Has Our Understanding of Calcification in Human Coronary Atherosclerosis Progressed?

Fumiyuki Otsuka,* Kenichi Sakakura,* Kazuyuki Yahagi, Michael Joner, Renu Virmani

Abstract—Coronary artery calcification is a well-established predictor of future cardiac events; however, it is not a predictor of unstable plaque. The intimal calcification of the atherosclerotic plaques may begin with smooth muscle cell apoptosis and release of matrix vesicles and is almost always seen microscopically in pathological intimal thickening, which appears as microcalcification (≥0.5 μm, typically <15 μm in diameter). Calcification increases with macrophage infiltration into the lipid pool in early fibroatheroma where they undergo apoptosis and release matrix vesicles. The confluence of calcified areas involves extracellular matrix and the necrotic core, which can be identified by radiography as speckled (≤2 mm) or fragmented (>2, <5 mm) calcification. The calcification in thin-cap fibroatheromas and plaque rupture is generally less than what is observed in stable plaques and is usually speckled or fragmented. Fragmented calcification spreads into the surrounding collagen-rich matrix forming calcified sheets, the hallmarks of fibrocalcific plaques. The calcified sheets may break into nodules with fibrin deposition, and when accompanied by luminal protrusion, it is associated with thrombosis. Calcification is highest in fibrocalcific plaques followed by healed plaque rupture and is the least in erosion and pathological intimal thickening. The extent of calcification is greater in men than in women especially in the premenopausal period and is also greater in whites compared with blacks. The mechanisms of intimal calcification remain poorly understood in man. Calcification often occurs in the presence of apoptosis of smooth muscle cells and macrophages with matrix vesicles accompanied by expression of osteogenic markers within the vessel wall.

Key Words: coronary artery disease | pathology | vascular calcification

Three main types of vascular calcification have been reported: medial Mönckeberg arterial calcification, intimal calcification associated with atherosclerosis, and infantile calcification. In the current review article, we will focus on (intimal) calcification related to coronary atherosclerosis, although other beds will be also mentioned. Atherosclerotic calcification has intrigued pathologists, cardiologist, and researchers of lipid metabolism and inflammation for more than a century; however, despite extensive research in this area, our mechanistic understanding of atherosclerotic calcification in man remains limited. An important factor contributing is the lack of good animal models of human atherosclerosis. This deficiency can be explained by the different life span of species that cannot be compensated in contemporary animal models. Human atherosclerosis progresses over decades before becoming manifest in a large majority of cases in the sixth and seventh decades, whereas atherosclerotic animal models typically involve breeding periods ranging from months to a few years. By far, the most studied animal being the genetically modified mouse, with either apolipoprotein E or the low-density lipoprotein receptor deficient, that develop atherosclerosis via increases in serum very-low-density lipoprotein and disruption of cellular low-density lipoprotein uptake, respectively, resulting in excessive accumulation of lipids in the vascular wall. In these animals, minimal calcification and no thrombosis is seen, which is significantly different from the observations made in man. Nevertheless, the mouse model has been extremely useful for the understanding of basic pathways involved in atherosclerosis.

Atherosclerosis occurs in the presence of risk factors, especially hyperlipidemia, and manifests focally at branch points as a chronic inflammatory process induced by lipid deposits in the arterial wall. Calcification of the atherosclerotic plaque begins in middle age and is ubiquitously observed in older individuals. The disease is highly prevalent worldwide but relatively few have a clinical event. Clinical manifestations of the coronary disease include myocardial infarction, unstable and stable angina, and sudden coronary death (SCD); carotid disease includes stroke and transient ischemic attack, whereas peripheral artery disease manifestation includes claudication and critical limb ischemia. In patients dying from coronary thrombosis, the main cause is acute plaque rupture, less frequently erosion, and least often calcified nodule.

In this review, we will concentrate on the human coronary atherosclerotic calcification with emphasis on plaque progression. The various plaque types and the degree of narrowing will be described. Furthermore, we will review the difference in its prevalence among men and women and how race may...
also influence the extent of calcification. Although pathologica
cal mechanisms of calcification are likely multifactorial, there is
little consensus and therefore we will emphasize mainly on
those that may be more applicable to man.

