Nutritional status in patients with HIV infection and AIDS

Marcela Stambullian¹, Susana Feliu²,³ and Nora H. Slobodianik²,³*  
¹Helios Salud, University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina  
²Department of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina  
³School of Pharmacy and Biochemistry, University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina

The aim of this study was to evaluate the nutritional status of adults with HIV infection or with AIDS through the use of biochemical parameters. The study was performed on 43 patients (19 HIV+ and 24 AIDS patients), between 26 and 44 years of age, from low and medium socioeconomic status, with access to health care services; 35 patients were under highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) treatment. Body weight and height were determined, and the Body Mass Index calculated (kg/m²). Blood samples were collected from fasting patients. Plasma cholesterol (total, HDL and LDL), triacylglycerol, total protein, apolipoproteins A-I and B, albumin, transthyretin, retinol binding protein, and ceruloplasmin concentrations were determined. Plasma levels of zinc, copper, and selenium were determined in a haemolysis-free sample by flame atomic absorption spectrometry. Statistical analyses were performed with the Student’s t-test. AIDS patients showed changes in biochemical parameters, particularly an increase in fibrinogen and a trend to decreased transthyretin levels. These findings stress the importance of the inclusion of functional biochemical parameters in the periodic evaluation of these patients. This would allow an early assessment of the need for appropriate nutritional support, implemented along with the specific retroviral treatment. This would aim at delaying the progression of the disease, and might improve the prospects of survival and quality of life.

HIV infection: AIDS: Biochemical parameters: Serum fractions: Lipid profile: Mineral

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection is a major global health problem, and nutritional disorders are often present in HIV+/AIDS patients. Early studies demonstrated weight loss and protein depletion, findings associated with body cell mass depletion in untreated patients. Poor nutritional status may be caused by different factors:

- inadequate nutrient intake or absorption, metabolic alterations, hypermetabolism, or a combination of these;
- alteration of the gastrointestinal tract;
- drug-nutrient interactions.

Anorexia related to the psychological processes provoked by the pathology (mainly social isolation), biochemical changes, including an increase in the activity of the cytokines, a diverse drug intake, physical inactivity, and opportunistic diseases also lead to a decrease in food intake.

Since the appearance of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), a lower incidence of malnutrition, and an improvement of the survival and immunological functions of infected patients has been observed. However, this highly effective antiretroviral therapy is associated with lipodystrophy, related, in turn, to insulin resistance and its metabolic complications, such as impaired glucose tolerance, diabetes, and hypertriglyceridemia.

The importance of nutritional support, in addition to the antiretroviral therapy in HIV+ patients, has been accepted. Nutritional support is needed to maintain optimum nourishment during the symptomatic period, in order to prevent further deterioration of the nutritional status during acute episodes of infection, and to improve the nutritional status during the stable symptom-free period. Since 1989, the American Dietetic Association emphasised that nutrition intervention and education should be part of the health care provided to individuals infected with HIV, and they should be implemented at all stages of the disease. It is also advocated that nutritional intervention should be applied early and individually, with periodic and constant screening. Some authors have pointed out that nutritional deficiency may influence the biological gradient and the natural course of the AIDS infection.

International literature considers that biochemical evaluation in AIDS patients must include at least serum levels of albumin, transferrin, total protein, and cholesterol, blood haemoglobin content and haematocrit. It is also considered that the depletion of some of these is indicative of protein deficiency or anaemia, respectively. On the other hand, routine indicators, such as the total number of lymphocytes and delayed hypersensitivity skin tests, are not useful as indices of nutritional state, due to the impact of the disease on immunological markers. Moreover, some authors indicate that nutritional assessment of these patients should include a measurement of body composition, and analyses of nutritional parameters, including albumin, transthyretin, and C-reactive protein.

* Corresponding author: Nora H. Slobodianik, Tel/fax 54 11 4 964 8243, email nslobo@ffyb.uba.ar
The aim of this study was to evaluate the nutritional status of adults infected with HIV or with AIDS through the examination of their biochemical profile.

