HDL₃ Induces Cyclooxygenase-2 Expression and Prostacyclin Release in Human Endothelial Cells Via a p38 MAPK/CRE-Dependent Pathway: Effects on COX-2/PGI-Synthase Coupling

G.D. Norata, E. Callegari, H. Inoue, A.L. Catapano

Objective—In endothelial cells, cyclooxygenase-1 (COX-1) and COX-2 both contribute to prostacyclin production. Recent findings suggest that COX-2 contributes significantly to systemic prostacyclin synthesis in humans; whether COX-2 inhibition is related to an increased cardiovascular risk is undergoing debate. HDLs have been shown to increase prostacyclin synthesis, thus in the present study we investigated the molecular mechanisms involved in this effect in endothelial cells.

Methods and Results—HDL₃ (30 μg/mL) induced COX-2 expression in a time- and dose-dependent manner. COX-2 was found mainly in the perinuclear area where it co-localizes with PGI synthase. Transient transfection experiments showed that CRE is required for HDL-induced COX-2 transcription, and we demonstrated that p38 MAPK activation by HDL₃ is involved in COX-2 mRNA transcription and stabilization. As a consequence of COX-2 induction by HDL₃, prostacyclin production increased, incubation with a COX-2 selective inhibitor blocked this effect. Moreover, HDL₃ increased caveolin-1 phosphorylation, thus promoting PGI-synthase shuttling from the membrane to the perinuclear area.

Conclusion—We conclude that in endothelial cells, HDL modulates COX-2/PGI-S activity via both p38 MAPK-dependent COX-2 mRNA stability and transcription and both caveolin-1–dependent PGI-synthase shuttling and COX-2 coupling. The understanding of these mechanisms may provide new insights into the antiatherogenic role of HDL. (Arterioscler Thromb Vasc Biol. 2004;24:871-877.)

Key Words: HDL ■ cyclooxygenase-2 ■ p38 MAPK ■ prostacyclin ■ caveolin-1

High-density lipoprotein (HDL) protects from atherosclerotic vascular disease. Beyond reverse cholesterol transport, HDL particles posses several anti-atherosclerotic effects, including the induction of prostacyclin (PGI₂), a strong vasorelaxant that acts also as an inhibitor of platelet and leukocyte activation. The stimulatory effect on PGI₂ depends mainly on the supply by HDL of endothelial cells with arachidonic acid. The rate-limiting step in the conversion of the arachidonic acid to eicosanoids is the activity of cyclooxygenase (COX). Two major forms of COX, COX-1 and COX-2, have been identified. Although COX-1 is constitutively expressed in most cell types, COX-2 is induced by various growth factors and cytokines. Recent findings suggest that COX-2 contributes significantly for PGI₂ synthesis in endothelial cells, whereas COX-1 is mainly involved in TXA₂ synthesis by platelets. Whether COX-2 inhibition is related to an increase of cardiovascular risk is uncertain. HDL induces COX-2 expression in rabbit smooth muscle cells and cooperates with TNF-alpha to elicit this effect, the molecular mechanisms involved, however, are unclear. COX-2 expression is modulated by growth factors and cytokines via mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPKs) cascade. Once activated, the MAPKs may modulate the activity of several transcription factors such as CREB, NFAT, AP-1, and NF-KB, which are involved in COX-2 expression.

In the present study, we investigated the molecular mechanisms involved in the effect of HDL₃ on COX-2 expression and eicosanoid production in cultured human endothelial cells.

Methods
HDL₃ (density 1.125 to 1.21 g/mL) was isolated from human plasma and protein content was determined as described. HDL₃ was used within 6 hours from isolation. No LPS contamination was detected as assessed by the endotoxin kit (Sigma, Italy).
HUVECs were isolated and cultured as described. In all experiments, cells were preincubated with serum-free medium for 6 hours, then HDL3 was added.

The antibodies to phospho-p38 MAPK, phospho-p44/42 MAPK, phospho-IkB-alpha, phospho-CREB, and phospho-caveolin-1 were from New England Biolabs (Germany). COX-1, COX-2, and PGI synthase (PGIS, mPGES-1) monoclonal antibodies were from Cayman (USA). β-Actin antibody was from Sigma. Secondary antibodies were from Biorad (Italy). Western blotting analysis was performed as described; all antibodies were diluted 1:1000, except β-actin (1:10000).