Atherosclerosis Plaque Progression

The natural history of atherosclerosis is considered to be a
dynamic process varying from early lesion development to
more advanced plaques complicated by acute thrombosis.
Intimal thickening begins with an increase in smooth muscle
cells (SMCs) and proteoglycan–collagenous matrix with little
or no infiltration of inflammatory cells, which is classified as
adaptive intimal thickening (AIT), and is related to blood flow.
Atherosclerotic plaques have been described to begin as fatty
streak with accumulation of lipid-laden foamy macrophages
and SMCs, although this lesion is known to regress. To our
knowledge, the earliest progressive atherosclerotic lesion is
pathological intimal thickening (PIT), which is characterized
by the presence of acellular lipid pools within the intima but
close to the media where there is a lack of SMCs but there is an
abundance of proteoglycans and lipid deposition. As plaques
progress, there is infiltration by macrophages and T lympho-
cytes close to the lumen and remote from the lipid pools.

The more advanced stage of atherosclerotic lesion is classi-
fied as fibroatheroma, which is characterized by the presence
of a lipid-rich necrotic core encapsulated by fibrous tissue.
The early phase of fibroatheroma (early fibroatheroma) shows
infiltration of macrophages into the lipid pool and focal loss of
proteoglycans and collagen matrix. The accumulation of free
cholesterol in early fibroatheromas is not extensive, whereas
the late fibroatheroma consists of discrete collections of acel-
ular debris, increased free cholesterol, and near-complete
depletion of extracellular matrix.

Thin-cap fibroatheroma (TCFA), conceptually referred to
as vulnerable plaque, consists of a large necrotic core har-
bored by a thin (<65 μm) fibrous cap which is heavily infiltrated
by macrophages and to a lesser extent T lymphocytes with a
paucity or absence of SMCs. This well-characterized omi-
bus lacks endothelium and is rich in proteoglycans and SMCs.9
This well-characterized ominous lesion is considered to be the prelude of plaque rupture.

The only difference between plaque rupture and TCFA is a
rupture and erosion. The provisional matrix at the site of
ruptures may be single or consecutive events resulting in mul-
tiple layers of necrotic cores interspersed by fibrous tissue.

With respect to the sequence of ruptures, the earliest tear
may be found in deeper intima suggestive of previous thrombotic
events, which sequentially leads to increased plaque burden
and luminal narrowing.

Progression of Calcification in the Course
of Atherosclerosis

The progression of calcification may begin with microcalci-
fication (≥0.5 μm, typically <15 μm)11–13 which is seen fol-
lowing special stains for calcification, for example, von Kossa
stain, Alizarin red (Figure 1A). Early calcification is appar-
ent within the lipid pools as stippling by calcium stains which
likely originates from SMC apoptosis or matrix vesicles and
is generally ≥1 μm in size that can be appreciated by light
microscopy.11,13,14 Electron microscopic examination of vascu-
lar wall has revealed that the initial calcification occurs
in matrix vesicles which vary in size from 100 to 700 nm in
diameter.15 The loss of intimal SMCs has also been identi-
fied by the presence of prominent basement membrane which
stains strongly with periodic acid–Schiff and contains cen-
tral areas of apoptotic bodies derived from SMCs (Figures 1A
and 2). Calcification is typically located in the intima close to
the internal elastic lamina.

Microcalcification may also occur from macrophage releas-
ing matrix vesicles or from apoptosis.10 Macrophage apop-
tosis may result in a different morphological appearance
of calcification. Although SMC apoptosis results in fine micro-
calcification, macrophage apoptosis exhibits large punctate,
blocky appearance (Figure 1B and 1C). Microcalcification is
frequently observed in TCFA, despite the fact that its con-
tribution to plaque vulnerability remains to be determined.
These microcalcifications often coalesce into larger masses
and involve both the necrotic core and the surrounding
collagen-rich extracellular matrix to form speckled and frag-
ments of calcification. This particular pattern also starts in the
deeper region of the necrotic core close to the internal elastic
lamina (Figure 1D and 1E). Further progression of calcifica-
tion is seen as extension from the outer rim of the necrotic
core (Figure 1F) into the surrounding collagenous matrix.
Importantly, the central core either becomes fully calcified
or may remain noncalcified at this stage. Nevertheless further
progression of disease results in calcified plaque that forms
calciﬁed sheets or plates (Figure 1G and 1H). Calciﬁed plates
may fracture which results in the formation of nodular calci-
dication that is accompanied by fibrin deposition (Figure 1I).
These nodules may protrude into the lumen or into the media.
When the former occurs, it results in luminal protrusion and
there is discontinuity of the overlying collagen and endothe-
lium with acute thrombosis. The latter calcified nodules are
rare occurring in 2% to 7% of cases with thrombosis but are
more frequent (4%–14%) in the carotid plaques.17

