

Table 3  
Clinical characteristics of those type 2 diabetic subjects with and without *Ala146* variant of the *Gly146Ala* polymorphism of *SF-1*

Characteristics	<i>Gly/Gly</i>	<i>Gly/Ala + Ala/Ala</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>n</i>	63	88	–
Gender (male/female)	24/39	37/51	0.63
Age (years)	62.07 ± 0.81	60.51 ± 1.17	0.37
Diabetes onset age	54.74 ± 1.80	55.12 ± 1.50	0.87
Family history (+/–)	49/14	65/23	0.58
BMI (kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	26.20 ± 0.57	26.90 ± 0.49	0.35
WHR	0.90 ± 0.007	0.89 ± 0.006	0.47
FPG (mmol/l)	9.10 ± 0.47	9.68 ± 0.79	0.57
f-IRI (pmol/l)	15.01 ± 0.88	25.94 ± 3.60	0.02
HOMA-IR	5.38 ± 0.43	11.78 ± 2.95	0.04
HOMA-β	76.78 ± 5.56	123.32 ± 13.69	0.01
SBP (mmHg)	139.37 ± 2.40	133.68 ± 2.57	0.12
DBP (mmHg)	84.65 ± 1.31	82.51 ± 1.11	0.22
TC (mmol/l)	4.94 ± 0.15	4.93 ± 0.13	0.93
TG (mmol/l)	1.75 ± 0.14	1.73 ± 0.12	0.90
HDL-C (mmol/l)	1.37 ± 0.05	1.33 ± 0.04	0.53
LDL-C (mmol/l)	3.21 ± 0.14	3.16 ± 0.11	0.76
Treatments			0.50
Diet only	0	1	
Oral agent only	32	49	
Insulin only	8	15	
Oral agent + insulin	23	24	

while the differences haven't reached statistical significance due to relative large S.E.M. values, the tendency of higher fasting insulin levels, higher HOMA-IR and HOMA-β values are obvious in those *Ala146* carrying subjects; suggesting the *Ala146* variation of *SF-1* may confer resistance to insulin action in healthy subjects as well.

Table 4  
Clinical characteristics of those non-diabetic subjects with and without *Ala146* variant of the *Gly146Ala* polymorphism of *SF-1*

Characteristics	<i>Gly/Gly</i>	<i>Gly/Ala + Ala/Ala</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>n</i>	75	66	–
Gender (male/female)	21/54	13/53	0.25
Age (years)	67.51 ± 1.07	67.03 ± 1.05	0.76
BMI (kg/m <sup>2</sup> )	21.20 ± 0.27	21.40 ± 0.3	0.74
WHR	0.83 ± 0.007	0.81 ± 0.008	0.06
FPG (mmol/l)	4.49 ± 0.08	4.60 ± 0.06	0.32
f-IRI (pmol/l)	10.17 ± 0.91	11.26 ± 0.72	0.20
HOMA-IR	2.11 ± 0.09	2.35 ± 0.15	0.10
HOMA-β	209.82 ± 16.19	308.61 ± 97.69	0.15
SBP (mmHg)	130.19 ± 1.73	125.52 ± 2.03	0.08
DBP (mmHg)	82.53 ± 1.12	80.74 ± 1.15	0.27
TC (mmol/l)	5.09 ± 0.11	5.24 ± 0.11	0.18
TG (mmol/l)	1.66 ± 0.15	1.37 ± 0.09	0.12
HDL-C (mmol/l)	1.81 ± 0.06	1.82 ± 0.05	0.83
LDL-C (mmol/l)	2.96 ± 0.11	3.18 ± 0.12	0.09

While mutations of *SF-1* gene cause obesity both in human and mice, a predicted effect of *Gly146Ala* polymorphism on obesity was not observed. In both the diabetic group and the non-diabetic group, body mass index (BMI), as well as waist-to-hip (WHR), was not affected by the presence of *Ala146* allele (Tables 3 and 4).

Although *SF-1 Gly146Ala* affected the susceptibility to type 2 diabetes, it appears that the variation is not related with an early onset of diabetes, the diabetes onset age was similar between subjects with and without the *Ala146* allele, neither the prevalence of family history differed between the two subgroups (Table 3).

Among both diabetic and control subjects, there were no significant differences in age, sex, blood pressure and plasma lipid profile between the two subgroups with and without the *Ala146* variation (Tables 3 and 4).

#### 4. Discussion

While *SF-1* is traditionally a key factor for steroidogenic processes and is crucial for development and function of adrenal and gonads in both sexes, accumulating findings are linking the nuclear receptor to metabolism disorders. Mutations of the gene cause obesity in both human and rodents. Added to these findings, the present study, to our knowledge, for the first time revealed a higher *Gly146Ala* polymorphism frequency in type 2 diabetes population as compared with a non-diabetic control population, and thus further suggests a potential implication of *SF-1* gene in metabolic diseases.

The effects of *SF-1* on metabolism might firstly rely on its vital role in the hypothalamus, especially the nucleus of ventromedial hypothalamic nucleus (VMH). Hypothalamus is believed to be the center of energy homeostasis and metabolism regulation [15]. This area of science became one of the most dramatically progressing field since the discovery of leptin [16]. Body fat is regulated by a complex neuroendocrine system through which information about the status of stored energy is converted to key CNS circuit using changing levels of hormones such as leptin and insulin. Leptin, which is in proportion to body fat mass, circulates to hypothalamus, stimulates PMOC neurons and represses AgRP/NPY neurons, and results in inhibited appetites and increased energy burning. Added to this well established hypothalamic role in energy homeostasis and body weight control, Rossetti and colleagues recently have proposed that, in addition to hormones (leptin and insulin), fuels such as glucose

and lipid are also afferent endocrine factors that regulate neuronal activity in the hypothalamus, and play critical roles in controlling blood glucose [17,18]. Thus hypothalamus is crucial for both energy and glucose homeostasis, and might be directly involved in onset of both obesity and diabetes. Among various nuclei of hypothalamus, VMH is one of the most important that plays vital roles in regulation of appetite and body weight. Lesions in VMH cause hyperphagia and obesity. *sf-1* KO mice have marked abnormalities in the VMH [19], which persists in the adult animals and contributes to the onset of obesity of those mice [10]. SF-1 is the most definitive molecular marker for the VMH, and has a distinct role in the VMH terminal differentiation and development [20,21]. SF-1 may also impact on either hormone (leptin and insulin) or fuels induced hypothalamic neuro-endocrine circuits, and functional alterations of the receptor caused by mutations or polymorphic variations may thus contribute to metabolism disorders by interfering with central regulation of energy and glucose homeostasis. Intriguingly, specific knockout of *sf-1* gene in hypothalamus is sufficient to induce obesity in mice [22].

A recent discovery of phospholipids as endogenous ligands for SF-1 [8,9] is very striking; important moleculars involved in insulin signaling, like PIP3, is thus a cognate ligand for SF-1. Given the dominant hypothalamic expression of SF-1 and critical role of hypothalamic insulin signaling in both energy and glucose homeostasis [23], this becomes particularly significant. Insulin, as above-mentioned, is a major afferent humoral information regarding the sufficiency of body fat stores to central nervous system (CNS). Reduced CNS insulin signaling contributes to the pathogenesis of metabolic disorders [23]. SF-1 in hypothalamus may work as a sensor of local insulin signaling. Phospholipids as SF-1 ligand also makes the receptor a possible nuclear lipid sensor, and potentially have important role in intracellular metabolism regulation.

