effects of functional selenoprotein polymorphisms, that the selenoenzymes do play a role, particularly at nutritional levels of intake. Se in selenoproteins can reduce oxidative stress and limit DNA damage, both of which have been linked to cancer risk. Some of these anti-cancer processes or pathways are discussed more fully later (p. 536).

**Methyl selenol and its precursors**

The *in vivo* production of small-molecular-weight Se metabolites such as CH₃SeH that have potent anti-cancer properties has been inferred from work carried out by a number of research groups (Ip, 1998; Jiang et al. 1999; Ip et al. 2000, 2002; Davis & Finley, 2003; Spallholz et al. 2004; Whanger, 2004). The metabolism of dietary forms of Se is shown in Fig. 2 (adapted from Combs, 2001; Rayman, 2004), from which it can be seen that CH₃SeH can be formed by the methylation of H₂Se as part of the Se excretory pathway. There is also some evidence that CH₃SeH can be formed directly from selenomethionine either by the action of a γ-lyase, also known as methionase (Nakamura et al. 1997; Wang et al. 2002; Spallholz et al. 2004) or by an α, γ-elimination reaction (Okuno et al. 2005). Alternatively, it can be formed from a storage form of Se, i.e. γ-glutamyl-selenomethyl (SeMe)-SeCys, that is present in plants of the Brassica and Allium families (Ip et al. 2000; Kotrebai et al. 2000; Whanger, 2004) and probably accounts for the anti-tumour effects of Se-enriched broccoli and garlic (Ip et al. 2000; Davis & Finlay, 2003). Metabolism removes the γ-glutamyl group to give SeMe-SeCys, which is acted upon by a β-lyase to give CH₃SeH directly (Ip et al. 2000; Combs, 2001). There is a suggestion that the β-lyase is present at a higher level in cancer cells than in normal cells, ensuring greater exposure of the tumour cells to the anti-cancer agent (Spallholz et al. 2004).

Speciation studies have been carried out on Se-enriched yeast, the form of Se shown to be effective in most human interventions. These studies have shown the presence of small amounts of both γ-glutamyl-SeMe-SeCys and SeMe-SeCys, dependent on the method of extraction, inferring that CH₃SeH may be produced directly from the Se-enriched yeast without the necessity of conversion from selenomethionine, its major Se constituent (Goenaga Infante et al. 2004, 2005). As SeMe-SeCys has been found to be more than twice as effective as selenomethionine in reducing mammary tumours in rats (Whanger, 2004), even these small amounts may be important.

Precursors of CH₃SeH, typically methyl seleninic acid (CH₃SeO₂H) in experimental *in vitro* systems, have been shown to block progression of the cell cycle, induce apoptosis of cancer cells and inhibit the formation of new blood vessels, without which tumours cannot grow or metastasise (Ip, 1998; Jiang et al. 1999; Ip et al. 2000; Davis & Finley, 2003; Whanger, 2004). Processes by which these effects are achieved may involve redox cycling linked to oxidative stress-induced apoptosis, as described by Spallholz et al. (2004), and include changes in the expression of genes that control the cell-cycle checkpoint and regulate signalling pathways and caspase-mediated apoptosis (Dong et al. 2003). For instance, SeMe-SeCys activates caspase-3 in mouse mammary epithelial tumour cells *in vitro* (Unni et al. 2001) while CH₃SeO₂H is known to activate initiator caspases-1, 8, 10, and 12 (Zu & Ip, 2003). Apoptosis induced by CH₃SeO₂H in DU-145 and PC-3 human prostate cancer cells is principally initiated by caspase-8 and involves cell detachment as a prerequisite (Jiang et al. 2001; Zu & Ip, 2003). Caspase-12, an endoplasmic reticulum-resident caspase essential for endoplasmic reticulum stress-induced apoptosis, is also activated during apoptosis induced by CH₃SeO₂H in PC-3 cells, suggesting a possible role for endoplasmic reticulum stress in apoptosis induced by CH₃SeH (Zu & Ip, 2003).