Bone formation can rarely be observed in areas of arterial
calcification (Figure 1J), particularly in heavily calcified seg-
ments, which indicates osteogenesis induced at sites of arte-
rial calcification. The incidence of bone formation has been
reported to be 19% in peripheral vascular disease in patient
who underwent lower limb amputation.18 However, to our
knowledge, the frequency of bone formation in coronary
Figure 1. Progression of coronary calcification. Nondecalcified arterial segments (A and B) and decalcified segments (C–J) were serially cut for the microscopic assessment. A, Pathological intimal thickening (PIT) characterized by lipid pool (LP) that lacks smooth muscle cells.
arteries has not been reported, but is uncommon. Several lines of evidence have suggested that arterial calcification shares features with skeletal bone formation and calcification, such as chondrocyte and osteoblast differentiation, mineralization, bone matrix deposition, and bone resorption. Bone-related proteins including bone morphogenic protein (BMP)-2 and BMP-4, bone sialoprotein, osteocalcin, osteonectin, osteopontin, and osteoprotegerin have been reported to be present in calcified arteries. Dhore et al.19 evaluated immunoreactivity pattern of bone matrix proteins in human nondiseased aorta, intimal xanthoma, fibroatheroma, and fibrocalcific plaques. They found that matrix Gla protein (MGP) and bone sialoprotein were highly expressed in the intima and media of nondiseased aortas including endothelial cells, SMCs, and elastic fibers. BMP-4, osteonectin, and osteopontin were highly expressed only in the medial SMCs. On the contrary, in advanced lesions, bone sialoprotein, BMP-2, BMP-4, osteonectin, and osteoprotegerin were expressed in intimal SMCs located at the shoulder region of fibroatheroma; whereas MGP, bone sialoprotein, osteocalcin, BMP-4, osteopontin, and osteonectin were expressed in foam cells and in the lipid core. In lesions with fibrocalcific plaques, which are rich in collagen, with large areas of calcification and necrotic core and in those with a bone structure showing cartilage tissue, calcification and bone tissue, stains for BMP-2, BMP-4, osteopontin, and osteonectin were positive (Figure 3).19 Immunohistochemical studies in early coronary plaques from SCD victims showed positive staining for osteoprotegerin, osteopontin, and MGP at the sites of microcalcification (Figure 1A and IB). Roijers et al.20 have shown intima areas with abundant microcalcification expressing osteocalcin and BMP-2 in coronary arteries. In contrast, uncarboxylated MGP expression is negative in the AIT but is increased in fibroatheromas, whereas carboxylated MGP is highly expressed in PIT and fibroatheromas.20 Although the above-mentioned proteins are present in early plaques, the mechanism of calcification/osteogenesis in the arterial wall remains to be determined.

Calcification is common in all atherosclerotic lesions independent of location, that is, peripheral arteries—superficial femoral, deep femoral, peroneal, popliteal, anterior and posterior tibial, dorsal pedis, and the carotid arteries. The peripheral arteries not only show calcification of intimal atherosclerotic but also medial Mönckeberg calcification. The peripheral artery atherosclerosis shows greater collagen deposition degeneration). The prominent basal laminae (bl) around these clusters of vesicles led us to conclude that the vesicles are of SMC and not of macrophage origin. Reproduced with permission from Kockx et al.13 Authorization for this adaptation has been obtained both from the owner of the copyright in the original work and from the owner of copyright in the translation or adaptation.
Calcification and Plaque Stability

