Folic acid treatment reduces elevated plasma levels of asymmetric dimethylarginine in hyperhomocysteinaemic subjects

Kirsten B. Holven1,2*, Tor S. Haugstad3, Torbjørn Holm1,4, Pål Aukrust1,5, Leiv Ose2 and Marit S. Nenseter1,2,6

1Research Institute for Internal Medicine University Hospital Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway
2The Lipid Clinic, University Hospital Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway
3Pediatric Research Institute, University Hospital Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway
4Department of Cardiology, University Hospital Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway
5Section of Clinical Immunology and Infection Diseases, Medical Department, University Hospital Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway
6MSD Cardiovascular Research Centre, University Hospital Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway

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Asymmetric dimethylarginine (ADMA), an endogenous inhibitor of NO synthase, has been suggested to be a novel risk factor for endothelial dysfunction (Bo¨ger et al. 1998). ADMA is an endogenous competitive inhibitor of NO synthase (NOS), the enzyme catalysing the formation of NO from arginine (Bo¨ger et al. 1998). Plasma levels of ADMA have been shown to be elevated in various cardiovascular disorders, such as atherosclerosis (Miyazaki et al. 1991), hypertension (Matsuoka et al. 1997) and congestive heart failure (Feng et al. 1998). In addition, raised plasma levels of ADMA have been reported in monkeys with hyperhomocysteinaemia and/or hypercholesterolaemia (Böger et al. 2000a), in healthy subjects following an oral methionine load (Böger et al. 2001) and recently also in elderly patients with stroke (positively correlated with plasma homocysteine levels in these patients (Yoo & Lee, 2001).

Hyperhomocysteinaemia is an independent risk factor for cardiovascular disease (Harker et al. 1974; Ueland et al. 1992; Boushey et al. 1995). While the mechanisms by which homocysteine may cause vascular lesions have not yet been fully characterised (Kokame et al. 1996; Upchurch et al. 1997; Wang et al. 1997), several studies suggest that homocysteine may promote endothelial dysfunction (Lentz et al. 1996; Tawakol et al. 1997; Woo et al. 1997; Bellamy et al. 1998; Chambers et al. 1998). Elevated concentrations of homocysteine can be reduced effectively by folic acid supplementation (Brattstrom et al. 1988), and such therapy has also been shown to improve endothelium-dependent vasodilatation (Bellamy et al. 1999; Usui et al. 1999; Woo et al. 1999; Wilmink et al. 2000), possibly involving NO-related mechanisms (Holven et al. 2001).

Abbreviations: ADMA, asymmetric dimethylarginine; NOS, nitric-oxide synthase; NOx, nitric-oxide-derived endproduct.

*Corresponding author: Dr Kirsten B. Holven, fax +47 2307 3630, email kirsten.holven@basalmed.uio.no
To elucidate further the possible interactions between homocysteine, NO and its endogenous NOS inhibitor ADMA, in the present study we examined: (1) plasma level of the NO-precursor arginine and ADMA in hyperhomocysteinaemic subjects and healthy controls; (2) the effect of folic acid supplementation on arginine and ADMA levels in subjects with hyperhomocysteinaemia.

Methods

Subjects

Twenty-one adults, < 75 years of age, with hyperhomocysteinaemia (fasting plasma total homocysteine concentration > 15 µmol/l) were recruited at the Lipid Clinic, Rikshospitalet, Oslo, Norway. Three of the participants had hypertension, two had established coronary artery disease, ten were on statin treatment and eleven were current smokers. Control subjects (n 21) were age- and sex-matched healthy non-smoking volunteers with no history of hypertension, diabetes, coronary artery disease or other acute or chronic illness. The study protocol was approved by the Regional Committee of Medical Ethics and by The Norwegian Medicine Control Authorities. Informed consent was obtained from all subjects. The investigation conforms with the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Intervention with folic acid

The study was an uncontrolled open supplementation trial, and the study protocol has previously been reported (Holven et al. 2001). Briefly, patients with hyperhomocysteinaemia received, after baseline evaluation, 5 mg folic acid/d during the first week, then 1 mg folic acid/d for the following 37 weeks, and finally 400 µg folic acid/d for the last 14 weeks. All but one patient was included during a 2-week period. All patients had previously been instructed by a nutritionist to follow the National Cholesterol Education Program Step I Diet (Department of Health and Human Services, 1993) and this diet was continued, they were subjected to logarithmic transformation before the parametric analysis. Univariate ANOVA was positive. Associations between variables were tested by Pearson correlation coefficients. The level of statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

Results

Characteristics of the hyperhomocysteinaemic subjects

The baseline characteristics of the hyperhomocysteinaemic subjects and the healthy controls are given in Table 1. Compared with healthy control subjects, patients with hyperhomocysteinaemia had significantly raised plasma...
homocysteine ($P<0.001$, Table 1). More importantly, plasma ADMA level was significantly increased ($P<0.001$, Fig. 1), whereas plasma NOx was significantly reduced ($P<0.001$, Table 1). Plasma arginine levels were also increased in patients with hyperhomocysteaemia, although the difference did not reach statistical significance ($P=0.058$; Fig. 2). Among patients with hyperhomocysteaemia, there was no significant difference in plasma ADMA, arginine or NOx levels between statin-users and non-statin-users, smokers and non-smokers, or females and males (results not shown).