**Reduction of DNA damage**

Evidence that Se can reduce DNA damage comes from studies in dogs and man. In a canine model of prostate cancer forty-nine elderly male beagle dogs, physiologically equivalent to 62–69-year-old men and similarly subject to prostate cancer, received nutritionally-adequate or supra-nutritional levels of dietary Se or Se-enriched yeast for 7 months (Waters et al. 2005). DNA damage in the prostate was measured by the alkaline comet assay while Se was measured in toenails. The percentage of prostate cells with extensive DNA damage was found to fall with increased Se exposure up to a level of...
Table 5. Some cellular processes and molecular pathways that may be involved in the anti-cancer effect of selenium

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anti-cancer processes or pathways</th>
<th>Selected evidence for Se involvement</th>
<th>Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seleno-enzyme mechanisms</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of DNA damage</td>
<td>Se intake or status affects DNA damage in both human and animal studies</td>
<td>Karunasinghe et al. (2004), Kowalska et al. (2005), Waters et al. (2005); also, see p. 533</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of oxidative stress</td>
<td>Levels of dietary antioxidant vitamins and carotenoids and SNP that affect antioxidant selenoproteins modify the effect of Se on cancer risk</td>
<td>See p. 535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduction of inflammation growth</td>
<td>Selenoenzymes can reduce hydroperoxide intermediates in the cyclooxygenase and lipoxygenase pathways preventing the production of pro-inflammatory prostaglandins and leukotrienes</td>
<td>Rayman (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction of phase II conjugating enzymes and reduce DNA adduct formation</td>
<td>Reduction of inflammation: inflammation promotes tumour growth (Caruso et al. 2004). Some selenocompounds e.g. methyl selenol (CH₃SeH), can up regulate phase II conjugating enzymes such as glutathione-S-transferase, increasing detoxification of carcinogens Carcinogen adducts are reduced in liver and mammary gland of rats fed Se-enriched garlic, mushrooms and selenite</td>
<td>Ip &amp; Lisk (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhancement of immune response: cytotoxic lymphocytes and natural-killer cells are able to destroy tumour cells</td>
<td>Se supplementation (Na₂SeO₃) enhanced the immune response of volunteers and cancer patients by increasing the numbers of cytotoxic lymphocytes and natural-killer cells</td>
<td>Kiremidjian-Schumacher et al. (1994, 2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase in tumour-suppressor protein p53: inhibits proliferation, stimulates DNA repair and promotes apoptotic death by acting as a transcription factor for several genes, including the damage-inducible gadd genes</td>
<td>SeMet can activate p53 through redox regulation of key p53 cysteine residues. Methyl seleninic acid (CH₃SeO₂H) and Na₂SeO₃ modulate p53 activity by phosphorylation Selenodiglutathione also induces p53</td>
<td>Smith et al. (2004) Lanfear et al. (1994) Kaeck et al. (1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inactivation of protein kinase C (PKC), a signalling receptor that plays a crucial role in tumour promotion by oxidants</td>
<td>Selective inactivation of PKC results from reaction of its catalytic domain with selenometabolites such CH₂SeO₂H (formed from membrane-bound CH₂SeH and fatty acid hydroperoxides), inhibiting tumour promotion and cell growth</td>
<td>Gopalakrishna &amp; Gumimeda (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alteration in DNA methylation: abnormal methylation patterns are associated with neoplasia and inactivation of tumour-suppressor genes</td>
<td>Se affects the extent of DNA methylation and the activity of DNA methyl transferase</td>
<td>Davis et al. (2000), Davis &amp; Uthus (2003), Fiala et al. (1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blockage of the cell cycle: inhibits growth and may allow DNA repair to take place</td>
<td>CH₃SeH precursors can induce cell cycle arrest without single-strand breaks and with or without caspase induction and p53 regulation</td>
<td>Davis &amp; Finley (2003) Medina et al. (2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Induction of apoptosis of cancer cells: generally involves the sequential activation of the caspases, a family of proteases capable of degrading cellular components</td>
<td>CH₃SeH precursors induce DNA double-strand breaks and cell death by apoptosis involving the caspase cascade</td>
<td>Medina et al. 2001, Unni et al. (2001), Wang et al. (2002), Davis &amp; Finley (2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhibition of angiogenesis: new blood vessels are required for the growth and metastasis of tumours</td>
<td>CH₃SeH reduces microvessel density in chemically-induced rat mammary carcinomas (but not in normal tissue), the expression of vascular endothelial growth factor and matrix metalloproteinases p38 MAPK may be a key upstream mediator for the CH₃SeH-specific induction of vascular endothelial caspase-dependent apoptosis</td>
<td>Jiang et al. (1999) Jiang et al. (2004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SNP, single-nucleotide polymorphisms; SeMet, selenomethionine; MAPK, mitogen-activated protein kinase.
0.3–0.9 μg/g, as measured in dog toenails. Damage began to rise at >1.0 μg/g toenails, demonstrating the typical ‘U’-shaped response to a nutrient that is toxic at high levels. Although the authors claim to have supplemented the dogs over the range of intake seen in US men, the baseline maintenance diet, at 0.3 μg Se/g, gave an intake in the control group of 6 μg/kg body weight, already equivalent to a high human intake, i.e. 450 μg/d for a 75 kg man. The highest supplement level was an additional 6 μg Se/kg body weight, equivalent to a total daily intake of 900 μg/d for a 75 kg man. It is not surprising, therefore, that the upward arm of the ‘U’-shaped response was breached.

