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.2-5 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.6 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,9,11-16 and that elevated ISPs add to the cardiovascular risk associated with these risk factors.9,11-14 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.
Blood pressure (mm Hg), in supine position, was measured twice in the right arm after a 10-minute rest. The average of two measurements was used. A sphygmomanometer and a rubber cuff of appropriate size were used.

Physical inactivity was noted for men who reported that they are mostly sedentary in their spare time. Subjects who confirmed a doctor’s diagnosis of angina pectoris or who used nitrates were considered to have angina pectoris.

Men with fasting whole blood glucose ≥6.1 mmol/L and/or 2 hour post-load glucose ≥10.0 mmol/L (glucose load: 30 g per m² body surface area) and men with self-reported diabetes were considered to have diabetes. Serum cholesterol and triglycerides were analyzed with standard methods at the laboratory of the university hospital.21

**Table 1. Baseline Characteristics in Men With Low Cardiovascular Risk (No Risk Factor) and Men With High Cardiovascular Risk (≥2 Risk Factors) in Relation to ISP Levels.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Low Cardiovascular Risk</th>
<th>High Cardiovascular Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>46.4 ± 3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smokers (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥20 cigarettes/d (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systolic blood pressure (mm Hg)</td>
<td>119 ± 8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diastolic blood pressure (mm Hg)</td>
<td>80 ± 5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment for hypertension (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol (mmol/L)</td>
<td>5.2 ± 0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triglycerides (mmol/L)</td>
<td>1.05 (0.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body mass index (kg/m²)</td>
<td>24.0 ± 2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diabetes (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical inactivity (%)</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angina pectoris (%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Low and high ISPs are defined as 0–1 or 2–5 ISPs in the top quartile.

*Comparison between the two low-risk groups and between the two high-risk groups.

**Inflammation-Sensitive Plasma Proteins**

An electroimmunoassay method was used to assess the plasma levels of five ISPs.22 The analyses were performed consecutively at the time of screening. These proteins were chosen since they are used in clinical practice in order to estimate inflammatory activity. The precision of the analysis had a standard error of <5%.22 The detection limits were 20 mg/L for ceruloplasmin, 50 mg/L for α1-antitrypsin, and 350 mg/L for orosomucoid, haptoglobin, and fibrinogen.

We have shown that the correlation coefficients between the individual proteins range from 0.31 to 0.5612 and that the relationships between ISP and cardiovascular diseases are nonlinear; i.e., the risk increases most between the 3rd and 4th quartiles of ISP.9 In accordance with our previous studies,9,11–16 the sample was categorized according to the number of ISPs in the top quartile.

**Follow-up**

All cases were followed from the baseline examination until death or until December 31, 1997. A cardiac event was defined as fatal or nonfatal MI (code 410 according to the International Classification of Diseases, 9th revision, ICD-9), or death due to chronic ischemic heart disease (ICD-9 codes 412 to 414). The Malmö Myocardial Infarction Register,23 the Swedish Hospital Discharge Register, and the Swedish Causes of Deaths Register were used for case retrieval. Of the 227 cardiac events, 142 were nonfatal. Of the 85 fatal cases, the cause of death was based on autopsy for 58 (68%). A validation study from the Swedish Hospital Discharge Register showed that the diagnosis “myocardial infarction” was false in only 5% of the cases.24

**Statistics**

The Pearson’s chi-square and the Mantel–Haenszel chi-square tests were used for comparisons of categorical variables between groups. Because of the small number of cardiac events in the low-risk group, the Mann–Whitney U test was used for continuous variables. The Cox proportional hazards regression was used for the analysis of the cardiac event rates with adjustments for age and potential confounders; i.e., factors that differed between groups with high and low ISPs. The SPSS statistical software (v 8.0) was used for the analysis.25

**Results**

**Subjects**

A total of 1108 men had a low cardiovascular risk (no major risk factors), and 1011 had high cardiovascular risk (at least 2 major risk factors). The distribution of risk factors in relation to ISP levels is given in Table 1.

**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
In men with low cardiovascular risk, the relationship between ISPs and cardiac events was only observed after more than 10 years of follow-up. Only one man with high ISPs had a cardiac event during the first 10 years. After more than 10 years of follow-up, the relative risks were 1.00, 1.4 (95% CI, 0.8 to 2.4), 1.7 (95% CI, 1.04 to 11), respectively, for men with 0, 1, 2 and ≥3 elevated ISPs (P for trend=0.02).

The Figure illustrates the incidence of cardiac events over time in relation to cardiovascular risk and 0 to 1 versus 2 to 5 elevated ISPs. For the first 10 years, the age-adjusted RR in men with low risk and 2 to 5 ISPs was 0.7 (95% CI, 0.1 to 5.4), as compared with low-risk men with 0 to 1 elevated ISPs. After more than 10 years of follow-up, the RR was 2.3 (95% CI, 1.01 to 5.4) for low-risk men with 2 to 5 ISPs (Figure).

Incidence of Cardiac Events in the High-Risk Group

In the high-risk group, the age-adjusted RR in men with low risk and 2 to 5 ISPs had no increased risk during the first 10 years. After more than 10 years of follow-up, this group had a significantly increased risk (see text).

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. 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 ISP levels. 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.

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.
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 disease during the first years and far less predictive after several years of follow-up.9,29,30 As the risk was high during the first years, it is speculative but not unreasonable to therefore likely that the benefit of the interventions was similar. Smokers were recommended to stop, but were not offered 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

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