Inflammation-Sensitive Plasma Proteins and Incidence of Myocardial Infarction in Men With Low Cardiovascular Risk

Gunnar Engström, Lars Stavenow, Bo Hedblad, Peter Lind, Patrik Tydén, Lars Janzon, Folke Lindgärde

Objective—Myocardial infarction (MI) is sometimes experienced by individuals without any traditional risk factor. This prospective study explored whether incidence of MI in nonsmoking, nondiabetic men with normal blood pressure and serum lipids is related to inflammation-sensitive plasma proteins (ISPs).

Methods and Results—Five ISPs (α1-antitrypsin, haptoglobin, ceruloplasmin, fibrinogen, orosomucoid) were analyzed in 6075 men, 47±3.6 years old. A low-risk group (no traditional risk factor, n=1108) and a high-risk group (≥2 major risk factors, n=1011) were defined. Incidence of MI (n=227) was monitored over 18.1±4.3 years of follow-up. In the low-risk group, the age-adjusted relative risks (RRs) were 1.00 (reference), 1.9 (95% CI, 0.8 to 4.2), 1.8 (95% CI, 0.6 to 5.4), and 2.9 (95% CI, 1.05 to 8.1), respectively, for men with 0, 1, 2 and ≥3 ISPs in the top quartile (trend: P=0.03). In this group, the increased risk was observed only after ≥10 years of follow-up. In the high-risk group, the age-adjusted RRs were 1.00, 1.4 (95% CI, 0.9 to 2.2), 1.9 (95% CI, 1.2 to 3.1), and 2.0 (95% CI, 1.3 to 3.1), respectively, for men with 0, 1, 2, and ≥3 ISPs in the top quartile (trend: P=0.0004).

Conclusion—Incidence of MI in nonsmoking, nondiabetic men with normal blood pressure and lipids was related to ISPs. The causes for this relationship remain to be explored. (Arterioscler Thromb Vasc Biol. 2003;23:2247-2251.)

Key Words: myocardial infarction • inflammation • epidemiology • risk factors

Dyslipidemia, hypertension, smoking, and diabetes are well-known risk factors for atherosclerosis and myocardial infarction (MI). Even in prospective studies of presumed healthy subjects, those who later have MI generally are subjects with at least one of these risk factors. However, MI is sometimes experienced by individuals without any major risk factor.1 Few studies have been specifically performed on this group. During recent years there has been a growing recognition that inflammation plays an important role in the development of cardiovascular diseases.2-8 No previous study has explored whether inflammation is associated with incidence of MI in men with low levels of the traditional risk factors.

The Malmö Preventive project was a screening program for detection of individuals with high risk for cardiovascular disease.10 Measurement of five inflammation-sensitive proteins (ISPs), α1-antitrypsin, haptoglobin, ceruloplasmin, fibrinogen, and orosomucoid, was part of the program for approximately 6000 healthy men. Previous follow-up studies from this cohort have shown that all five ISPs were significantly associated with incidence of MI.9,11-14 It has also been shown that elevated levels of these proteins are associated with increased levels of other risk factors, including diabetes, blood pressure, smoking, and cholesterol.9,11-14 and that elevated ISPs add to the cardiovascular risk associated with these risk factors.8,11-14 The aim of this study was to explore whether a low-grade inflammation is associated with incidence of MI in nonsmoking, nondiabetic men with normal blood pressure and lipids. The relation between inflammation and MI in this low-risk group is compared with the relationship in a high-risk group with at least two major risk factors.

Methods

Between 1974 and 1984, 22444 men participated in a screening program for detection of individuals with high risk for cardiovascular diseases.10 Participation rate was 71%. The concentrations of all five ISPs (α1-antitrypsin, haptoglobin, ceruloplasmin, fibrinogen, orosomucoid) were determined in 6193 men at the time of the health examination. Men with a history of MI and stroke (according to questionnaire and the Swedish hospital discharge register) were excluded. Men who reported that they had had cancer were also excluded. After the exclusions, 6075 men remained.

Subjects were categorised into nonsmokers and smokers using the question “Are you a smoker?”. Cigarette consumption was categorised into daily consumption of up to 9 cigarettes, 10 to 19 cigarettes, and ≥20 cigarettes per day.

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Incidence of Cardiac Events in the Low-Risk Group

Incidence of cardiac events increased with the number of ISPs in the top quartile. In the low-risk group, the age-adjusted relative risks (RRs) were 1.00 (reference), 1.9 (95% CI, 0.8 to 4.2), 1.8 (95% CI, 0.6 to 5.4), and 2.9 (95% CI, 1.05


to 4.2), 1.8 (95% CI, 0.6 to 5.4), and 2.9 (95% CI, 1.05
between MI and number of elevated ISPs were significant both for early events [<10 years, RRs: 1.00, 1.4 (95% CI, 0.6 to 3.1), 2.3 (95% CI, 1.1 to 5.0) and 2.4 (95% CI, 1.2 to 5.0), respectively (P for trend=0.007)] and late events [≥10 years, RRs: 1.00, 1.4 (95% CI, 0.8 to 2.4), 1.7 (95% CI, 0.96 to 3.1), and 1.7 (95% CI, 1.00 to 3.0), respectively (P for trend=0.04)]. If anything, the relationships were attenuated after more than 10 years of follow-up.