In a New Zealand study of men aged 50–75 years at risk of prostate cancer (prostate-specific antigen >4 ng/ml), the comet assay was reported to show a significant inverse relationship with overall accumulated DNA damage in blood leucocytes from subjects with serum Se levels below the mean (Karunasinghe et al., 2004). As the mean serum Se was measured as 98 (sd 17) μg/l, this finding suggests that serum levels >98 μg/l are required for the prevention of DNA damage in New Zealand men.

Women born with a BRCA1 mutation carry a lifetime risk of breast cancer of 80% and a lifetime risk of ovarian cancer of 40% (Kowalska et al., 2005). The BRCA1 gene product is involved in maintaining the integrity of the human genome and helps repair double-strand breaks. When blood lymphocytes from BRCA1 carriers are exposed to bleomycin, a known mutagen that induces double-strand breaks, an increased frequency of chromosome breaks per cell occurs, i.e. 0.58 in BRCA1 carriers v. 0.39 in non-carriers (Kowalska et al., 2005). In thirty-two female BRCA1 carriers supplemented with Se (276 μg as Na2SeO3/d) for 1–3 months, the frequency of chromosome breaks was found to be reduced from 0.63 per cell before supplementation with Se to 0.40 per cell after supplementation, bringing it to the level in non-carrier controls. Thus, Se may have the potential to reduce breast cancer risk in these women.

**Reduction of oxidative stress**

The modification of the anti-cancer effects of Se by other antioxidant nutrients suggests that the ability of Se in selenoproteins to reduce oxidative stress is relevant to its anti-cancer effects. Thus, Se intake or status becomes more important when the concentration of other antioxidants or the activity of other antioxidant enzymes is low. The strongest effect of Se on cancer risk has been shown among those subjects with the lowest levels of dietary antioxidant vitamins and carotenoids (Willett et al., 1983; Salonen et al., 1985; Kok et al., 1987; Knekt et al., 1990; van den Brandt et al., 1993, 2003; Yu et al., 1999), and particularly at low α-tocopherol concentrations (Combs & Gray, 1998). In the study of Yoshizawa et al. (1998), summarised in Table 2, the inverse association between Se status and advanced prostate cancer was found to be slightly stronger after excluding men with an intake of vitamin E >30 mg/d, mostly from supplementary sources (OR 0.29 v. 0.35), Data, as yet unpublished, from the NPC trial (M Reid, personal communication) show that the effect of Se supplementation on prostate cancer risk only reaches significance in subjects in the bottom half of α-tocopherol status, i.e. plasma concentrations <21.66 μM (P = 0.03 v. P = 0.31 in the top half of α-tocopherol status).