It remains unclear whether coronary calcification predicts plaque instability or is merely a marker of plaque burden (Figure 4). Serial intravascular ultrasound studies have revealed that heavily calcified plaques are more resistant to change in atheroma volume as compared with less calcified plaques, whereas the presence of spotty calcification as compared with its absence is associated with greater progression of atheroma volume in patients with stable coronary artery disease.\(^{26,27}\) Biomechanical models using coronary plaques from human autopsy cases have suggested that calcification within the ruptured or stable plaque does not increase fibrous cap stress, whereas greater lipid area is associated with increased vessel wall stress.\(^{28}\) Autopsy studies have shown a weak but inverse correlation between calcification and macrophage areas in coronary plaques from SCD victims.\(^{29}\) Moreover, clinical imaging studies in patients with acute coronary syndromes as well as autopsy observations in SCD victims have demonstrated less calcification in ruptured or vulnerable plaques as compared with stable plaques (Figure 4).\(^{29,30}\) These findings support the notion that calcium generally confers stability to plaques rather than the opposite. Nevertheless, as it stands, location of the calcification seems to be paramount. Vengrenyuk et al\(^{31}\) have reported that microcalcification within a thin fibrous cap (typically 10 \(\mu\)m in diameter) facilitates plaque rupture through local increase in stress that leads to interfacial debonding (Figure 1E). However, their more recent article shows that microcalcification >5 \(\mu\)m in diameter may be harmful and can predict plaque rupture, whereas microcalcification <5 \(\mu\)m in diameter is seemingly less harmful.\(^{32}\)

We have previously reported that maximum calcification is seen in healed plaque ruptures, followed by fibroatheroma, TCFA, plaque rupture, with least calcification seen in plaque erosion and PIT.\(^{33}\) The degree of calcification by plaque type in SCD victims is shown in Figure 4. The mean calcified area is maximum in fibrocalcific lesion and least in AIT/fibrous plaques or erosion. Total occlusions display variable degrees of calcification, and the dimension of calcification depends on the underlying plaque morphology as well as the length of the thrombus.

Mauriello et al\(^{34}\) have recently shown that calcification is maximum in individuals dying from acute myocardial infarction relative to control patients dying from noncardiac causes but with ≥1 coronary artery showing >50% stenosis. However, the coronary calcification did not correlate with presence of unstable characteristics, thus suggesting that coronary calcification is a predictor of generic risk of acute events but is not useful for identifying vulnerable lesions. We have shown that age at presentation may be an important predictor of calcification among unstable and stable plaques. There seems to be an inverse relationship between calcification, plaque stability, and age.\(^{35}\) Although patients presenting in the fourth decade with ruptured/TCFA lesions (unstable plaques) showed greater calcification than those exhibiting stable plaques, no differences were observed in the fifties and sixties. In contrast, significantly greater calcification was observed in the seventies in stable than in unstable plaques.\(^{30}\)

### Results from Computed Tomography

Although the use of computed tomography (CT) for the detection of future cardiovascular events has engendered a fair amount of controversy in the past, the level of evidence has tremendously increased and has been given a level IIa recommendation for risk stratifying individuals at intermediate risk (10%–20%, 10-year risk).\(^{33}\) Although the risk of future coronary event is higher in asymptomatic individual with a high absolute calcium score, it is the risk for an individual patient that is best predicted by comparing calcium score percentiles; patients with a calcium score >75th percentile had 19 times the risk of having a hard coronary event as compared with those with a score of <25th percentile, whereas the risk of events in patients in the upper risk factor quartile was 6.5 times greater than that of patients in the lowest quartile.\(^{34}\) Recent studies have demonstrated that individuals with low low-density lipoprotein cholesterol and no reported risk factors but with any coronary artery calcium present have a
greater likelihood of coronary heart disease as compared with those without any calcification during a median follow-up of 5.4 years. Similarly, absence of coronary calcification imparts a low risk of future coronary events.

According to the literature, CT can only identify calcification areas of 1.03 to 1.37 mm² in size; that is, 3 to 4 contiguous pixels within a plaque area of 5 mm². Therefore, microcalcification seen in early plaques (PIT and early fibroatheroma) will not be identified by CT; this includes calcification of both SMCs as well as macrophages. Only once aggregation of calcium occurs in fibroatheromas, which is almost always observed near the intimal medial border involving both large areas of adjoining necrotic core and collagen, can CT identify these lesions.