Another possible way via which SF-1 exert its role in metabolism might rely on its well-known role in steroidogenesis. One identified cause of obesity, especially visceral obesity and metabolic complications like diabetes and dyslipidemia is exposure to excessive levels of glucocorticoids. Systematic glucocorticoid excess in Cushing syndrome causes visceral obesity, hyperglycemia and the metabolic syndrome [24,25]. Local overproduction of glucocorticoids in adipose tissue causes visceral obesity, insulin-resistant diabetes, and hyperlipidemia [26]. *Gly146Ala SF-1* variation may

affect the diabetes onset via its role on adrenal steroidogenesis function, since the polymorphism is associated with pathological background of the adrenal; it produces a more susceptible state to adrenal disorders, and was evidenced to related with occurrence of these disorders in human being [11].

SF-1 critically regulates a big cluster of genes through out the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis [27]; is critical for a functional HPA axis. A normal HPA axis is not only a prerequisite for proper glucocorticoid production (which affects insulin action), but also important for a normal circadian rhythm. HPA maintains consciousness and modulates sleep [28]. A recent study with the CLOCK transcriptional factor mutant mice showed that altering circadian rhythm also results in pathophysiological changes resembling the metabolic syndrome [29]. And importantly, disturbance of HPA axis function in human is associated with not only sleep diseases, but metabolic syndrome as well [28,30]. In this regard, a caveat to be considered in the interpretation of our present clinical data arising here is that, we, in the present study, couldn't include the analysis for the adrenal functional statuses (glucocorticoidogenesis), and especially the HPA functions status for subjects with different *SF-1* genotype. The issue is the major subject of one of our ongoing studies.

The higher fasting insulin levels and HOMA values observed in both diabetic and non-diabetic subjects carrying *Ala146* allele is likely, secondary due to *SF-1 Gly146Ala*'s role in metabolism, although a direct effect of the receptor on islet  $\beta$ -cell function is not excludable. Our data warrants careful evaluations of issues of hyperinsulinemia and insulin resistance in the previously reported human subjects and mice model of *SF-1* mutations, where mild to severe obesity was observed. The data also suggest that diabetic individuals with *Ala146* variant are likely to experience a worse insulin action and severe form of the disease.

In conclusion, the present study revealed a significant higher frequency of human *SF-1* gene *Gly146Ala* variation in type 2 diabetes subjects as compared to the non-diabetic subjects in Han Chinese; the allele *Ala146* is associated with an elevated risk for the development of type 2 diabetes. The variation is also related with a higher level of plasma insulin, and severer insulin resistance. While the Chinese Han ethnic group is more homogenous than Caucasians [31], and the influence of population stratification is likely smaller in the present study, studies with larger populations and those carried out in various races are definitely of great essentiality to further clarify the relationship between

the *Gly146Ala SF-1* polymorphism and type 2 diabetes and insulin resistance.

### Acknowledgements

We thank Professor Min Luo, Guo Li and Tianhong Luo (Shanghai Institute of Endocrinology, Ruijin Hospital, Shanghai) for their continuing support and help. This study was supported by a grant of the “Natural Science Research Foundation Project of Shanghai Second Medical University” 02XJ21016.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Serum concentrations of dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate (DHEA-S) in oldest old Japanese women correlate with cognitive activity rather than activities of daily living

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**Background:** Dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) and its interconvertible sulfate ester, DHEA sulfate (DHEA-S), mainly produced by the adrenal glands, are progressively decreased with aging and are proven markers of longevity. Although serum level of DHEA (-S) has been shown to be decreased in dementing diseases, the issue remains controversial. We investigated the physiological significance of DHEA-S in oldest old Japanese women in respect of activities of daily living (ADL) or cognitive activities.

**Methods:** Cross-sectional study of 50 women aged 90–103 years old. Serum concentrations of DHEA-S levels were measured by radioimmunoassay. ADL and cognitive activity were evaluated by the Barthel index and revised Hasegawa's dementia rating scale (HDS-R), respectively. Univariate or multivariate regression analyzes were used for statistics.

**Results:** Of the 50 subjects, 80% exceeded the lowest level of the normal range for women in their forties. Serum concentrations of DHEA-S were significantly correlated with HDS-R but not with the Barthel index.

**Conclusion:** Relatively higher levels of serum DHEA-S in oldest old women may reflect the longevity of this population and the levels might be associated with cognitive activity rather than ADL.

**Keywords:** activities of daily living (ADL), aging, dementia, dehydroepiandrosterone-sulfate (DHEA-S).

## Introduction

Dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) and its interconvertible sulfate ester, DHEA sulfate (DHEA-S) are mainly produced by the adrenal glands, with production

decreasing progressively with aging. After the age of 80 years, DHEA-S levels drop to 10–20% of the peak levels of women in their second decade.<sup>1</sup> DHEA and DHEA-S have recently received much attention because their serum levels were shown to be an important marker for longevity<sup>2</sup> and because a number of beneficial or anti-aging effects of DHEA-S on, for example, dementia, obesity, lipid metabolism, diabetes mellitus, atherosclerosis, osteoporosis, carcinogenesis and immune responses have been clarified.<sup>1,3</sup> Indeed, several preliminary trials to treat aged people with DHEA within a year appear promising; replacement of

Accepted for publication 15 May 2006.

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DHEA (50 mg) in men and women (50 years old) for 6 months in a double-blind trial showed a significant increase in the sense of well-being both in men and women.<sup>4</sup> Baulieu *et al.* performed a large scale double-blind study in which 280 healthy individuals (women and men, 60–79 years old) were daily given orally either 50 mg DHEA or a placebo for a year; a significant increase in most libido parameters and bone mineral density and the improvement of skin status was noted in the women.<sup>5</sup>

As for dementia, Sunderland *et al.* first reported decreased serum concentration of DHEA-S in Alzheimer's disease (AD) patients compared to controls.<sup>6</sup> However, subsequent similar trials revealed that serum DHEA or DHEA-S appeared inconstant as a biological marker for AD.<sup>7</sup> Other reports, including a previous one of ours, have reported that not only with AD patients, but also patients with cerebrovascular dementia (CVD) have lower concentrations of DHEA-S compared with age- and gender-matched controls.<sup>8,9</sup> Further, a recent, randomized, double-blind study involving 6 month's DHEA treatment of AD showed no significant improvement of cognitive function.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, studies regarding the relationship between serum DHEA-S levels and activities of daily living (ADL) performances in elderly people are also conflicting.<sup>11–13</sup> Therefore, the physiological significance of DHEA-S in the elderly remains controversial. There are no reports investigating whether serum DHEA-S levels are closely associated with either or both of ADL performance or cognitive activity.

The oldest old people are a good model to study the association of DHEA-S with longevity in respect of mental and physical activities. However, DHEA-S levels in the Japanese oldest old population have not been well studied. In the present study, to ascertain more about the significance of serum DHEA-S in oldest old women, we evaluated the relationship between the serum concentration of DHEA-S and ADL and cognitive activity of this population; here, aged more than 90 years old.

## Materials and methods

### Subjects

Fifty women over 90 years old, who resided in the nursing ward of Muta Hospital (Fukuoka, Japan) participated in this study. The blood samples were collected with subjects in a supine position at 8 AM on the day when regular check-ups of blood chemistry were undertaken. Functional independence in respect of ADL was evaluated by the Barthel index score (full score, 100).<sup>14</sup> A higher score indicates greater independence. Cognitive activity was evaluated by revised Hasegawa's dementia rating scale (HDS-R; full score, 30).<sup>15</sup> A higher score indicates less dementia. These evaluations are routine

work for elderly patients in Muta Hospital. ADL evaluators were blind to hormonal levels and those who performed hormone assays were blind to ADL scores.