The MEK inhibitor, U0126 (New England Biolabs), and the p38 MAPK inhibitor SB203580 (Sigma) were used at a final concentration of 10 μmol/L and 1 μmol/L, respectively. Indomethacin heptyl ester (Cayman), a selective COX-2 inhibitor, was used at 0.1 μmol/L.

**Immunocytochemistry**

Cells were cultured on coverslips in 24-well plates. Fixed cells were incubated with a monoclonal antibody for COX-1 or COX-2 (1:50) overnight at 4°C, followed by incubation with anti-mouse IgG FITC-conjugated (1:100, RD, Italy) for 30 minutes, then propidium iodide (2.5 μg/ml) was added for 30 minutes. For the studies of COX-1 and COX-2 co-localization with PGIS, PGES-1 and phospho-caveolin-1 fixed cells were incubated overnight with the antibody, followed by incubation with anti IgG FITC-conjugated (30 minutes), anti-COX-2 phycoerythrin-labeled for 1 hour, and TOPRO 3 (Molecular Probes) (1:500) for 15 minutes. The coverslips were analyzed with a confocal microscope (Nikon Eclipse TE 2000-S; Radiance 2100 Biorad) at 600× magnifications. Sixty sections were captured (0.01 μm each) and a three-dimensional reconstruction was obtained using the software Image ProPlace 4.5 (Media Cybernetics, USA).

**Real-Time Quantitative Reverse-Transcriptase Polymerase Chain Reaction**

Total RNA was extracted and underwent reverse transcription as described. Three μl of cDNA were amplified by real-time quantitative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) with 1× Syber green universal PCR mastermix (Biorad). The specificity of the Syber green fluorescence was tested by plotting fluorescence as a function of temperature to generate a melting curve of the amplicon. The melting peaks of the amplicons were as expected (not shown). The primers used, the amplicon size, and the melting temperature are indicated in online Table I (available online at http://atvb.ahajournals.org).

**Transcription Assay**

The construction of various reporter vectors for the human COX-2 gene has been described previously. Transfection experiments were first performed using HUVECs and EAhy 926 cells; however, the efficiencies reached were very low, with a high degree of cytotoxicity (data not shown). Because human COX-2 promoter regulation is similar in a wide number of cell types, we performed transfection experiments in CHO cells, a cell line widely used for studies involving the effects of HDL in vitro. CHO cells were transiently transfected with COX-2 (nucleotide –327/+59), the NF-kB mutated site (KB), or the CRE mutated site (CRM) luciferase reporter vectors using lipofectamine (Invitrogen, Italy) according to the manufacturer instructions. Luciferase activity was determined and normalized for the cellular protein concentration.

**Detection of Prostaglandin Release by Competitive Enzyme Immunoassay**

Competitive enzyme immunoassay kits for 6-keto PGFα, TXB2, and PGE2 were from Cayman. HUVECs were exposed to HDL3 (30 μg/ml) for 6 hours, washed twice with PBS, and then incubated for 30 minutes with exogenous AA (10 μmol/L); 50 μL for each sample were processed for prostaglandin release according to the manufacturer instructions.

**Statistical Analysis**

Statistical analysis was performed by ANOVA with the use of Statsoft Statistica Package.

**Results**

**HDL3 Induces COX-2 Expression in HUVECs**

COX-2 protein was expressed at low levels in unstimulated cells and was strongly induced 2 hours after exposure to HDL3 (30 μg/ml). In preliminary experiments, this concentration maximally induced COX-2 expression and no further increase was observed up to 600 μg/ml of HDL3. The induction was maximal after 4 hours and began to decrease after 8 hours (Figure 1a). In unstimulated cells, COX-2 expression remained low at all time points (data not shown). Under the same experimental conditions, HDL3 did not affect
Nuclear translocation of active NF-kB. Under our experimen
tively. Ik-B alpha phosphorylation results in the release and
agreement with the observation that both ERK1/2 and p38
with a peak of activity at 10 to 20 minutes (Figure 2), in
MAPK-dependent pathways. Several transcription factors are activated through
phosphorylation reached after 5 to 10 minutes of incubation
and on COX-2 Promoter Activity

HDL3 activated ERK1/2 and p38 MAPK, with a the peak of
COX-1 expression (Figure 1a). These findings were con-
firmed by immunocytochemistry. COX-2 expression in-
creased after 4 hours in cells incubated with HDL3 without
changes of COX-1 expression (Figure 1b). On three-
dimensional reconstruction, COX-2 localized in the perinuclear area and in the cytoplasm
Effects of HDL3 on Intracellular Kinase Pathways