### Effect of folate acid supplementation

Compared with baseline levels, folate acid supplementation of the hyperhomocysteaemic subjects for 6 weeks and 12 months significantly reduced the plasma level of homocysteine ($P<0.001$ v. baseline, Table 1), and increased serum concentration of folate ($P<0.001$ v. baseline, Table 1).

**Table 1.** Plasma concentrations of homocysteine, vitamins, lipids, creatinine and nitric-oxide-derived endproducts (NOx) in control subjects and in hyperhomocysteaemic subjects before, and after 6 weeks and 12 months, folate acid treatment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Control subjects (Baseline $n=21$)</th>
<th>Hyperhomocysteaemic subjects (Baseline $n=21$, 6 weeks $n=21$, 12 months $n=13$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
<td>Mean (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female ($n$) male ($n$)</td>
<td>7/14</td>
<td>7/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homocysteine ($\mu$mol/l)</td>
<td>11.0 (1-9)</td>
<td>21.0*** (10-8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folate (nmol/l)</td>
<td>279 (90)</td>
<td>206 (57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol (mmol/l)</td>
<td>5.0 (0-6)</td>
<td>5.7 (1-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDL-cholesterol (mmol/l)</td>
<td>1.3 (0-4)</td>
<td>1.3 (0-3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triacylglycerol (mmol/l)</td>
<td>1.1 (0-5)</td>
<td>1.3 (0-6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOx ($\mu$mol/l)†</td>
<td>29 (10)</td>
<td>14*** (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creatinine ($\mu$mol/l)</td>
<td>85 (11)</td>
<td>82 (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean values were significantly different from those of the control subjects: ***$P<0.001$. Mean values were significantly different from those of hyperhomocysteaemic subjects at baseline: †††$P<0.001$, ††$P<0.003$, †$P<0.001$. Mean values were significantly different from those of hyperhomocysteaemic subjects at baseline and after 6 weeks treatment: §$P<0.05$.

† For details of subjects and procedures, see p. 360.
††† Control subjects $n=13$, hyperhomocysteaemic subjects $n=19$ at baseline and after 6 weeks treatment.

**Fig. 1.** Plasma concentrations of asymmetric dimethylarginine (ADMA) in healthy controls at baseline ($\triangle$, $n=21$), and in hyperhomocysteaemic subjects at baseline ($\Delta$, $n=21$), and after 6 weeks ($\blacksquare$, $n=21$) and 12 months ($\bullet$, $n=13$), folate acid treatment. For details of subjects and procedures, see p. 360. Mean values are shown by horizontal bars. Mean value was significantly different from that of the control subjects: ***$P<0.001$. Mean values were significantly different from those of hyperhomocysteaemic subjects at baseline: †††$P<0.001$.

**Fig. 2.** Plasma concentrations of arginine in healthy controls at baseline ($\square$, $n=21$), and in hyperhomocysteaemic subjects at baseline ($\Delta$, $n=21$), and after 6 weeks ($\blacksquare$, $n=21$) and 12 months ($\bullet$, $n=13$), folate acid treatment. For details of subjects and procedures, see p. 360. Mean values are shown by horizontal bars. Mean value was significantly different from that of the control subjects: *$P<0.058$. Mean values were significantly different from those of hyperhomocysteaemic subjects at baseline: †††$P<0.001$. 

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increase in plasma NOx (Table 1). Furthermore, in the hyperhomocysteinaemic group, plasma levels of arginine and ADMA were positively correlated with plasma level of homocysteine (r 0.39, P<0.01 and r 0.43, P<0.001 respectively), and negatively correlated with plasma folate (r -0.42, P<0.001 and r -0.46, P<0.001 respectively) and plasma NOx (r -0.33, P<0.05 and r -0.35, P<0.02 respectively). Plasma arginine and ADMA were also positively correlated (r 0.755, P<0.001). The correlation analyses were based upon measurements at all three timepoints in the study.

Discussion

ADMA has been suggested to be a novel risk factor for endothelial dysfunction (Bo¨ger et al. 1998). In the present study, we have shown that hyperhomocysteinaemic individuals are characterised by raised plasma levels of ADMA, positively correlated with homocysteine and negatively correlated with folate levels. Even more importantly, the reduction in homocysteine levels during folic acid supplementation was accompanied by a significant decrease in plasma levels of this endogenous NOS inhibitor. Our results suggest that ADMA may be a mediator of the atherogenic effects of homocysteine.