Based on clinical diagnoses, the 50 oldest old women consisted of 10 with hypertension, five with mild heart failure, nine with after-effect of cerebrovascular disease, 16 with various degrees of dementia (13 with senile dementia of Alzheimer's type, one with relatively early onset AD, and two with cerebrovascular dementia) and 10 with disease-free state. However, by HDS-R evaluations, 45 women who scored less than 20 were assumed to have actual dementia.

### Radioimmunoassay

The concentrations of DHEA-S and DHEA in serum were measured by SRL (Tokyo, Japan) using Coat-A-Count DHEA-SO<sub>4</sub> and DHEA (Diagnostic Products Corporation, Los Angeles, CA, USA) kits, respectively, as previously reported.<sup>7</sup> Normal ranges of serum DHEA-S concentration by decade in females based on SRL's evaluation were 85–299 (20–29 years old), 64–203 (30–39 years old), 25–195 (40–49 years old), 11–116 (50–59 years old) and 5–100 µg/dL (over 60 years old; see Fig. 1).

### Statistics

Correlations among age, serum concentrations of DHEA-S (or DHEA), Barthel index score and HDS-R were evaluated by univariate or multivariate regression analyses. Statistical evaluation was performed using SPSS 11.5 software (Windows; SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA) with the level of significance set at 5%.

## Results

Serum concentrations of DHEA-S in the oldest old women subjects ranged 2–141 µg/dL (Fig. 1). A significant age-associated change of serum DHEA-S level was not observed ( $r = -0.0174$ ,  $P = 0.91$ ). Furthermore, 80% (40/50) of all women exceeded the lowest level of the normal range of women in their forties, while five subjects exceeded even the lowest level of the normal range of women in their twenties.

In the Barthel index, 10 subjects scored 0/100, whereas the other 40 subjects scored from 12/100 to 100/100. On the other hand, on HDS-R, 16 subjects scored 0/30 while the other 34 subjects scored from 1/30 to 24/30. Indeed, the 45 women who scored less than 20 were assumed to have actual dementia. Interestingly, univariate regression analysis revealed that the serum DHEA-S level significantly correlated with HDS-R ( $R = 0.392$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) but not with the Barthel index ( $R = -0.009$ ; Fig. 2). We also measured serum concentrations of DHEA because DHEA is expected to be an active form

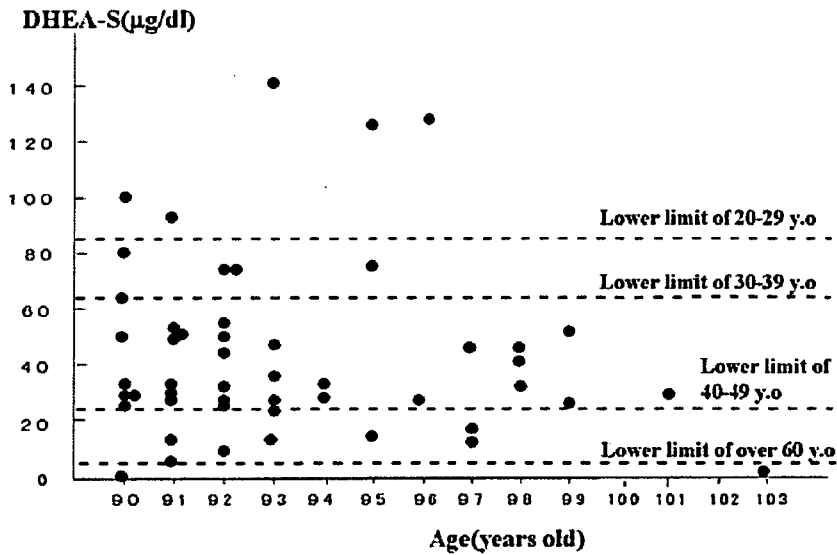


Figure 1 Scattergram of serum dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate (DHEA-S) concentrations versus age in oldest old women ( $n = 50$ ). The dashed line indicates the lower limit of DHEA-S concentrations according to age.

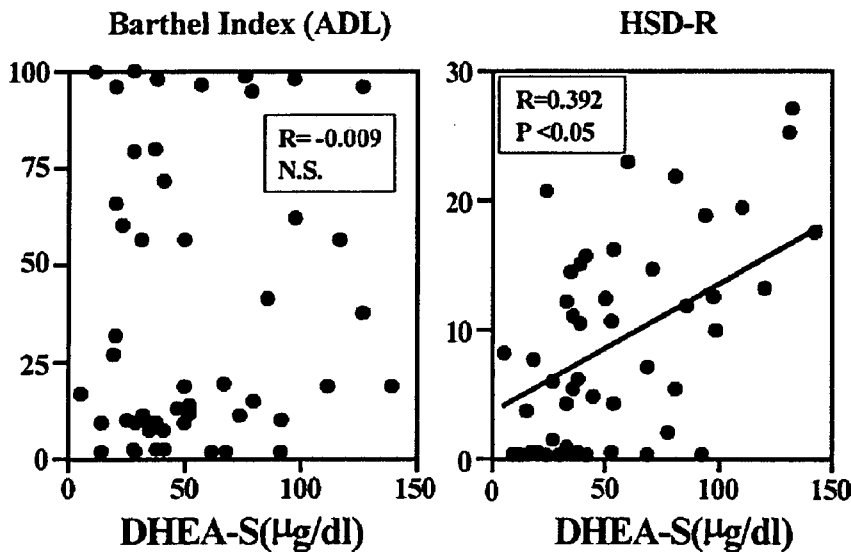


Figure 2 Correlation between DHEA-S concentrations and Barthel index scores (left), and Hasegawa's dementia rating scale (right).

of DHEA-S and pass through the blood brain (B-B) barrier,<sup>16</sup> unlike DHEA-S.<sup>17</sup> The results for DHEA were the same as those of DHEA-S; namely, that DHEA significantly correlated with HDS-R ( $R = 0.367, P < 0.05$ ) but not with Bathel's index ( $R = -0.017$ ). DHEA and DHEA-S-values showed good correlation with each other as expected ( $R = 0.792, P < 0.001$ ).

Multivariate regression analysis also revealed that only HDS-R was a factor significantly correlated to DHEA-S or DHEA at a significance level of 5%. There was no significant correlation between the Barthel index and HDS-R on both univariate and multivariate regression analyses, suggesting that dementia did not essentially affect the ADL performance scales.