Methods and materials

Body weight and height were determined, and the BMI (kg/m²) calculated in 43 patients (19 HIV+ and 24 AIDS patients) between 26 and 44 years old, who attended Helios Salud, a health centre specialised in AIDS management. Blood samples were collected from fasting patients; 35 patients received HAART. 89% presented CD4+ blood cell counts of >200 cells/ml and 60-75% showed viral charges lower than 50 copies/ml. Plasma cholesterol, HDL and LDL cholesterol, triacylglycerol, total protein, apolipoproteins A-I and B (ApoA-I and ApoB) and fibrinogen concentrations were determined. Specific plasma proteins of potential utility in nutrition studies, including albumin, transthyretin, retinol binding protein (RBP) and the acute phase reactant ceruloplasmin were also determined. Total protein content was determined by the Biuret method, and specific proteins by quantitative radial immunodiffusion on plates (Diffuplate, Biocientifica SA, Argentina and Binding Site, UK). Results were compared to reference values.

Total cholesterol, HDL and triacylglycerol concentrations were determined by enzymatic-colorimetric methods, and LDL was calculated with Friedwald’s equation (LDL-cholesterol = total cholesterol - triacylglycerols/5 + HDL-cholesterol). Reference values for total cholesterol, HDL, LDL, triacylglycerols, and ceruloplasmin were taken from the current guidelines for handling dislipidaemia.

Plasma levels of zinc (Zn), copper (Cu), and selenium (Se) were determined in haemolysis-free plasma by flame atomic absorption spectrometry. For each mineral, a calibration curve was performed, using commercial standards. The Cu/Zn ratio was calculated, and compared with reference values. Statistical analyses were performed with the Student’s t-test. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Buenos Aires, and all participants gave written consent before recruitment.

Results

Table 1 shows the BMI, total protein concentration, and plasma levels of albumin, transthyretin, RBP, and ceruloplasmin. No significant differences were observed in BMI, total protein concentration and plasma levels of albumin, transthyretin, RBP and ceruloplasmin, between HIV+ and AIDS patients. Table 2 shows the lipid profile, ApoA-I, ApoB and fibrinogen in the patients. Fibrinogen levels from the AIDS patients were higher than those from the HIV+ group. No statistical differences between the groups were observed in other biochemical parameters. Regarding the minerals status, there were no statistical differences in plasma Cu, Zn, and Se levels or in the Cu/Zn ratio between the HIV+ and AIDS groups. In a group of postsurgical patients, both groups showed plasma Zn and Cu levels within the highest reference values. About 70% of the patients had plasma Se concentrations which were below 60 μg/l.

Discussion

HIV-infected and AIDS patients showed albumin levels within the reference range. Different investigators have demonstrated that the levels of albumin, transthyretin, and C-reactive protein are predictors of survival. Short-lived proteins are very promising in the evaluation of the nutritional status. However, metabolic disorders caused by stress can also affect their concentration. In this study, we observed that 50-60% of HIV+ and AIDS patients presented plasma RBP levels close to the highest reference values, and 10% of AIDS patients showed transthyretin values within the highest reference values. This behaviour was also described by Lopez Hellin et al. in a group of postsurgical patients with high levels of stress. Only two patients with AIDS showed lower levels of transthyretin and RBP than laboratory reference values. Around 40% of HIV+ and AIDS patients presented ceruloplasmin levels above 65 mg/dl. It is interesting to remark that AIDS patients with transthyretin levels above 40 mg/dl presented ceruloplasmin concentrations over reference values, and this protein fraction would be performing the role of acute phase protein. Fibrinogen levels were significantly higher in AIDS patients while total cholesterol, triglycerides, and Apo B tended to be higher in the HIV+ patients, but the differences between groups did not reach statistical significance. These changes were described in several reports as complications related to the antiretroviral medication, especially regarding the levels of triglycerides and very low density lipoproteins.

The changes of fibrinogen in this study supports previous studies on HIV+ and AIDS infants (M.S. Feliu, unpublished results), and stress the importance to include fibrinogen in the periodic nutritional monitoring of these patients. The global analysis of the results shows an alteration in the lipid profile of HIV+ and AIDS patients, and emphasizes the need to

**Table 1.** BMI, and concentrations of total and specific plasma proteins in HIV+ and AIDS patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>BMI (kg/m²)</th>
<th>Total protein (g/dl)</th>
<th>Albumin (g/dl)</th>
<th>Transthyretin (mg/dl)</th>
<th>RBP (mg/dl)</th>
<th>Ceruloplasmin (mg/dl)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIV+</td>
<td>23·8 (3·8)</td>
<td>8·69 (0·51)</td>
<td>4·50 (0·4)</td>
<td>33·0 (6·3)</td>
<td>8·29 (2·6)</td>
<td>64·2 (18·2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>25·9 (4·5)</td>
<td>8·78 (0·96)</td>
<td>4·54 (0·4)</td>
<td>30·9 (6·7)</td>
<td>8·40 (1·5)</td>
<td>70·6 (15·2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are mean (SD).