HDL3 activated ERK1/2 and p38 MAPK, with a peak of
phosphorylation reached after 5 to 10 minutes of incubation
(Figure 2). Several transcription factors are activated through
MAPK-dependent pathways.17-19 HDL3 activated CREB,
with a peak of activity at 10 to 20 minutes (Figure 2), in
agreement with the observation that both ERK1/2 and p38
MAPK activate CREB via p90RSK or via MSK-1, respectively. Ik-B alpha phosphorylation results in the release and nuclear translocation of active NF-kB. Under our experimental conditions, a basal level of phosphorylation of Ik-B alpha was present, and only a minimal effect on phosphorylation was observed after 5 and 10 minutes of incubation with HDL3 (Figure 2). The human COX-2 promoter region (−327/ +59) contains the NF-kB, the NF-IL6, and the CRE sites.20,21 Transient transfection assay showed that HDL3 induced promoter activity by 2.96±0.03-fold, whereas LPS (1 μg/mL), a positive control, induced promoter activity by 4.24±0.02-fold (P<0.01 for both versus control) (Figure 3). The promoter activity of the plasmid carrying the mutation at the NF-kB site was 1.87±0.12 fold in HDL3 incubated cells (P<0.01) and 0.93±0.09 fold in LPS-treated cells, whereas that of the mutant carrying the mutation at the CRE site was 1.15±0.03-fold in HDL3-treated cells and 1.26±0.16-fold in LPS treated cells (Figure 3; P=NS versus control).

Involvement of p38-MAPK in HDL3-Induced
COX-2 Protein and mRNA Expression

Cells were preincubated with the MEK1 inhibitor U 0126
(25 μmol/L) or the p38 MAPK inhibitor SB 203580
(1 μmol/L) for 1 hour. HDL3 (30 μg/mL) were added for 2
and 4 hours to evaluate COX-2 mRNA and protein expres-
sion. U0126 did not affect HDL3-induced COX-2 expression.
SB203580 strongly inhibited HDL3-mediated COX-2 mRNA
and protein expression (Figure 4). Because p38 MAPK
stabilizes COX-2 mRNA,22 we investigated whether HDL3
possesses this effect. To assess the stability of COX-2 mRNA
in HUVEC, actinomycin D (2 μg/mL) was added to cells
after 2 hours of HDL3 incubation and COX-2 mRNA levels
were measured up to 60 minutes (Figure 4). Simultaneous
addition of SB203580 (1 μmol/L) and actinomycin D to the
cells after a 2-hour stimulation with HDL3 resulted in a more
rapid decrease in COX-2 mRNA levels, suggesting mRNA
stabilizing effect by p38 MAPK activity.

Effects of HDL3 on Eicosanoid Production

The effects of HDL3 on eicosanoids production were assessed in
HUVECs exposed to 30 μg/mL of lipoproteins for 6 hours,
followed by 30 minutes of incubation with exogenous AA
(10 μmol/L).11 In control cells, the production of 6-keto
PGF2α (PGI2 main metabolite) was 73.14±6.79 pg/mg of
cellular protein. Incubation of endothelial cells with HDL3
increased 6-keto PGF2α production to 113.38±2.54 pg/mg of
cellular protein (P<0.01) (Table II, available online at
http://atvb.ahajournals.org). In the presence of 0.1 μmol/L
indomethacin eptyl ester, a selective COX-2 inhibitor,25
HDL3-induced 6-keto PGF2α production was reduced to
77.95±10.19 pg/mg of cellular protein and PGE2 resulted in
74.10±3.45 pg/mg of cellular protein and was not affected by
HDL3 incubation.
Effects of HDL$_3$ on PGI Synthase Expression and Cellular Localization

As HDL$_3$ induces COX-2 expression and increases PGI$_2$ release, we investigated whether HDL$_3$ can affect PGI-S or mPGES-1 expression. HDL incubation did not change PGI-S or mPGES-1 expression (1.10±0.2-fold and 1.07±0.5-fold versus control cells, respectively) (Figure 5a). Furthermore, in HDL-treated cells, PGI-S co-localized with COX-2 while mPGES-1 showed a different subcellular distribution (Figure 5b).