## Discussion

In the present study, we measured serum concentrations of DHEA-S in 50 oldest old females and evaluated the relationships with ADL and mental activity, estimated by the Barthel index and HDS-R, respectively. Most of our subjects, all over 90 years of age, showed levels above the lowest normal levels for serum DHEA-S in women in their forties. The relatively higher level of serum DHEA-S levels in the oldest old female population may provide a plausible basis for the longevity of our subjects since Roth *et al.* has reported that relatively higher serum DHEA-S levels are associated with a significantly higher survival rate in humans.<sup>2</sup>

The de novo synthesis of DHEA in the brain has been demonstrated in the presence of steroidogenic enzymes<sup>18</sup> and by the fact that brain DHEA content is not affected by adrenalectomy or even castration.<sup>19</sup> Administration of DHEA or DHEA-S to mice has been shown to enhance memory retention<sup>20</sup> and to block the memory-impairing effects of scopolamine or benzodiazepine.<sup>21,22</sup> Also, DHEA has a trophic effect on cholinergic neurons and cultured neurological cells.<sup>20,23</sup> DHEA binds specifically to synaptosomal membranes and acts as an allosteric antagonist of GABA ( $\gamma$ -aminobutyric acid) receptors.<sup>24</sup> Although the relationship between such neuromodulatory functions and neuronal excitability or memory enhancement by DHEA is not well understood, these findings suggest the functional importance of DHEA-S on the central nervous system, and possibly in the prevention of dementia. Decreased concentrations of DHEA may fail to protect partly degenerated or at-risk brain cells, which might thus disturb memory retention. However, the role of serum DHEA-S levels in dementing diseases including AD is controversial.<sup>5-9</sup> Well-Engerer *et al.* directly determined steroid concentrations in various regions of the aged human brain by gas chromatography-mass spectrometry; demonstrating that high levels of key proteins were implicated in the formation of plaques and neurofibrillary tangles and were correlated with decreased brain levels of DHEA-S suggesting a possible neuroprotective role for DHEA in AD.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the presence of DHEA, DHEA-S and their metabolites such as  $7\alpha$ -,  $7\beta$ -, or  $16\alpha$ -hydroxy DHEA in human cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) has been reported.<sup>26</sup> Although the physiological significance of this remains unclear, relatively higher DHEA and lower DHEA-S levels in CSF were observed in patients with AD and CVD compared with levels in controls.<sup>26</sup>

Further investigations are required to ascertain whether such reductions of brain DHEA content in patients with AD can be linked with decreases of serum DHEA-S. At present, whatever the causes of variations in serum DHEA-S levels are, it is evident that it would be convenient if we could accurately estimate cognitive and physical activities of elderly people by serum DHEA-S levels. Our results showing a relatively good correlation between serum DHEA-S concentrations and HDS-R might support the hypothesis that DHEA-S protects against dementia.

On the other hand, DHEA-S levels were not correlated with ADL evaluated by the Barthel index. In respect to our study, dementia did not appear to affect ADL estimations because the Barthel index and HDS-R were statistically independent of each other. Ravaglia *et al.* reported that in healthy men over 90 years of age, there was a positive relationship between serum DHEA-S levels and functional independence as evaluated by the Katsz scale of ADL.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, several other stud-

ies have reported an inverse relation between serum DHEA-S levels and functional independence (ADL) in nursing home men<sup>12</sup> and women.<sup>13</sup> While reasons for these conflicting results remain unclear, it might depend on differences in contents of ADL estimation scales or differences in study populations.

In summary, while further studies are needed to elucidate these relationships, our results suggest that DHEA-S levels in serum in oldest old Japanese females may be more related with cognitive function than with ADL. Trials involving DHEA treatment using different doses to groups of oldest old Japanese would test this hypothesis.

## Acknowledgments

This work was partly supported by the Research Grant for Longevity Sciences from the Ministry of Health and Welfare.

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# Evaluation of a New Carotid Intima-Media Thickness Measurement by B-Mode Ultrasonography Using an Innovative Measurement Software, Intimascope

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Carotid intima-media thickness (IMT), an indicator of atherosclerosis and coronary heart disease (CHD) is usually evaluated by eye measurement under B-scope carotid artery ultrasonography. However, the axial resolution of this system is  $\geq 0.1$  mm, which causes difficulties in respect to accuracy and reproducibility. We evaluated a newly developed B-scope carotid artery ultrasonography programmed by an innovative measurement software, Intimascope (Media Cross Co. Ltd., Tokyo, Japan), which measures IMT with 10 times higher axial resolution at an estimated scale of 0.01 mm. Intraobserver or interobserver coefficient of variation (CV) of the computer-based average IMT (aver-IMT) value and 3-point IMT value were much smaller than the corresponding value by conventional eye-measurement method (3-point value). We measured IMT of 427 asymptomatic subjects undergoing medical checkups (243 men and 184 women, 23 to 73 years of age). Although the mean values of aver-IMT and 3-point IMT of 427 subjects were comparable with that of

the eye measurement method, the aver-IMT showed the smallest SD (standard deviation) and CV values. In both men and women, multivariate regression analysis revealed significant contributions of age and LDL-C to the aver-IMT value. Univariate regression analysis revealed that the aver-IMT value of total subjects showed the highest correlation coefficient values with most risk factors and risk assessment score, Framingham Risk Assessment, or Prospective Cardiovascular Munster study (PROCAM) Risk Score. These results may suggest superiority of computer-based aver-IMT over 3-point IMT by either computer-based or eye measurement method. Carotid aver-IMT measurement using the new Intimascope software may provide a more precise and reproducible index of atherosclerosis than does conventional IMT measurement.

Am J Hypertens 2006;19:1206–1212 © 2006 American Journal of Hypertension, Ltd.

**Key Words:** IMT, carotid, software.

**I**ntima-media thickness (IMT) determined by B-mode ultrasonography is comparable to the thickness of intima-media complexes as determined by histologic examination.<sup>1,2</sup> The extent of carotid atherosclerosis is strongly associated with the presence of coronary heart disease (CHD) and is a marker for the early phase of the atherosclerotic process<sup>3–10</sup>; thus carotid IMT has now become a convenient and noninvasive method for evaluating structural changes in the arterial wall. However, it has

usually been evaluated by the eye-measurement (manual) method using a devices such as slide calipers, making it somewhat difficult to obtain reproducible results by multiple observers or indeed even by a single observer. Furthermore the axial resolution of this system is at least in the order<sup>11</sup> of 0.1 mm, thus presenting further difficulties in respect to precision and reproducibility.

To resolve these problems of accuracy and reproducibility, a new ultrasonic diagnostic equipment (SDU-2200,

Received September 16, 2005. First decision May 14, 2006. Accepted May 16, 2006.

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Shimadzu) programmed by an innovative measurement software for IMT (Intimascope, Media Cross Co. Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) was developed. This system was designed to avoid errors in the smooth estimation of the boundary of the intima and adventitia. It also enables the averaging of approximately 250 points of IMT values in the measurement segment with a high axial resolution in the order of 0.01 mm.

In the present study, we report the high utility of this computer-automated measurement system as an evaluation tool for atherosclerosis based on a comparative study with manual method and an extensive study of 427 asymptomatic subjects. In addition, we examined the relationships between carotid IMT and risk assessment scores for CAD and with various atherosclerosis-related parameters.

## Subjects and Methods

### Subjects

For intraobserver variation, 10 examiners measured IMT of three different subjects (all male; 35, 37 and 38 years of age). For interobserver variation, IMT of 11 volunteers (nine men, 33 to 48 years of age; and two women, 25 and 35 years of age) were evaluated by 10 different measurers to assess interobserver variations by methods using computer-automated IMT measurement and conventional eye-measurement IMT measurement.

The subject group comprised 427 individuals (243 men, age 23 to 73 years, average  $48 \pm 9$  (mean  $\pm$  SD); 184 women, 25 to 73 years, average  $46 \pm 8$ ) who consulted the Human Dry Dock Center, Wellness (Fukuoka, Japan) for a routine health evaluation. A summary of the subject

profiles is shown in Table 1. Evaluations included measurement of body mass index (BMI), body fat ratio, blood chemistry analyses, electrocardiography, chest radiography, evaluations of serum chemistry and carotid artery ultrasonography. By interview, smoking index (number of cigarettes/day), and family history of myocardial infarction were also evaluated. All studies were undertaken as part of routine examinations, with the consent of all subjects. Blood samples were obtained from subjects in a fasting state at 8:30 AM. Serum concentrations of total cholesterol (TC), triglyceride (TG), HDL cholesterol (HDL-C), fasting blood sugar (FBS), glycosylated hemoglobin (HbA<sub>1c</sub>), uric acid (UA), and high-sensitivity C-reactive protein (hsCRP) were measured. Serum concentrations of LDL-cholesterol (LDL-C) were calculated by the Friedewald formula.<sup>12</sup> The Framingham Risk Score (FRS)<sup>13</sup> and the Prospective Cardiovascular Munster study (PROCAM) score,<sup>14</sup> both useful markers in predicting CHD within the next 10 years, were also evaluated. The PROCAM score is different from the FRS in that the PROCAM score has two more scores regarding the presence or absence of diabetes mellitus and family history of myocardial infarction.