**Characteristics of Men With and Without Cardiac Events**

In men with high and low cardiovascular risk, the number of elevated ISPs was higher in men who subsequently had cardiac events (Table 2). Cholesterol and blood pressure were not significantly associated with cardiac events in the low-risk group. As expected, men with a high cardiovascular risk generally had higher ISPs. With the exception of fibrinogen in the low-risk group, the individual ISPs were higher in those who had cardiac events as compared with those who remained free from disease, and the magnitude of the difference was largely similar in the group with low cardiovascular risk as compared with the high-risk group.

**Discussion**

Some men without traditional risk factors nevertheless have MI. From a scientific point of view, this is an interesting group that has received very little attention.1 This study explored whether MI in nonsmoking, nondiabetic men with normal blood pressure and lipids could be related to ISP levels. The risk of MI in this group increased with the number of elevated ISPs. However, the relationship was only observed after more than 10 years of follow-up.

Cut-off levels for lipids, glucose and blood pressure are often controversial. The cardiovascular risk for the low-risk group would be even lower if lower cut-off levels for cholesterol and blood pressure had been used. This would, however, require a larger cohort with data on ISPs. In our opinion, the cut-off levels have been fully adequate for the purpose of the present study, which was to identify two polar groups with low and high cardiovascular risk. As the traditional risk factors were similar in the two low-risk groups, differences in traditional risk factors at baseline cannot explain the increased risk in men with low risk and high ISP levels.

In men with low cardiovascular risk, high ISPs were not associated with MI during the first 10 years, but after that period, elevated ISPs were associated with an increased risk. There could be several explanations for this finding. First, the progression of atherosclerosis could be increased in men with high ISPs, even with low levels of the traditional risk factors.2,26 The long time period to the cardiac events could reflect a slower progression rate in men with low cardiovascular risk. Another possibility is that ISPs are unrelated to cardiac events unless other risk factors are also present. It can be assumed that a non-negligible proportion had developed at least one major risk factor after 10 years of follow-up.15,27 Longitudinal studies have shown that incidence of hypertension and diabetes is higher in men with high ISPs compared with those with low ISPs.1,28 The long time period to the cardiac events could reflect the time needed for other risk factors to become apparent.
factors to develop. It is also possible that there had been a significant difference for the first 10 years if the study population had been larger.

In contrast to the low-risk group, men with high cardiovascular risk and high ISPs showed an increased risk during the first 10 years of follow-up and, if anything, the relative risk decreased after that time. Studies of ISPs in the elderly, a group with a high atherosclerotic burden, have shown that high ISPs are associated with incidence of cardiovascular diseases during the first years and far less predictive after several years of follow-up.10,29,30 As the risk was high during the first 10 years, it is speculative but not unreasonable to offer any help to do so. We do not know whether smoking cessation differed between the high-risk groups.

The ISP levels were associated with incidence of MI in nondiabetic, nonsmoking men with normal blood pressure and serum lipids. This relationship was observed only after more than 10 years of follow-up. The causes for this relationship remain to be explored.

Acknowledgments

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References


### TABLE 2. Baseline Levels of Cardiovascular Risk Factors in Men With Low Cardiovascular Risk (No Risk Factor) and High Risk (≥2 Risk Factors) in Relation to Cardiac Events During a Mean Follow-up of 18 Years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low Cardiovascular Risk</th>
<th>High Cardiovascular Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cardiac Events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes N=33</td>
<td>No N=1075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>47.9±3.7</td>
<td>46.4±3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systolic BP (mm Hg)</td>
<td>121±8</td>
<td>119±8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diastolic BP (mm Hg)</td>
<td>81±4</td>
<td>80±5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol (mmol/L)</td>
<td>5.3±0.7</td>
<td>5.2±0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triglycerides (mmol/L)</td>
<td>1.4 (0.6)</td>
<td>1.05 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (kg/m²)</td>
<td>25.3±3.2</td>
<td>24.0±2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smokers (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>α1-antitrypsin (g/L)</td>
<td>1.3±0.24</td>
<td>1.2±0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ceruloplasmin (g/L)</td>
<td>0.31±0.05</td>
<td>0.30±0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fibrinogen (g/L)</td>
<td>3.24±0.81</td>
<td>3.25±0.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haptoglobin (g/L)</td>
<td>1.24±0.61</td>
<td>1.13±0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orosomucoid (g/L)</td>
<td>0.80±0.15</td>
<td>0.74±0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No ISP in top Q (%)</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ISP in top Q (%)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ISP in top Q (%)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥3 ISP in top Q (%)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISP in top Q (g/L)</td>
<td>1.1±1.2</td>
<td>0.7±1.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean±SD or %, unless otherwise stated.


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