Determination of Calcification: Sex and Race Differences

Sex differences in calcification have been appreciated for a long time (Figure 5). The incidence of coronary artery disease in women is delayed by 10 to 15 years as compared with men, likely attributable to the protective effects of estrogen.

The effect of estrogen therapy on coronary calcification was studied in women aged 50 to 59 years during a 7-year period of treatment. Calcification burden was significantly less in women assigned to estrogen substitution as compared with those receiving placebo. However, it must be stated that a prior large study, the Women’s Health Initiative (WHI) trial of conjugated equine estrogen given in postmenopausal women who had undergone hysterectomy, reported a hazard ratio of 0.95 (confidence interval, 0.79–1.16) for nonfatal myocardial infarction plus fatal coronary heart disease in those receiving estrogen versus placebo. Nevertheless, secondary analysis by age group suggested that the results were different in younger versus older women. In our registry of 108 human hearts (70 men; mean age, 50.4±12.2 years and 38 women; mean age, 49.6±12.2 years) who died of SCD, the extent of coronary calcification was assessed on a semiquantitative scale (grade 0=no calcification; grade 1=calcification <40 μm in diameter; grade 2=40 μm in diameter involving only 1 quadrant; grade 3=in 2 arterial quadrants; grade 4=in 3 arterial quadrants; grade 5=involving the entire arterial circumference). When
stratified by decades, the extent of calcification was greater in men as compared with women up to the sixties, whereas in the seventies, the prevalence was similar, suggesting that coronary calcification develops rapidly during the postmenopausal period (Figure 5A). Our laboratory previously reported that the degree of calcification in postmenopausal women is 3 times higher than in premenopausal women assessed in men and women dying suddenly.42

It has also been reported that race affects the degree of calcification. In the MESA in asymptomatic individuals aged 45 to 84 years after adjusting for various clinical parameters, the relative risk for calcification was 0.78 (95% confidence interval, 0.74–0.82) in blacks, 0.85 (95% confidence interval, 0.79–0.91) in Hispanics, and 0.92 (95% confidence interval, 0.85–0.99) in Chinese relative to the white race.43 Our autopsy assessment in SCD victims showed that the total coronary calcification scores when stratified by decades was consistently greater in whites as compared with blacks in all decades (Figure 5B).46 This finding is in line with previous clinical observations showing that the prevalence and extent of calcification was substantially greater in whites as compared with blacks when assessed by CT.44 Although the mechanisms responsible for the racial difference in coronary calcification are not fully understood, several possible explanations have been proposed. Bone mineral density is less in whites than in blacks,45 and bone density is inversely related to aortic calcification.46 There may be inherent genetic predisposition for coronary calcification in blacks and whites, which remains to be determined. Huang et al47 showed that race-related genes, such as GAB2, which is expressed at a lower level in blacks and also in those with low calcification, may be another explanation for the lower prevalence of calcification in blacks. Furthermore, it has been reported that soluble epoxide hydroxylase gene polymorphism is associated with coronary calcification in blacks, but not in whites.48 Although multiple variations of gene expression are likely to be involved,49 the precise genetic impact on calcification remains to be elucidated.

Calcification, Vascular Remodeling, and Luminal Stenosis

Sangiorgi et al50 demonstrated that arterial calcification correlated with plaque burden, but had only a weak correlation with luminal narrowing (Figure 6A and 6B). Because coronary calcification has been shown to be a predictor of future events, it is not surprising that there is a good correlation between calcification and plaque area. The poor correlation between calcification and plaque area needs to be interpreted with caution because effective plaque area represents multifactorial processes. Conventionally, lumen area decreases as plaque burden increases beyond 40% stenosis, introducing a negative correlation among these parameters. A deviation from this notion is expected when there is compensatory enlargement of the vessel, termed positive remodeling. This relationship was clearly demonstrated by Glagov et al51 who showed that lumen area does not decrease until the lesion occupies ≥40% of the internal elastic lamina area. Compensatory enlargement may be the main explanation why there is no correlation between calcification and lumen area in early plaque development when calcification is progressing. The poor correlation between calcification area and lumen area can also be partially explained on the basis of plaque morphology with highly fibrotic plaques being associated with negative remodeling.51 Luminal narrowing may only occur in advanced atherosclerotic lesions after the vascular capacity of compensatory enlargement has exhausted. We investigated the association between arterial remodeling and plaque components and have shown that arterial expansion was strongly correlated with calcification, macrophage infiltration, and lipid core.51