Endothelium-derived NO is a potent endogenous vasodilator (Furchgott & Zawadzki, 1980), and we have previously shown that these hyperhomocysteinaemic individuals have decreased plasma levels of NOx (Holven et al. 2001), suggesting impaired NO activity in these patients. Several factors may contribute to these disturbances, but the present study suggests that the decreased NOx level is not caused by decreased availability of the NO precursor arginine. In fact, hyperhomocysteinaemic patients had increased plasma levels of this amino acid. However, these patients also had raised ADMA levels negatively correlated with plasma levels of NOx, suggesting that, rather than decreased precursor availability, the reduction in NOx may at least in part be due to an increased plasma level of the endogenous NOS inhibitor ADMA. Elevated ADMA level has been shown in patients with atherosclerosis (Miyazaki et al. 1991), hypertension (Matsuoka et al. 1997) and congestive heart failure (Feng et al. 1998), as well as in monkeys with hyperhomocysteinaemia and/or hypercholesterolaemia (Bo¨ger et al. 2000a). It has also been reported in healthy subjects following an oral methionine load (Bo¨ger et al. 2001), and in elderly patients with stroke (positively correlated with plasma homocysteine in these patients (Yoo & Lee, 2001)). Although the molecular mechanisms leading to raised ADMA levels in these disorders have not been fully elucidated, Stuhlinger et al. (2001) recently presented evidence suggesting that homocysteine may impair the NOS pathway directly by inhibiting dimethylarginine dimethylaminohydrolase activity, thereby causing ADMA accumulation, resulting in the subsequent reduction in NO synthesis. Whatever the mechanisms, evidence is accumulating that ADMA is one possible cause of endothelial dysfunction in several disorders, and it is tempting to speculate that an ADMA-mediated inhibition of NO synthesis may contribute to the impaired endothelium-dependent vasodilation previously shown in hyperhomocysteinaemic patients (Tawakol et al. 1997; Woo et al. 1997; Bellamy et al. 1998, 1999; Chambers et al. 1998; Holven et al. 2001). However, our present findings do not prove any causal relationship between ADMA and endothelial dysfunction in patients with hyperhomocysteinaemia and the exact role of ADMA in these patients will have to be further elucidated.

A major and novel finding in the present study was a marked reduction in ADMA levels during folic acid supplementation in hyperhomocysteinaemic individuals. We have previously shown that folic acid treatment in this group of hyperhomocysteinaemic subjects leads to a marked increase in plasma NOx levels as well as an improved endothelium-dependent vasodilation (Holven et al. 2001). Moreover, folic acid therapy also induced a significant reduction in arginine levels. Although the reason for this decrease has not been clarified, it may reflect increased consumption of this NO precursor after removal of an ADMA-induced inhibition of NOS. Notably, Bo¨ger et al. (2000a) have recently reported that while vitamin B supplementation decreased homocysteine level in hyperhomocysteinaemic monkeys, these vitamins had no effect on ADMA level or endothelial dysfunction. Although that experiment may not be comparable with the present study, a direct effect of folic acid on NO and ADMA metabolism should be further investigated in human subjects.

In the present study, we have shown that patients with hyperhomocysteinaemia are characterised by high levels of the endogenous NOS inhibitor ADMA. Moreover, folic acid supplementation significantly decreased plasma levels of ADMA, suggesting the involvement of ADMA-mediated mechanisms in the decreased NO activity in these patients. While the inhibitory effects on NOS is best studied, ADMA seems to have additional effects on endothelial cells with potential atherogenic properties such as enhancement of monocyte adhesiveness, augmented chemokine synthesis and increased oxidative stress with secondary activation of the transcriptional factor nuclear factor-xB (Bo¨ger et al. 2000b). Thus, ADMA has been proposed to be an endogenous proatherogenic molecule, and our present findings suggest that ADMA may represent a ‘novel’ pathway for the homocysteine-mediated atherogenic effects, possibly involving NO-related mechanisms.

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References


increase in plasma NOx (Table 1). Furthermore, in the hyperhomocysteinaemic group, plasma levels of arginine and ADMA were positively correlated with plasma level of homocysteine (r 0.39, P<0.01 and r 0.43, P<0.001 respectively), and negatively correlated with plasma folate (r -0.42, P<0.001 and r -0.46, P<0.001 respectively) and plasma NOx (r -0.33, P<0.05 and r -0.35, P<0.02 respectively). Plasma arginine and ADMA were also positively correlated (r 0.755, P<0.001). The corre-