### Ultrasound Protocol

The IMT was measured by ultrasonic diagnosis equipment (Shimadzu SDU-2200) that was programmed by the IMT measurement software, Intimascope (Media Cross Co. Ltd.). In a manual method, the IMT value was conventionally measured by the eye-measurement method without this software. Intimascope is an innovative software

**Table 1.** Subject profile by decade of age

Characteristic	$\leq 39$ y	40-49 y	50-59 y	60-69 y	70-79 y
Number	91	172	132	30	2
Age (y)	35.5 (3.5)	44.4 (3.0)	53.8 (2.7)	63.1 (2.3)	73.0 (0.0)
Men/women	45/46	96/76	81/51	20/10	1/1
Smoker/nonsmoker	25/66	44/128	33/99	3/27	0/2
BMI	21.6 (3.5)	22.8 (3.5)	23.0 (2.8)	23.9 (2.5)	20.5 (2.2)
% Body fat	23.6 (5.8)	24.6 (5.6)	24.4 (4.9)	24.8 (4.9)	20.0 (0.1)
SBP (mm Hg)	107.5 (13.2)	112.0 (13.7)	116.6 (15.5)	123.1 (14.8)	115.0 (7.1)
DBP (mm Hg)	64.4 (9.4)	67.1 (10.3)	70.4 (11.0)	72.5 (10.0)	66.0 (5.7)
FBS (mg/dL)	91.1 (8.0)	95.5 (14.8)	100.7 (26.3)	100.4 (21.2)	99.0 (4.2)
HbA <sub>1c</sub> (%)	4.67 (0.33)	4.88 (0.61)	5.04 (0.81)	5.07 (0.69)	5.05 (0.07)
TC (mg/dL)	192.1 (32.0)	207.4 (30.5)	213.0 (33.4)	196.4 (33.9)	253.0 (1.4)
TG (mg/dL)	103.2 (76.4)	132.0 (137.4)	123.0 (81.1)	111.7 (80.3)	95.0 (43.8)
HDL-C (mg/dL)	60.1 (14.4)	59.2 (14.8)	56.5 (15.0)	53.6 (10.9)	65.0 (21.2)
LDL-C (mg/dL)	111.3 (25.1)	121.9 (28.9)	131.9 (28.5)	120.5 (35.1)	169.0 (28.6)
UA (mg/dL)	5.28 (1.49)	5.32 (1.58)	5.72 (1.52)	5.61 (1.35)	4.90 (0.85)
Smoking index	87.8* (155.5)	169.8† (325.4)	229.3‡ (389.9)	151.2§ (421.2)	0.0 (0.0)

BMI = body mass index; DBP = diastolic blood pressure; FBS = fasting blood sugar; HDL-C = HDL-cholesterol; LDL-C = LDL-cholesterol; SBP = systolic blood pressure; TC = total cholesterol; TG = triglyceride; UA = uric acid.

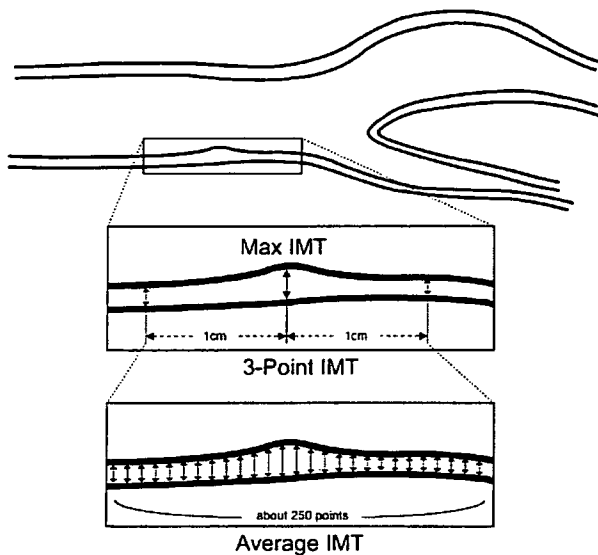
Values are given as mean (SD).

\*  $N = 81$ .

†  $N = 150$ .

‡  $N = 103$ .

§  $N = 21$ .



**FIG. 1.** Schematic representation of the carotid artery segment as measured in this study and the three methods used for measuring intima-media thickness (IMT): 3-point, maximal, and computer-based average (aver-IMT).

developed for IMT measurement to minimize measurement errors, which are usually caused by the meandering of blood vessels and differences in the skill levels of measurers. This software was devised to determine the perpendicular distance to the external membrane of the blood vessel. The software makes it possible to recognize automatically the edges of the internal and the external membranes of the blood vessels and to measure automatically the distance at a sub-pixel level (estimated to be 0.01 mm), using a three-dimensional polynomial measurement formula.

Carotid ultrasonography was performed using a 10-MHz scanning frequency in B mode. One skilled observer, blinded to the clinical data, scanned the vessel in transverse planes. Subjects were examined in a supine position. Images were obtained in the 20 mm proximal to the origin of the bulb at the far wall of the right common carotid artery (CCA) (Fig. 1). It is easy for examiners to access the origin of the bulb with echography, thus facilitating the correct positioning of the segment to be measured. In all subjects examined in this study, no plaque was observed in this segment. Thus, in this plaque-free region, computer-based IMT was evaluated by three methods: 3-point, maximal, and average evaluations (Fig. 1). Three-point evaluation refers to the average value of 3-point IMT, including two end points and the middle point in the >2 cm region. Maximal (max) evaluation was obtained by the IMT value at a maximal point of the region. Average IMT (aver-IMT) is the average value of 250 computer-based points in the region. In a manual method, IMT was measured by eye-measurement based on the average value of 3-point IMT.

### Statistical Analysis

Agreement between different IMT measurement methods was assessed by a simple plot of the difference between the

methods against their mean, as previously described by Bland and Altman.<sup>15</sup> The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to examine whether respective IMT values of the 427 subjects measured by the different methods show normal distribution pattern. As a result, all IMT values by four different methods including computer-based methods (max IMT, 3-point IMT, and aver-IMT methods) and manual 3-point IMT did not show a normal distribution pattern ( $P < .001$ ). The difference among the methods against their mean was then statistically examined using a nonparametric method, the Mann-Whitney test. Correlations between IMT values and various parameters including BMI, body fat ratio, systolic blood pressure (SBP), diastolic blood pressure (DBP), and smoking index were evaluated. Linear univariate regression and linear multiple regression analyses were performed using the SPSS version 11.5 for Windows software package (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL), with significance for both set at  $P < .05$ . In the linear multivariate regression analysis, aver-IMT was adjusted as a dependent (response) variable whereas age, FBS, TC, HDL-C, TG, LDL-C, UA, HbA<sub>1c</sub>, BMI, percentage of body fat, SBP, DBP, hCRP, smoking index, FRS, and PROCAM score were adjusted as independent variables and extracted by stepwise method using forward-backward selection. In this selection,  $F$  values as inclusion criteria were  $\leq 0.05$ , whereas  $F$  values as exclusion criteria were  $\geq 0.10$ . To compare the effectiveness of variables on the aver-IMT, a standardized regression coefficient was also calculated.