PGI-S resides in caveolae in resting cells. Caveolin-1 is the main protein of caveolae, and when phosphorylated it moves into the cytoplasm, shuttling PGI-S in the perinuclear area where it couples to COX-2, thus increasing prostacyclin synthesis. We investigated, therefore, whether HDL can influence caveolin-1 phosphorylation and shuttling in the perinuclear space. After 4 hours of incubation, HDL increased caveolin-1 phosphorylation (Figure 6a), mainly in the area surrounding the nucleus (Figure 6b). Moreover, a three-dimensional reconstruction shows that phosphorylated caveolin-1 localizes near COX-2 in the perinuclear area of HDL-treated cells (Figure 6c), where PGI-S is also located (Figure 6d).

Discussion

The major finding of this study is that HDL$_3$ induces COX-2 expression and PGI$_2$ release in human endothelial cells via p38 MAPK activation. The activation of this signaling pathway promotes COX-2 mRNA transcription and stabilization.

On incubation of cells with HDL$_3$, COX-2 protein localized mainly in the perinuclear area, in agreement with previous findings showing that COX-2 accumulation near the nuclear envelope and in the cytoplasm is required for the increase in COX-2-mediated prostanoid synthesis in vascular endothelial cells. This effect is specific for COX-2; in fact, COX-1 was mainly localized in the cytoplasm and was not modulated by HDL$_3$; moreover, PGI$_2$ synthesis was downregulated by a specific COX-2 inhibitor.

The molecular mechanisms by which HDL$_3$ induces COX-2 are unknown. Here we show that HDL$_3$ activates 2 of the major kinases pathways involved in COX-2 gene transcription: ERK1/2 and p38 MAPK. HDL can activate ERK1/2 via cell surface S1P receptor in astroglial cells. However, the possibility that MAPK activation results from plasma membrane cholesterol depletion cannot be excluded. In support of this hypothesis, Smith et al showed that increasing concentration of LDL or free cholesterol decreases COX-2 expression and PGI$_2$ synthesis. As HDL triggers the release of cholesterol from cells, our observation suggests that cellular cholesterol balance plays an important role in determining COX-2 levels.

HDL$_3$ also activates CREB in a time-dependent fashion, CREB binds to CRE, which serves as an anchor for P300 interaction with upstream transactivators and downstream transcription machinery, thus suggesting that CRE plays a relevant role in COX-2 induction by a number of stimuli. Using transient transfection experiments, we demonstrated that mutation in CRE abrogated the luciferase activity induced by HDL$_3$, confirming the role of CRE in HDL$_3$-induced COX-2 gene transcription.

NF-kB has also been suggested to be involved in determining COX-2 gene transcription. We show that a mutation in the NF-kB response element abrogates luciferase activity induced by LPS, used as a positive control, while it slightly decreases HDL$_3$-induced luciferase activity, suggesting a minor role of this pathway in COX-2 induction by HDL$_3$. 

![Figure 4. Involvement of p38 MAPK pathway in COX-2 mRNA (a and b) and protein expression induced by HDL$_3$ (c and d). HUVECs were incubated for 2 hours (for mRNA detection) and 4 hours (for protein detection) with HDL$_3$ (30 μg/mL) alone or in the presence of U0126 (25 μmol/L) or of SB203580 (1 μmol/L). a, COX-2 mRNA expression was assessed with real-time quantitative PCR; the target sequence was normalized to the beta actin content. b, Inhibition of p38 MAPK destabilizes COX-2 mRNA expression induced by HDL$_3$. HUVECs were incubated for 2 hours with HDL$_3$ (30 μg/mL), then actinomycin D alone or actinomycin D plus SB203580 were added (time 0). COX-2 mRNA levels were measured using real-time quantitative PCR from time 0 minutes up to 60 minutes. Data are mean±SD of 4 separate experiments. *P<0.01. c and d, COX-2 protein expression was assessed by immunoblotting. The results are mean±SD of 4 separate experiments and are normalized for beta actin content. *P<0.01.](http://atvb.ahajournals.org/content/874/Arterioscler-Thromb-Vasc-Biol-May-2004/figures/4)
As transcripational regulation of the COX-2 gene occurs via activation of MAPKs, we investigated whether inhibition of ERK1/2 or p38 MAPK pathway affected HDL-induced COX-2 mRNA and protein expression. We show that the p38 MAPK pathway is responsible for the induction of COX-2 by HDL3. P38 MAPK plays a housekeeping role in maintaining COX-2 mRNA stability via the recognition of the AUUUA motifs present in the 3′ untranslated region of COX-2. We therefore studied COX-2 mRNA stability in cells stimulated with HDL3. Simultaneous addition of actinomycin D and SB203580 to the cells resulted in a more rapid decrease in COX-2 mRNA compared with actinomycin D alone. This represents a new mechanism by which HDL can influence gene expression at a posttranscriptional level and is likely to contribute to the increase of COX-2 protein levels in endothelial cells.