RBP, Retinol binding protein.
design appropriate nutritional treatments. This would allow an early evaluation of cardiovascular risk and the implementation of therapeutic guidelines, along with the specific retroviral treatment and adequate food selection, to exert a positive effect on plasma lipids, an important factor of cardiovascular risk.39,40

On the other hand, Treitinger et al. observed a decrease in the HDL-fraction, triacylglycerol, and albumin levels with an increase in haptoglobin concentration, as indicators of the progression of the disease in HIV + -infected patients.31

Several investigators have pointed out that a Cu/Zn ratio >1.0 is associated with an increase in mortality.32 In our study, about 30% of AIDS patients showed a Cu/Zn ratio higher than 1 while 21% of HIV infected patients did. Moreover, these patients suffered deterioration of the immune system, indicated by the lower number of CD4+ lymphocytes. This would be in agreement with Lai et al., who proposed that the Cu/Zn ratio would be a useful predictor of survival in HIV infection. Besides, Moreno et al. indicate that serum copper determination would be a helpful marker in the progression of the infection towards AIDS, and in other chronic infectious diseases.

Serum zinc levels in the studied individuals were within or over normal values; this finding agrees with a preliminary study performed in HIV +/AIDS children, but differs from data reported by other authors for adult patients, which indicated a decrease in serum Zn concentration.33,34. It is important to remark that Wellhausen et al. also demonstrated a decrease in Zn levels in 23% of a HIV + -infected population, which is in agreement with our results.35 Due to the importance of Zn to the immune system, the assessment of this mineral is very important in order to optimise the results of the nutritional treatment and drug therapy and its incorporation into the diet must be considered.

In addition, 65-70% of the studied population showed decreased plasma Se levels when compared to reference values; this fact is in agreement with international literature.36,37 The same observation was made in a preliminary study on infected children.34 Different authors indicate a sharp relationship between selenium deficiency and the deterioration of the immune system; they consider this biochemical parameter as an independent predictor of survival for patients infected with HIV.35,36. Our results stress the importance of analyzing the possible effect of the addition of selenium in the prevention and treatment of AIDS-related pathologies.

Bogden et al. have reported that depression of the nutritional status begins in the first stages of HIV-1 infection, which can contribute to the progression of the disease.

Our preliminary study, performed on HIV + and AIDS patients belonging to low and medium socioeconomic groups, with access to health care services, shows some differences in some biochemical parameters: an increase in fibrinogen and a trend to decreased transthyretin levels. Therefore, the nutritional status of infected patients is different at different stages of the disease. Moreover, these findings support previous studies on HIV +/AIDS-infected infants, and emphasise the importance of incorporating functional biochemical parameters in the periodic nutritional assessment of these patients.34,38. This would allow an early evaluation of the nutritional status, and the assessment of an appropriate tailored nutritional support, implemented along with the specific retroviral treatment. This would aim at delaying the evolution of the disease, and might improve the prospects of survival and quality of life of these patients.

Conflict of interest statement
This study was funded by the University of Buenos Aires (B-060). The authors have no conflict of interests to declare. The manuscript is in partial fulfillment of the Doctor’s Degree of MS, fellow of University of Buenos Aires. The article was discussed and co-written by all authors (MS, SF, NHS).

Table 2. Plasma lipid profile, and concentrations of apolipoproteins A-I and B and fibrinogen in HIV + and AIDS patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Total cholesterol (mg/dl)</th>
<th>HDL (mg/dl)</th>
<th>LDL (mg/dl)</th>
<th>Triglycerides (mg/dl)</th>
<th>ApoA-I (mg/dl)</th>
<th>ApoB (mg/dl)</th>
<th>Fibrinogen (mg/dl)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HIV +</td>
<td>174.3 (24.9)</td>
<td>47.0 (12.2)</td>
<td>100.8 (25.2)</td>
<td>108.7 (46.2)</td>
<td>256.8 (67.5)</td>
<td>162.7 (52.2)</td>
<td>392.9 (120.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIDS</td>
<td>197.4 (46.7)</td>
<td>44.4 (10.2)</td>
<td>114.6 (42.0)</td>
<td>220.1 (159.8)</td>
<td>278.3 (58.4)</td>
<td>182.5 (42.1)</td>
<td>475.8 (149.5)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are mean (SD) | *Significantly different from HIV + at P < 0.05.

References