## Results

### Comparison of IMT Values Between Computer-Automated and Manual Methods

The intraobserver variation for IMT measurements (10 different examiners for three subjects) was calculated as mean ( $\pm$ SD) of coefficient of variation (CV;  $SD/mean \times 100\%$ ) of the IMT. Mean ( $\pm$ SD) values of such CV values for manual 3-point IMT, computer-based 3-point IMT, and aver-IMT were  $7.7\% \pm 1.0\%$ ,  $7.0\% \pm 1.2\%$ , and  $5.6\% \pm 0.8\%$ , respectively. The interobserver variation for IMT by 3-point IMT and aver-IMT methods were evaluated using the computer-based methods and these values were compared with those by the 3-point IMT using the manual method. The interobserver CV computer-automated 3-point IMT method findings ranged from 2.2% to 13.5%, and the average value of the 11 subjects was 8.5%. In comparison the findings by the aver-IMT method ranged from 2.5% to 10.9%, and the average value of the 11 subjects was 5.9%. On the other hand, the interobserver variation by 3-point IMT based on the manual method ranged from 13.5% to 28.4%, and the average value of the 11 subjects was 20.6%. From these findings, the computer-automated aver-IMT evaluations by 3-point or aver-IMT methods were shown to be more reliable than manual 3-point method.

**Table 2.** Mean  $\pm$  SD (mm) and coefficient of variation (CV, %) of intima-media thickness (IMT) values of 427 healthy subjects

Value	Mean (mm)	SD (mm)	CV (%)
Max IMT	0.7331	0.1565	21.3
Aver IMT	0.5700	0.1053	18.5
3-Point IMT	0.5852	0.1180	20.2
Eye-M IMT	0.5832	0.1467	25.2

Maximal (Max) IMT, average (Aver) IMT, and 3-point IMT are computer-generated values. Eye-M IMT indicates conventional eye-measurement 3-point IMT.

Next we also compared the values of the computer-automated IMT values by the three methods (max-IMT, 3-point IMT, aver-IMT and eye-measurement 3-point methods) and the IMT values by conventional method in 427 asymptomatic subjects presenting for a regular medical check-up (Table 2). By mean value, the maximal IMT value was the highest, followed by the 3-point IMT value, the aver-IMT value, and manual 3-point IMT value. Agreement between different IMT measurement methods based on a simple plot of the difference between the computer-based method and manual method against the mean<sup>15</sup> revealed that only the difference between max IMT and manual IMT ( $0.1499 \pm 0.132$  mm, mean  $\pm$  SD) was quite large compared with those between aver-IMT and manual IMT ( $-0.0135 \pm 0.1049$ ) and between 3-point IMT and manual IMT ( $0.0020 \pm 0.1145$ ). Figure 2 provides an example of the agreement between aver-IMT and manual IMT against the mean, indicating the methods to be comparable with each other. Agreement between different IMT measurement methods was also tested by a statistical analysis using a nonparametric method, the Mann-Whitney *U* test. The mean value of computer-based aver-IMT and 3-point IMT matched the value of the eye-measurement IMT, respectively, but the max IMT did not. With regard to SD and CV values of IMT in the 427 subjects by the four methods mentioned above, the values of computer-based aver-IMT and 3-point IMT were much smaller than those of the eye-measurement methods (Table 2).

### Correlation Between aver-IMT and Other Parameters

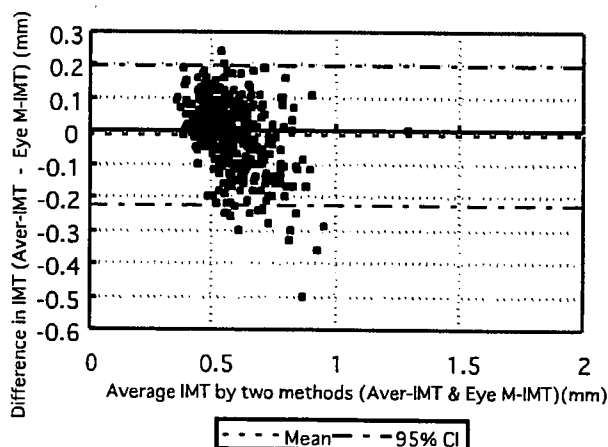
In linear multivariate regression analyses using the stepwise method (forward-backward selection), age, BMI, and LDL-C were factors significantly correlated with aver-IMT in men ( $P < .05$ ). In men, standardized regression coefficient values of age, BMI, and LDL-C were 0.502, 0.182, and 0.109, respectively, indicating that age had the strongest effect on IMT. Similarly age, SBP, and LDL-C were factors significantly correlated with aver-IMT in women ( $P < .01$ ). In women, standardized regression coefficient values of age, LDL-C, and SBP were 0.448, 0.155, and 0.142, respectively. In addition, in univariate analysis, the aver-IMT values showed a positive correla-

tion with FRS both in men ( $n = 243$ ,  $r = 0.389$ ,  $P < .001$ ) and in women ( $n = 184$ ,  $r = 0.470$ ,  $P < .001$ ). Similarly the IMT values showed a similar significant correlation with the PROCAM risk score both in men ( $r = 0.387$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and in women ( $r = 0.406$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). As the results of multivariate analyses, the FRS and PROCAM score were quite similar for both sexes, univariate regression analyses between IMT and each parameter were performed in a combined group of both men and women.

We evaluated the correlations between the IMT values and various parameters, which are closely associated with the metabolic syndrome and atherosclerosis (Table 3). Parameters that positively correlated with aver-IMT values in the total group of subjects ( $n = 427$ ) with a significance of  $P < .05$ , were age, FBS, TC, LDL-C, UA, HbA<sub>1c</sub>, BMI, SBP, DBP, smoking index, FRS, and PROCAM risk scores. As previously reported in a number of studies,<sup>16</sup> aver-IMT was largely age dependent in normal subjects. The actual aver-IMT values with aging are shown in Fig. 3, and the rate of increase of aver-IMT with aging was 0.007 mm/year. On the other hand, HDL-C was negatively correlated with aver-IMT values. Importantly, computer-based IMT values by aver-IMT and 3-point IMT always showed higher coefficient values with the above parameters except TC than did conventional eye-measurement IMT. However, it was difficult to conclude which was superior between computer-based aver-IMT and 3-point IMT, because the difference of coefficient values between these two methods were not particularly evident apart from the parameter age.

## Discussion

Carotid IMT is a very useful marker of coronary atherosclerosis in terms of the presence and extent of atherosclerosis as well as of coronary events.<sup>3-10</sup> However there



**FIG. 2.** Difference between means for intima-media thickness; Aver-IMT - Eye-M-IMT). The 95% confidence intervals (CI) range from  $-0.2233$  to  $0.1963$ . Aver-IMT = computer-based average intima-media thickness; Eye-M = eye-measurement method (3-point value).