Another intriguing finding is that there is an excellent correlation between percent stenosis and the percentage of calcification (%) as well as mean calcification area (square
The positive correlation between percent stenosis and the degree of calcification may be partly explained by the relationship between plaque morphology and percent stenosis. When percent stenosis is stratified by decades, the prevalence of complex lesions and calcification increase incrementally. In other words, complex lesions, especially healed plaque ruptures, are frequently observed in higher-grade stenosis and are likely to be accompanied by greater calcification (Figure 7).

The Location of Coronary Calcification

Our data indicate that calcified area is greater at proximal than in distal locations in the 3 main epicardial arteries (left anterior descending artery, left circumflex artery, right coronary artery) in patients presenting with coronary artery disease at a mean age of 64±14 years. This has also been reported by Sangiorgi et al in 13 patients with only 2 having died of coronary artery disease. A recent longitudinal intravascular ultrasound study showed that plaque burden was greatest in proximal and least in distal coronary arteries. However, calcification was similar in proximal and middle and least in the distal arteries in individuals presenting with acute coronary syndromes with a median age of 58 years. This observation is in keeping with the previous notion that plaque burden correlates with calcification as reported by histology, angiography, intravascular ultrasound, and now by cardiac CT.

Mechanisms of Atherosclerotic Calcification

As stated above, atherosclerotic intimal calcification is different from medial Mönckeberg calcification, and the latter occurs independently from intimal calcification (Figure 8). Most importantly, medial calcification is not associated with lipid deposition or inflammation. Medial calcification is first appreciated within the elastic lamellae, both within the media and in the internal elastic lamina, followed by medial SMC. It is accelerated in the presence of diabetes mellitus and chronic renal failure. The SMCs lose their contractile phenotype (α-actin and SM22-α) and gain osteochondrogenic markers such as
Osteopontin, Runt-related transcription factor 2, also known as core-binding factor subunit α-1 (Runt-related transcription factor 2/core-binding factor subunit α-1), alkaline phosphatase, and osteocalcin. It has also been shown that MGP-null mice undergo spontaneous arterial medial calcification, pointing toward the relevance of MGP in medial calcification.55,56

**Figure 7.** Prevalence of various coronary plaque morphologies at 10% incremental cross-sectional area narrowing in sudden coronary death victims. AIT indicates adaptive intimal thickening; PIT, pathological intimal thickening; and TCFA, thin-cap fibroatheroma. Data presented as each 10% increase in narrowing from Burke et al.25