A further indication of a link between the antioxidant capacity of Se and cancer risk is seen in the modification of the Se-dependent risk by a polymorphism in Mn superoxide dismutase (MnSOD), the primary antioxidant enzyme in mitochondria. MnSOD has an Ala/Val polymorphism at codon 16 in the mitochondrial targeting sequence that affects the structure of the protein. The relationship between prostate cancer, the MnSOD polymorphism and baseline plasma Se concentration has been investigated in 567 cases and 764 controls nested within the prospective Physicians’ Health Study (Li et al., 2005). Although little overall association was found between MnSOD polymorphism and prostate cancer risk, in men with the Ala/Ala genotype high Se status (4th quartile v.
1st quartile) was shown to be associated with a significantly lower risk (RR 0.3 (95% CI 0.2, 0.7); P = 0.002 for trend). For clinically-aggressive prostate cancer the RR shown to be even more reduced (0.2 (95% CI 0.1, 0.5); P<0.001 for trend). In contrast, in men with one or two Val alleles the RR in the 4th quartile compared with the 1st quartile was shown to be less affected by Se status (0.6 (95% CI 0.4, 1.0) and 0.7 (95% CI 0.4, 1.2) for total and clinically-aggressive prostate cancer respectively; Li et al. 2005). The interdependence of MnSOD, Se status and prostate cancer risk implies a role for the antioxidant selenoenzymes.

Evidence from selenoprotein genotype data for a role of selenoproteins in cancer prevention

It had been thought that selenoenzymes were not involved in anti-cancer mechanisms because the level of Se supplementation that reduced cancer risk (200 µg/d) was greater than the amount then believed to be needed to optimise selenoenzyme activity (Combs & Gray, 1998). However, it has recently become clear that optimal expression of some selenoproteins, notably selenoprotein P, requires a higher amount, as yet undetermined, of dietary Se (Xia et al. 2005) and, furthermore, that a substantial number of individuals may have a higher requirement for Se for efficient synthesis of selenoproteins, as will be explained later (p. 537).

Individuals differ substantially in their ability to increase selenoprotein activity in response to additional dietary Se (Brown et al. 2000). This inter-individual variation in selenoprotein expression levels may be accounted for by SNPs in selenoprotein genes that determine the efficiency with which individuals can incorporate Se into selenoproteins (Kumaraswamy et al. 2000; Ratnasingham et al. 2000; Hu et al. 2001; Hu & Diamond, 2003). Thus, requirements for dietary Se for optimal protection against cancer may be much higher in individuals carrying particular functional selenoprotein SNPs such as those that will be described.

**Cytosolic glutathione peroxidase.** Recent studies have reported a link between cancer risk and polymorphisms in the cytosolic GPx selenoprotein (GPx1) gene at Pro198-Leu. Possession of the Leu198 allele has been found to be associated with an increased risk of lung cancer in Caucasians but not among ethnic Chinese, who do not appear to show this polymorphism (Ratnasingham et al. 2000). Possession of the Leu198 allele also confers an increased risk of bladder cancer (see Table 6) and that risk is further raised in men who have one or two Ala alleles at codon 9 (apparently identical to codon 16, as described earlier) in exon 2 of MnSOD (Ichimura et al. 2004). In the 213 patients with bladder cancer, when compared with the Pro/Pro genotype, the Pro/Leu genotype was found to be significantly associated with advanced tumour stage (OR 2.58 (95% CI 1.07, 6.18); P = 0.034 for tumour stage T2–4 v. tumour stage Ta+1; Ichimura et al. 2004). By contrast, in a case–control study of 399 cases of incident invasive breast cancer and 372 controls, no association between breast cancer and GPx1 Pro198Leu was found (Knight et al. 2004). However, the allele of GPx1 containing four GCG repeats was found to be significantly associated with breast cancer risk in premenopausal women (OR 1.55 (95% CI 1.04, 2.30) for carriers v. non-carriers). Importantly, GPx1 with the Leu allele has been shown to be less responsive to stimulation of its enzyme activity by Se supplementation than GPx1 with the Pro allele (Hu & Diamond, 2003).