**Table 3.** Coefficient values between carotid intima-media thickness (IMT) and various parameters in total group of subjects ( $n = 427$ )

Risk factor	Computer-based values		Eye-M IMT
	Aver IMT	3-Point IMT	
Age	0.544*	0.501*	0.433*
FBS	0.207*	0.215*	0.187*
TC	0.182*	0.174*	0.187*
HDL-C	-0.187*	-0.172*	-0.106*
TG	0.076	0.046	0.137†
LDL-C	0.241*	0.246*	0.162*
UA	0.167*	0.163*	0.152*
HbA <sub>1c</sub>	0.248*	0.264*	0.195*
BMI	0.280*	0.262*	0.224*
% Body fat	0.090	0.066	0.040
SBP	0.293*	0.289*	0.254*
DBP	0.274*	0.272*	0.217*
hCRP	0.085	0.067	0.069
Smoking index	0.120†	0.117†	0.109†
FRS	0.444*	0.418*	0.372*
PROCAM score	0.386*	0.357*	0.317*

hCRP = high-sensitivity C-reactive protein; other abbreviations as in Table 1.

Only the numbers of examinees for smoking index are 357 (see Table 1).

\*  $P < .01$ .

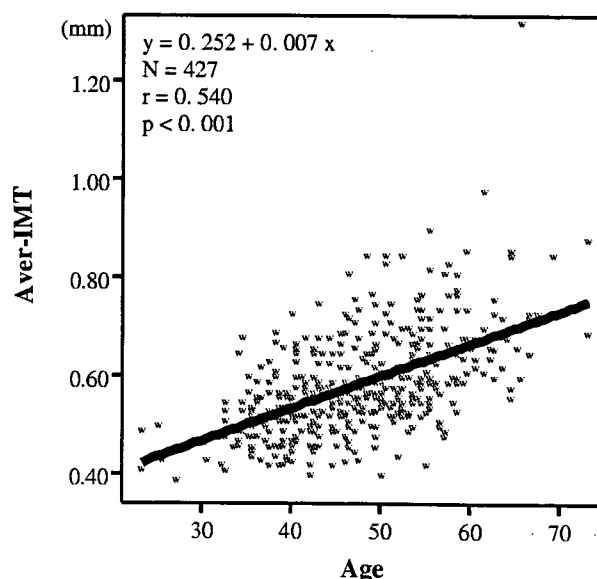
†  $P < .05$ .

remains a problem in that eye-measurement methods using devices such as slide calipers do not always allow precision and reproducibility of the IMT value, especially when measured by inexperienced observers. Many studies have adopted max IMT as a predictor of CHD<sup>5,6,9</sup>; however, the measurement of max IMT does not necessarily typify the whole character of carotid atherosclerosis. A reasonable approach to increase the accuracy and reproducibility would be to extend measurements of IMT in respect of numbers of points and locations to as many as possible. For example, average IMT measurements by 10 points in both carotid arteries including common and internal arteries<sup>10</sup> or even at 80 points in common carotid artery<sup>3</sup> have been reported to be very useful for such evaluations. However there is a physical limitation to the numbers of the points that can be measured manually, because the measurements consume much time and require a large expenditure of resources.

For these reasons, a more sensitive and handy method for such measurements has long been sought. In the present study, we evaluated a newly developed B-scope carotid artery ultrasonography device programmed by an innovative measurement software, Intimascope, which enables measurement of IMT with an axial resolution 10 times higher than previously possible, at an estimated scale of 0.01 mm. The IMT values based on this software were highly reliable in that the average interobserver variation was much superior to values obtained by the manual

method. The difference analysis between the methods against their mean IMT values in 427 healthy subjects revealed that the computer-based aver-IMT and 3-point IMT values were statistically equivalent to the manual IMT value, respectively. Under these conditions, the computer-based aver-IMT evaluations were much more reliable than the 3-point IMT by either computer-based or manual methods, in respect to precision from the findings of the smallest values of SD and CV in the 427 subjects and from the highest positive correlation with various risk factors. This is reasonable because aver-IMT measurement takes advantages of the power of computer software, thus making it possible to measure an average value from 250 computer-based points of IMT in a 2-cm segment. The system also saves an examiner's time because the aver-IMT values can be automatically measured and calculated by the software. The total time for getting a result including measurement is usually <5 min per single subject. This software also produces easy to read reports of the IMT measurements. Thus the quickness and the easy applicability of IMT measurements using this software provides many advantages, especially when used in multiple locations and on different vessels or when used in a large numbers of patients. However a limitation of this software is that it is sometimes difficult to trace correctly the edges of the internal and the external membranes of blood vessels in some images containing many plaques or reverberation.

It is noteworthy that aver-IMT values in the healthy subjects in our study were positively correlated with age, BMI, SBP, DBP, FBS, HbA<sub>1c</sub>, TC, LDL-C, and UA, and were negatively correlated with HDL-C in univariate regression analysis, and also positively correlated with age and LDL-C in multivariate regression analysis. Similar



**FIG. 3.** Significant correlation between computer-based average intima-media thickness (aver-IMT) and age in the total population of subjects ( $n = 427$ ).

results have been reported in a number of other IMT studies,<sup>16-21</sup> but most of these were reported in populations that included patients with CAD, hypercholesterolemia, cerebrovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, and hypertension. Reasonable correlations between aver-IMT values and several risk factors for CAD, even in our asymptomatic and healthy subjects undergoing routine health examination, suggest not only the validity of our study but also the high sensitivity of our method using this computer-automated measurement system.

The Framingham study stresses the importance of a multivariate risk profile in the prediction and prevention of CAD.<sup>22</sup> Indeed the traditional risk factors for CAD are associated with carotid artery IMT.<sup>3,19-24</sup> The utility of the FRS for predicting CHD in a person within the next 10 years has been demonstrated in individuals of white and nonwhite ethnicity, and in middle-aged and older populations.<sup>21,22-25</sup> PROCAM score is another type of multivariate risk score, and has also been shown to be useful in predictions of probability of CAD within the next 10 years.<sup>26</sup> We observed a positive correlation between aver-IMT values and those scores, indicating the impact of multiple risk factors on atherosclerosis even in a healthy, asymptomatic population. Similarly it is reported that a positive correlation between IMT and FRS in a young (age 20 to 38 years), population<sup>27</sup> supported the usefulness of FRS for guiding intervention in CAD risk factors from an early age.

In conclusion, our method for measurement of carotid IMT using the Intimascope software was found to be useful for evaluations of atherosclerosis, showing accuracy and reproducibility measurements in healthy subjects. This system is a powerful tool for the assessments of IMT in either the progression or regression of atherosclerosis in patients with risk factors for CHD as well as in studies evaluating various drug therapies.

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Experimental Hematology 34 (2006) 1542–1552

## Modification of glucocorticoid sensitivity by MAP kinase signaling pathways in glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis

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(Received 6 October 2005; revised 13 June 2006; accepted 27 June 2006)

**Objective.** Glucocorticoid is widely used for the treatment of diseases such as hematological malignancies. Glucocorticoid sensitivity is different from person to person and the mechanism of the regulation of glucocorticoid sensitivity is not well known. Glucocorticoid resistance is a major clinical problem.

**Methods and Results.** Here, using glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis, a model system for the analysis of the mechanism of glucocorticoid action, we clarified that mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPKs) modify glucocorticoid sensitivity, namely that the activation of extracellular signal-regulated protein kinase (ERK) and p38 MAP kinase reduce and enhance glucocorticoid sensitivity, respectively.

**Conclusion.** These findings might provide new tools for overcoming glucocorticoid-resistance. © 2006 International Society for Experimental Hematology. Published by Elsevier Inc.

Glucocorticoid is a stress hormone secreted from the adrenal gland. Glucocorticoid is physiologically involved in metabolism, cell differentiation, and several aspects of the maintenance of homeostasis. Pharmacologically, glucocorticoids have immunosuppressive, anti-inflammatory, and anti-allergic actions, and are administered for the treatment of diseases such as hematological malignancies and autoimmune diseases.