**Figure 8.** Schematic illustrating 4 nonmutually exclusive theories for vascular calcification: (1) cell death leading to release of apoptotic bodies and necrotic debris that may serve to nucleate apatite at sites of injury; (2) circulating nucleational complexes released from actively remodeling bone or matrix vesicular released locally; (3) loss of inhibition as a result of deficiency of constitutively expressed tissue-derived and circulating mineralization inhibitors leads to default apatite deposition; and (4) induction of bone formation resulting from altered differentiation of vascular smooth muscle (SMCs) or stem cells. MGP indicates matrix Gla protein; and OPN, osteopontin. Reproduced and modified with permission from Speer and Giachelli.54 Authorization for this adaptation has been obtained both from the owner of the copyright in the original work and from the owner of copyright in the translation or adaptation.
The molecular mechanisms are different between intimal and medial calcification, and vascular intimal calcification is now considered an active process and that many nonmutually exclusive mechanisms exist. There is little consensus on which mechanisms of atherosclerotic intimal calcification apply best to man. There seem to be different schools of thought raising 4 nonmutually exclusive concepts (Figure 8), with those who foster the idea that SMCs acquire an osteogenic profile and calcification occurs akin to bone formation. It is thought that extracellular vesicles (matrix vesicles) calcify when calcium phosphates appear inside these matrix vesicles, forming hydroxyapatite crystals, akin to bone formation.90 Apoptotic cell death generated form SMCs, and macrophages calcify in the extracellular environment, and that nucelate hydroxyapatite mineral crystallization occurs.90 Within this group, there are those of us who believe in the concept that chronic low levels of SM and macrophage apoptosis is the main driver of calcification in man. Another concept is related to the loss of inhibitors of calcification molecules which are normally expressed in the vessel wall such as MGP, osteopontin, fetuin, pyrophosphates, and others that may lead to spontaneous calcification. Fetuin, a circulating glycoprotein, is a major inhibitor of apatite found in circulation, and decrease in fetuin levels results in augmented vascular calcification and higher cardiovascular mortality in hemodialysis patients. Also, the presence of bone proteins in the vessel wall, such as osteopontin, osteocalcin, and BMP-2, and the presence of bone and cartilage in vessel walls suggest osteogenetic origin. Indeed, it has been shown in culture studies that SMCs phenotypically change to cartilage and bone and calcify under various conditions, and this view of calcification is being presented by Demer et al in this editorial series on calcification. The cell death view, along with other investigators such as Clarke et al,59 Kockx et al,11 and Proudfoot et al60 have shown in in vitro research related to the mechanisms of bone formation, which strongly supports the school of thought that vascular calcification may be akin to bone formation. Also, it has been shown in the mouse model that vascular SMCs undergo osteochondrogenesis and contribute to atherosclerotic intimal calcification.60 However, looking at this topic from a more observational point of view, vascular calcification is largely observed in areas of cell death. Data showing viable SMCs that do not calcify have been shown in culture studies. Reynolds et al70 have shown that the matrix around the SMCs calcifies, the cells remained viable, and once the calcified matrix is removed, they proliferate, thus showing viability of the SMCs.71 In addition, true lacunar bone formation including osteoblasts and osteoclasts in coronary atherosclerosis remains exceptional to our knowledge. Also, presence of cartilage has only rarely been reported72 in peripheral arteries, whereas reports inferring the existence of cartilaginous metaplasia in coronary lesions are lacking to date. From a pathological standpoint, vascular calcification seems to constitute a destructive event in advanced atherosclerotic lesions. Statin treatment has been shown to at least halt disease progression with respect to cholesterol accumulation in the vessel wall. Surprisingly, statin treatment has been reported to even increase calcification of atherosclerotic lesions, thus suggesting that calcification may be a marker of stable, nonprogressive atherosclerosis process.73 It could also between lipid core, fibrous cap, and the area underlying the rupture. Kockx et al61 have shown that SMC apoptosis is rare in fatty streak lesions. If present, it mostly occurs in SMCs which are enclosed by a cage of thickened basement membrane, frequently within the deeper layers of the plaque (Figure 2). In keeping with this, the necrotic core of advanced atherosclerotic plaques is largely acellular indicating cell death which must have occurred earlier or enlargement of the necrotic core may be secondary to plaque hemorrhage.64 Surrounding the necrotic core, especially toward the luminal surface, there is a dense infiltration of macrophages and these also show changes of apoptosis.65 A significantly greater number of apoptotic bodies have been identified within the necrotic core as compared with other parts of the plaque.66 Low-level apoptosis has been shown by Clarke et al60 to accelerate calcification in SM22α-hDTR apolipoprotein E–deficient mice promoting calcification in early and in late vulnerable plaques. It is not only apoptosis that is necessary, but also the calcification must occur at these sites of necrosis. Proudfoot et al60 showed in a culture model that SMC nodules calcify at sites of apoptosis and that this can be prevented by inhibiting apoptosis. Similarly, others have shown that calcification is enhanced after induction of hyperphosphatemia or addition of transforming growth factor-β1 in interstitial aortic valve cells.67,68 It is clear that calcium and phosphate ions in biological fluids are tightly regulated, and any abnormality as in chronic renal failure results in higher rates of calcification in soft tissues.
be that location of calcification is the most important and that small calcifications in the thin fibrous cap may contribute to plaque rupture. It is clear that large calcification located near the intimal-medical border does not impart instability to a plaque but may even be harbingers of stability. Novel imaging modalities, both invasive and noninvasive, will likely result in better understanding of calcification dynamics in the future.