COX-2 has been proposed to exert both an antiatherogenic or a proatherogenic role depending on the eicosanoids produced and the arterial wall cells where it is expressed. Eicosanoids are involved in a variety of physiological pro-
cesses in atherosclerosis and thrombosis, including leukocyte–endothelial cell adhesion, vasoconstriction, and platelet aggregation. The dominant prostaglandin produced by endothelial cells is PG~1_2~.~4~ PG~1_2~ is believed to play a protective role in atherothrombosis.~4~ COX-2 contributes significantly to systemic PG~1_2~ synthesis in humans;~42~ therefore, it is possible that COX-2 induced in endothelial cells at lesion-protected areas catalyzes the formation of the anti-atherogenic molecule prostacyclin. This may be the case in the presence of HDL~3~ that increases PG~1_2~ release mediated by AA in endothelial cells. This effect is dependent mainly on COX-2 as indomethacin eptyl ester, a specific COX-2 inhibitor, abolished PG~1_2~ release induced by HDL~3~. This observation may also be relevant to the recent observation that COX-2 inhibitors may increase CHD risk.~10~ In vitro 30~µg/mL of HDL~3~ induces maximally COX-2 expression, and no further increase is observed up to 600~µg/mL (a physiological concentration that constantly bathes arteries in vivo), thus suggesting that low concentrations of HDL are enough to support COX-2 expression, and higher levels may only provide the substrate. Alternatively, the in vitro conditions allow for a better interaction of HDL with cultured endothelial cells as compared with in vivo settings, in which proteoglycans may trap lipoproteins and reduce their availability for interactions with the endothelial cells.

The observation that COX-2 induced by HDL~3~ does not increase PGE~2~, a proatherogenic eicosanoid, synthesized mainly via COX-2,~12~ confirms that COX-2 expression in the arterial wall could play both a proatherogenic or anti-atherogenic role, but it is the final eicosanoid produced that is responsible for its proatherogenic or anti-atherogenic properties.

Moreover, HDL~3~-induced COX-2 protein co-localizes with PGI-S in endothelial cells, thus suggesting that in this model, once induced, COX-2 can drive prostacyclin synthesis. PGI-S is associated with caveolae~33~ and is activated when shuttled from the plasma membrane in the perinuclear area;~35~ moreover, disruption of caveolae organization downregulates prostacyclin production and impairs angiogenesis.~43,44~ Here we demonstrate that HDL~3~ induces caveolin-1 phosphorylation, which shuttles with PGI-S from the plasma membrane to the perinuclear area where it co-localizes with COX-2. Furthermore, the possibility that the abundant increase in COX-2 observed can be related to an increase of prostanoioids synthesis other than prostacyclin cannot be excluded.

Also, endothelial nitric oxide synthase, the enzyme responsible for nitric oxide synthesis in the endothelium, localizes in the caveolae.~33,35~ Nitric oxide is responsible for several beneficial effects of HDL on endothelial cells,~45~ such as helping to maintain endothelial integrity, facilitating vascular relaxation, inhibiting cell adhesion to vascular endothelium, decreasing radical oxygen production, and inhibiting apoptosis.~45~ Even if we have not addressed the role of HDL in modulating endothelial nitric oxide synthase shutting through caveolin-1 phosphorylation, it is conceivable that some of the effects of HDL are mediated via this pathway.~46~

In summary, our data suggest that in human endothelial cells, HDL can modulate COX-2 expression via p38 MAPK-dependent COX-2 mRNA transcription and stabilization. Moreover, the HDL-dependent caveolin-1 phosphorylation favors PGI-S shuttling and COX-2 coupling. These data add further insights into the molecular mechanisms involved in the anti-atherogenic activity of HDL.

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Table I
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<th>6-keto PGF1α</th>
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<td>73.14 ±6.79</td>
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Table II