Studies showing selective loss of the Pro198 allele of the GPx1 gene during tumour development, as detected by loss of heterozygosity at this locus, implicate GPx1 in the risk and development of tumours. The Leu/Leu genotype has been found to be almost twice as common in DNA from breast cancer tissue as it is in DNA from cancer-free individuals, while the Pro/Leu genotype was found to be underrepresented, indicating loss of heterozygosity at this locus in breast tumour development (Hu & Diamond, 2003). Similarly, DNA samples from head and neck tumours exhibit fewer heterozygotes and an increased frequency of the Leu/Leu genotype compared with DNA from the cancer-free population (Hu et al. 2004).

**15kDa selenoprotein.** Sep15 is expressed at high levels in normal liver and prostate but at reduced levels in the corresponding malignant organs (Behne et al. 1997). It is located in the endoplasmic reticulum, tightly complexed to UDP-glucose-glycoprotein glucosyltransferase, an enzyme involved in the quality control of protein folding (Korotkov et al. 2001). (The location of Sep15 may be of interest as some forms of Se appear to activate endoplasmic reticulum stress-induced apoptosis, as mentioned earlier.) The Sep15 gene lies on chromosome 1p22.3 at a locus commonly deleted or mutated in human cancers (Kumaraswamy et al. 2000; Kryukov et al. 2003). Two SNPs at positions 811 (C/T) and 1125 (G/A) that are in strong allelic association have been studied in the 3′-UTR of the Sep15 gene; G1125A lies within a functional SECIS element (Kumaraswamy et al. 2000). The T811/A1125 variant has been shown to be more effective in supporting UGA read-through than the C811/G1125 variant, but less responsive to the addition of Se to the culture medium (Hu et al. 2001; Kumaraswamy et al. 2000). Thus, the identity of the nucleotides at 811 and 1125 influences the function of the Sep15 SECIS element in a Se-dependent manner.

### Table 6. Association between glutathione peroxidase Pro198Leu allele and cancer risk (odds ratio; OR) and modification of risk by manganese superoxide dismutase (MnSOD) genotype

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cancer</th>
<th>Tissue sampled</th>
<th>SNP genotype</th>
<th>OR* 95% CI Reference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lung</td>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>Pro/Leu</td>
<td>1.8 1.2-2.8 Ratanasinghe et al. (2000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leu/Leu</td>
<td>2.3 1.3-3.8 Ichimura et al. (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pro/Leu + MnSOD Val/Ala+ Ala/Ala</td>
<td>6.3 1.3-31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bladder</td>
<td>Blood</td>
<td>Pro/Leu</td>
<td>0.9 0.7-1.2 Knight et al. (2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leu/Leu</td>
<td>0.8 0.5-1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SNP, single-nucleotide polymorphism.
*Compared with Pro/Pro genotype.
manner (Kumaraswamy et al. 2000). Individuals possessing one or other of these haplotypes may therefore differ in the efficiency with which they can make Sep15 and in how well they can use dietary Se.

The frequency of the T811/A1125 haplotype is 0.25 in Caucasians and 0.57 in African Americans, who have a higher incidence of prostate cancer (Hsu et al. 2001). If lower levels of the Sep15 gene product predispose cells to malignant transformation in the human population, then those individuals carrying a particular Sep15 gene polymorphism may be at a greater risk of cancer and might require a higher Se intake for protection. Furthermore, a difference was found among African Americans (but not Caucasians) in allele frequencies in DNA from breast or head and neck tumours compared with DNA from cancer-free controls. The authors (Hsu et al. 2001; Diwadkar-Navsariwala & Diamond, 2004) suggest that this difference is likely to be largely related to loss of heterozygosity at the Sep15 locus.