Conclusions

Despite the undoubted association between coronary atherosclerotic calcification and prediction of future cardiovascular events, there is only weak correlation between calcification-induced coronary plaque progression and luminal narrowing. Coronary calcification is reported to occur sporadically in AIT/fibrous lesions and is almost uniformly seen in PIT with or without macrophages. In PIT lesions, calcification can be observed microscopically as microcalcification which is usually 0.5 to 15 μm in size and enlarging to ≥15 μm in early fibroatheromas, when macrophages infiltrate the necrotic core and undergo apoptosis. Confluent calcified areas begin to appear in fibroatheromas and occasionally in PIT and fibrous lesions. Calcified areas are mostly located around the necrotic core close to the media. In the course of atherosclerosis progression, calcified areas enlarge to form calcified sheets, which are hallmarks of stable plaques and fibrocalcific lesions. The sheets may break and lead to nodular calcification, which is often observed as small rounded calcified fragments separated by fibrin with luminal protrusion and an overlying thrombus. Calcification is greater in men than in women especially in the premenopausal period. Blacks have less calcification than whites. Maximum calcification is observed in fibrocalcific plaques followed by healed plaque rupture and fibroatheroma, whereas ruptured plaques and TCFAs have much less calcification. Stable plaques overall show greater calcification than unstable plaques. The mechanisms of calcification are beginning to be better understood through the development of animal models and molecular modifications.

Mainly, 3 types of calcification have been described in the vasculature, and the most prevalent being atherosclerotic, followed by medial calcification, and least frequent is arterial calcification of infancy. Atherosclerotic intimal calcification has been linked to bone formation with matrix vesicle release, but other factors may also play a role such as loss of calcification-inhibiting pathways and SMC and macrophage apoptotic cell death. Factors that govern calcification include alterations in calcium and phosphate balance, especially in patients with renal failure, diabetes mellitus, and lipid oxidation products. In the future, strategies to control or remove calcification may enable us to reduce the burden of atherosclerotic disease.

Sources of Funding

CVPath Institute Inc, Gaithersburg, MD, provided full support for this work. F. Otsuka is supported by a research fellowship from the Uehara Memorial Foundation, Tokyo, Japan. K. Sakakura is supported by a research fellowship from Banyu Life Science Foundation International.

Disclosures

None.

References


Intimal atherosclerotic calcification is the most common form of calcification, begins early, and is first appreciated in pathological intimal thickening when it can only be identified by special stains. It progresses from microscopic speckling to punctate lesion accompanied by apoptosis of smooth muscle cells and macrophages and release of matrix vesicles. These microcalcified areas coalesce with eventual formation of fragments of calcification seen in fibroatheromas. The fragmented calcified areas are located close to the medial wall and extend to involve the necrotic core and the adjacent collagen eventually forming calcified sheets. Calcification is significantly greater in men than in women and correlates with plaque area but not with lumen area. It is only at this stage when calcified fragments reaches a threshold of 1.03 to 1.37 mm² in size that computed tomography can identify calcification. Computed tomography imaging techniques have shown that individuals with a high calcium score have a higher risk of developing future cardiovascular events.

**Significance**

Intimal atherosclerotic calcification is the most common form of calcification, begins early, and is first appreciated in pathological intimal thickening when it can only be identified by special stains. It progresses from microscopic speckling to punctate lesion accompanied by apoptosis of smooth muscle cells and macrophages and release of matrix vesicles. These microcalcified areas coalesce with eventual formation of fragments of calcification seen in fibroatheromas. The fragmented calcified areas are located close to the medial wall and extend to involve the necrotic core and the adjacent collagen eventually forming calcified sheets. Calcification is significantly greater in men than in women and correlates with plaque area but not with lumen area. It is only at this stage when calcified fragments reaches a threshold of 1.03 to 1.37 mm² in size that computed tomography can identify calcification. Computed tomography imaging techniques have shown that individuals with a high calcium score have a higher risk of developing future cardiovascular events.

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_Arterioscler Thromb Vasc Biol_. published online February 20, 2014;
_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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