Apolipoprotein CIII (apoCIII) was first identified more than 40 years ago as a component of very-low-density lipoprotein (VLDL), and shortly thereafter as an inhibitor of lipoprotein lipase. More than a decade later, apoCIII was found to inhibit lipoprotein remnant uptake by the liver. Its relevance to human lipid metabolism was made clear by its absence, along with apolipoprotein AI, in 2 sisters with hypertriglyceridemia and inversely related to the size of LDL particles. These individuals had marked increases in the fractional removal of TG from VLDL (increased lipoprotein lipase activity) and increased conversion of VLDL to low-density lipoprotein (LDL) (less remnant removal). These findings spurred investigations at a molecular level, including demonstrations of hypertriglyceridemia in apocIII transgenic mice and decreased TG levels in apocIII knockout mice. In humans, apoCIII levels are associated with hypertriglyceridemia and increases in VLDL and inversely related to the size of LDL particles. ApoCIII was the first lipid-associated gene to be linked by a common polymorphism to hypertriglyceridemia.

Studies of the regulation of apoCIII gene expression have identified responsiveness to insulin, peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor-α (PPAR-α), farnesoid X receptor, and Rev-erba. In this issue of Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology, Caron et al demonstrate responsiveness of the apoCIII promoter to glucose. In a series of well-designed and well-conducted studies, these investigators provide strong evidence for stimulation of apoCIII gene expression by glucose via hepatic nuclear factor-4α and carbohydrate-responsive element binding protein but not liver X receptor. In addition, the authors demonstrate a modest correlation between plasma apoCIII levels and both fasting and postglucose challenge plasma insulin levels in obese subjects. Of note, there was no correlation between apoCIII levels and either fasting or postchallenge plasma insulin levels. A polymorphism in the upstream untranslated region of the apoCIII gene had been shown to eliminate insulin responsiveness in rodents and hepatocytes. Although this finding has been confirmed in some human studies, the presence of this same polymorphism in type I diabetic patients had no effect on plasma apoCIII or triglyceride concentrations. Further uncertainty regarding the role of the insulin regulatory site in humans derives from conflicting studies in patients with nonalcoholic fatty liver disease. The absence of an association between apoCIII levels and plasma insulin in the present human studies reported by Caron et al is consistent with the negative gene association studies.

What is the physiological relevance of this finding and how can we fit these new data into a model of the normal role of apoCIII in the regulation of plasma lipid and lipoprotein metabolism? Caron et al suggest that by stimulating apoCIII expression, thereby reducing lipolysis of circulating TG, glucose would increase its own utilization by peripheral tissues. However, insulin levels are usually increased at the same time glucose levels rise, and if insulin suppresses apoCIII expression in vivo, a much more complex relationship must exist between these 2 potential regulators of apoCIII expression. It is likely that any significant role of apoCIII in “nutrient switching” will depend on the quantities of glucose and TG ingested or released from organs, the timing of insulin release relative to the flux of glucose and TG, and the sensitivity of apoCIII in the liver and the small intestine to insulin. Caron et al suggest that in individuals with insulin resistance and diabetes, there is a loss of insulin-mediated suppression of apoCIII that, coupled with glucose-stimulated apoCIII expression, leads to hypertriglyceridemia. Thus, although a physiological role for glucose-stimulated apoCIII expression is not easily envisioned, a pathophysiologic role for this pathway is consistent with data from several sources, including kinetic studies in humans that have demonstrated increased secretion of apoCIII into plasma (presumably mostly from the liver) in people with hypertriglyceridemia and insulin resistance. Potentially important additions to this scheme derive from recent evidence in both liver cells and human kinetic studies that apoCIII may facilitate or enhance VLDL TG secretion and that plasma fatty acids, which are often elevated in insulin resistance and diabetes, stimulate apoCIII secretion.

Why should we be interested in the regulation of apoCIII gene expression? In addition to its clear effects on lipid and lipoprotein metabolism, where increased apoCIII would lead to increased levels of VLDL TG and remnant lipoproteins, there have been an increasing number of clinical and preclinical studies suggesting a more direct proatherogenic role for apoCIII. Thus, apoCIII-enriched LDL has increased binding to proteoglycans and can increase monocyte bind-
We know that fibrates lower apoCIII levels, at least partly by reducing the rate of secretion of this apolipoprotein into plasma.\(^2\) The PPAR\(\gamma\) agonist pioglitazone also lowers apoCIII secretion rates\(^3\); the basis for this might be increased hepatic sensitivity to insulin, pioglitazone interaction with PPAR\(\gamma\) receptors, or both. Statins lower apoCIII levels,\(^4\) but most likely this effect is secondary to increased removal of remnants and apoCIII-containing LDL particles. Although reductions of plasma TG that occur with control of hyperglycemia in patients with diabetes are associated with reductions in apoCIII concentrations, there are no published studies examining effects of glucose-altering drugs on apoCIII secretion. There is significant interest among pharmaceutical companies in the development of new diabetes drugs that do more than simply lower blood glucose levels; the new findings from Caron et al\(^{16}\) suggest that screening for effects on apoCIII gene expression during the preclinical phase of development and measurement of apoCIII secretion into plasma during clinical testing might be important for the discovery of agents having that characteristic.

**References**

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KEY WORDS: apolipoproteins | gene expression | lipoproteins
Apolipoprotein CIII: 42 Years Old and Even More Interesting
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_Arterioscler Thromb Vasc Biol._ 2011;31:471-473
doi: 10.1161/ATVBAHA.110.221846

_Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology_ is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 1079-5642. Online ISSN: 1524-4636

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