Additional evidence for an effect of this polymorphism on cancer risk comes from a study of Apostolou et al. (2004), which has shown that the A1125 variant of Sep15 is less responsive to the apoptotic and growth-inhibitory effects of Se than the G1125 variant. The Sep15 gene was shown to be down-regulated in 60% of malignant-mesothelioma cell lines and tumour specimens in this study.

Phospholipid glutathione peroxidase. Phospholipid GPx (Gpx4) decreases lipid hydroperoxide levels, and thus inhibits the lipoygenases that metabolise arachidonic acid to generate intermediates that mediate signals for increasing cell proliferation and inhibiting apoptosis (Kim & Milner, 2001). In particular, it inhibits 5-lipoxygenase and reduces the production of 5-hydroxyeicosatetraenoic acid, which is known to stimulate the proliferation of prostate cancer cells (Ghost & Myers, 1998). Inhibition of 5-lipoxygenase has been shown to trigger massive apoptosis in human prostate cancer cells (Ghost & Myers, 1998). The C718 allele of the GPx4 T718C SNP, which is close to the SECIS element in the 3'-UTR, has a frequency of 0.45 in Caucasians and is associated with increased levels of lymphocyte 5-lipoxygenase total products (Villet et al. 2002). Thus, this polymorphism has functional consequences and may influence the production of 5-hydroxyeicosatetraenoic acid and consequently the proliferation or apoptosis of prostate cancer cells (Villet et al. 2002). Two genetic studies (Hsieh et al. 2001; Wiklund et al. 2003) have shown linkage of the chromosome 19p13.3 region that contains the GPx4 gene to prostate cancer.

Selenoprotein P. SNPs have also been identified in selenoprotein P, a selenoprotein believed to be involved both in protection from reactive oxygen and nitrogen species and in the transport of Se to tissues. Normally, the selenoprotein P gene is highly expressed in prostatic epithelium but it is down regulated in a subset of human prostate tumours, mouse tumours and prostate carcinoma cell lines (Calvo et al. 2002). Calvo et al. (2002) have suggested that reduced selenoprotein P synthesis occurs in a subset of patients resulting in loss of protection from oxidative stress.

Likelihood of simultaneous and consecutive effects at different cancer stages

Given the breadth of evidence for the involvement of forms of Se in various anti-cancer processes, it is likely that Se acts at a number of stages in cancer development and by a number of different mechanisms that may operate simultaneously, or consecutively, involving both small-molecule-weight Se metabolites and selenoproteins. Diwadkar-Navsariwala & Diamond (2004) have proposed a model in which the likelihood of cancer development is linked to reduced levels of one or more protective selenoproteins resulting from (1) inadequate dietary Se intake and/or (2) genetic polymorphisms that result in an increased Se requirement for selenoprotein synthesis and/or (3) allelic loss of one or two gene copies during tumour development. It may even be that exposure to some forms of Se provokes cellular stress, up-regulating protective response systems (such as glutathione-S-transferase) that reduce cancer risk (V Gladyshev, personal communication). Clearly, this very complex area is far from being fully understood.

Effect of selenium on progression and metastasis

There are a few indications that Se can have an effect on cancer progression or metastasis. Three examples are: (1) the effect of Se status on prostate cancer is greater for advanced disease (disease that has spread beyond the prostate) than for primary disease (Nomura et al. 2000; van den Brandt et al. 2003; Li et al. 2004), suggesting an inhibitory effect on tumour spread; (2) angiogenesis is required for progression and metastasis. It requires growth factors such as vascular endothelial growth factor and proteolytic degradation of the extracellular matrix by the family of matrix metalloproteinases. Vascular endothelial growth factor expression and protein levels are significantly lowered, as is the activity of matrix metalloproteinases by CH₃SeH precursors (Jiang et al. 1999, 2000, 2004), while selenite inhibits invasion of human fibrosarcoma cells by reducing the expression of matrix metalloproteinase-2 and -9 (Yoon et al. 2001); (3) the tumour stage of bladder cancer is affected by GPx1 genotype, giving indirect evidence that GPx1 is relevant to bladder cancer progression (Ichimura et al. 2004).

Current and future selenium-cancer projects

The Selenium and Vitamin E Cancer Prevention Trial (SELECT), sponsored by the National Cancer Institute at a cost of US$180 million, is a phase III randomised double-blind placebo-controlled trial designed to test the efficacy of Se (200 μg l-selenomethionine) and vitamin E (400 mg α-tocopherol), both alone and in combination, in the prevention of prostate cancer (Klein, 2004). The target accrual of 32,400 male volunteers has been achieved and final results are expected in 2013.

The possibility of raising even one-tenth of the sum made available in the USA for the Selenium and Vitamin E
Cancer Prevention Trial for a similar-scale trial in Europe is remote. However, European investigators are still hopeful that a sufficient sum can be raised to carry out a less-expensive web-based trial (Prevention of Cancer by Intervention with Selenium) with Se-enriched yeast in Europe where Se intakes and status are so much lower. As the strongest treatment effect in the NPC Trial has been observed in subjects in the lowest tertile of plasma Se at baseline (Duffield-Lillico et al. 2002), Se intervention in European subjects would greatly increase the chance of seeing an effect. Equally importantly, it would eliminate the possibility of adverse effects in individuals of already-adequate Se status (≥ 120 µg/l) such as were seen in the top tertile in the NPC Trial (Duffield-Lillico et al. 2002). Furthermore, women as well as men would be included in the European trial.

Se-enriched yeast is currently being used in further prostate cancer studies at the Arizona Cancer Center at doses of 200–800 µg/d, i.e. the Negative Biopsy Trial (Stratton et al. 2003a), the Preprostatectomy Trial (Marshall, 2001) and the Watchful Waiting Trial (Stratton et al. 2003b).

There has not yet been a human trial with SeMe-SeCys, although preparation for such a study in human subjects by Ip and colleagues is apparently underway (M Reid, personal communication). As SeMe-SeCys is not a very good precursor for selenoproteins, the results of such a study would be very informative.

The present author and colleagues are investigating the effect of functional selenoprotein SNPs on prostate cancer risk using DNA samples from 1400 prostate cancer cases and 800 age- and location-matched controls from the Swedish prostate cancer study (Wiklund et al. 2003). Careful speciation work (Goenaga-Infante et al. 2004, 2005) is also being extended to identify low-molecular-weight Se species in body tissues and fluids and in Se-enriched yeast and plants.

Will industry allow us to find the definitive answer?

Much time has elapsed during which scientists have spent increasing amounts of time and effort in fund-raising for demanding and meticulous studies to clarify whether Se truly has an effect in reducing cancer risk. Industry has already made up its mind and is not prepared to wait. Apart from Se supplements that have been available for many years, there is now a greater push towards Se-containing functional foods and fertilisers and the selection or breeding of high-Se crop varieties (Broadley et al. 2006). The worry is that population-based studies will become increasingly difficult to carry out under these circumstances, so that the answer on Se and cancer in populations may never be definitive unless a European-based trial can be prioritised.

Acknowledgements

I should like to acknowledge the help and support I have had from my collaborators in pursuing my work on Se, particularly from Dr Fiona Green at the University of Surrey and Dr Heidi Goenaga Infante at the Laboratory of the Government Chemist. Thanks also go to my funders, Cancer Research UK, the US National Institutes of Health, the UK Prostate Cancer Charitable Trust and Wassen International.

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Micronutrients through the life cycle