Glucocorticoid acts through glucocorticoid receptor (GR) to activate or repress the expression of target genes. Transcriptional regulation by GR depends on coregulators, such as coactivators and corepressors, modifying the chromatin structure or mediating the recruitment of the basic transcriptional machinery.

It has long been known that glucocorticoid induces apoptosis in thymocytes. In mice under stressful conditions, the thymus becomes involuted by thymocyte apoptosis. Glucocorticoid also induces apoptosis in T cell tumor cell lines derived from leukemia, lymphoma, or thymoma.

Glucocorticoid-induced apoptosis in T cell tumor cell lines shares many common features with that in thymocytes.

Although functional GR is known to be required for glucocorticoid-induced apoptosis in T cells, it remains controversial as to which of the activation or repression functions of GR are involved in the apoptosis. A gene expression event is also known to be necessary for glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis from experiments using the RNA and protein synthesis blockers, actinomycin D and cycloheximide, respectively. In any case, enhanced expression of pro-apoptotic genes or inhibited expression of anti-apoptotic genes could be necessary for glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis, although the target genes remain to be elucidated [1–4].

It is generally thought that glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis is performed through a mitochondrial pathway [1–4]. Apoptosis through mitochondria is regulated by *bcl-2* family members, which include *bcl-2*, *bcl-xL*, Bak, Bax, Bad, and Bim. *bcl-2* and *bcl-xL* are anti-apoptotic, while Bak, Bax, Bad, and Bim are pro-apoptotic [5,6]. After the apoptotic signal reaches the mitochondria, several factors are released from the intermembrane space, leading to the activation of caspases and relief of the inhibitory activity of inhibitors of apoptosis proteins (IAPs) against caspases. These signals cause several apoptotic phenotypes

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including externalization of phosphatidylserine, chromatin condensation, and DNA fragmentation [7,8].

There are at least four distinct groups of mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPK): the extracellular signal-regulated protein kinases (ERK), the p38 MAP kinases, the c-Jun NH<sub>2</sub>-terminal kinases (JNK), and ERK5, also referred to as BMK-1 [9,10]. MAPKs have been shown to be involved in numerous biological phenomena including cell survival and cell death. It is generally thought that ERK is involved in cell proliferation and survival, while on the other hand, p38 and JNK are involved in stress response and apoptosis, although the response depends on the cell type and the surrounding context (Fig. 1) [11,12]. ERK5, the least studied MAPK, is activated by a variety of growth factors and stress stimuli [10]. MAPKs are activated by a series of phosphorylation cascades, the so-called MAPK phosphorelay module, consisting of MAP kinase kinase kinase (MAPKKK), MAP kinase kinase (MAPKK), and MAPK. MAPKKK, activated by several stimuli, phosphorylates and activates MAPKK, and then activated MAPKK phosphorylates and activates MAPK. MAPK, in turn, phosphorylates and activates several substrates including other protein kinases and transcription factors. MAPKK is a dual-specificity kinase phosphorylating both a threonine and a tyrosine residue in the activation loop of MAPK to activate it [13,14].

To examine the cross-talk between glucocorticoid and MAPK signaling pathways in glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis, the effects of inhibition or activation of the MAPK phosphorelay module were investigated at several steps of apoptosis in a T cell leukemia cell line, CCRF-CEM.

## Results

### *Dexamethasone-sensitive cell line CC7 and dexamethasone-resistant cell line CC3*

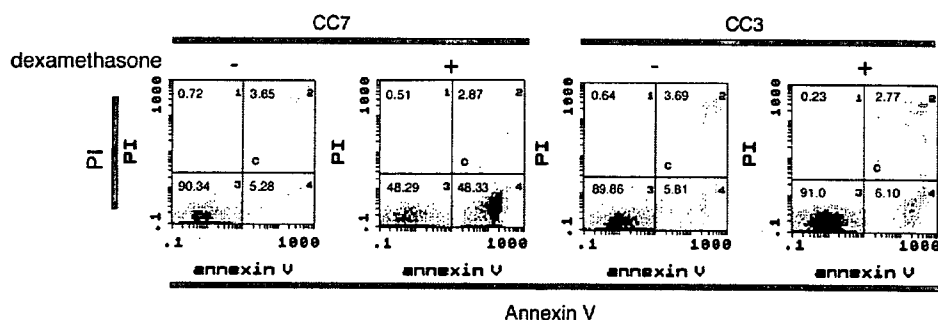
In the human T lymphoblast cell line CCRF-CEM, apoptosis can be induced by a synthetic glucocorticoid, dexamethasone. It has been reported that CCRF-CEM cells are

heterogeneous and contain both dexamethasone-sensitive and dexamethasone-resistant populations [15,16]. We subcloned several dexamethasone-sensitive and dexamethasone-resistant cell lines using the limiting-dilution technique, and analyzed the externalization of phosphatidylserine by annexin V binding. In the most sensitive clone, named CC7, after treatment with  $10^{-6}$  M dexamethasone for 48 hours, the percentage of annexin V binding-positive cells was  $51.2\% \pm 2.96\%$  and the majority of annexin V binding-positive cells were negative for the uptake of propidium iodide (PI) dye. On the other hand, in the most resistant clone, named CC3, after the same treatment with dexamethasone, only a small percentage of cells were positive for annexin V binding (Fig. 1).

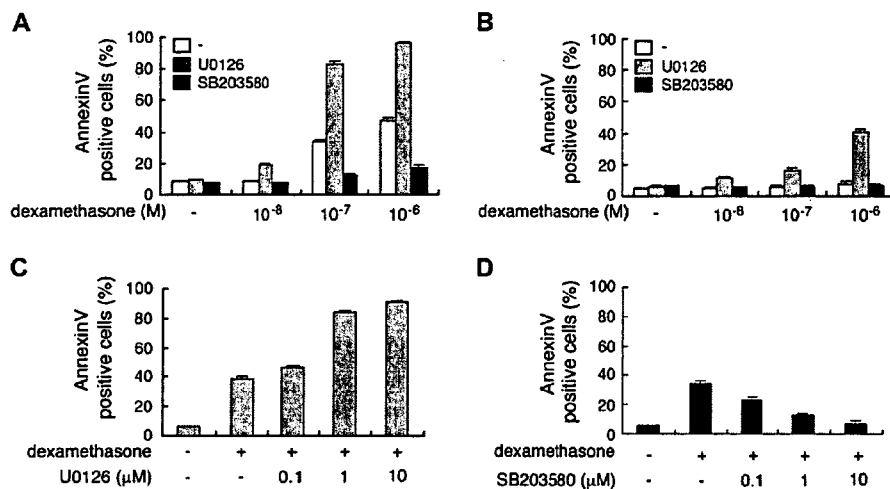
In order to investigate the dose dependency of dexamethasone, CC7 cells were untreated, or treated with  $10^{-8}$  M,  $10^{-7}$  M, or  $10^{-6}$  M dexamethasone. As a result,  $8.50\% \pm 0.20\%$ ,  $8.58\% \pm 0.52\%$ ,  $35.2\% \pm 1.05\%$ , and  $51.2\% \pm 2.96\%$  of cells became positive for annexin V binding, respectively, showing that dexamethasone induced annexin V binding in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 2A). On the other hand, only a small percentage of CC3 cells became positive for annexin V binding at each concentration of dexamethasone (Fig. 2B).

To delineate the effects of MAP kinase inhibitors on glucocorticoid-induced apoptosis, the externalization of phosphatidylserine was analyzed by annexin V binding in the presence or absence of dexamethasone with or without U0126, an ERK inhibitor, or SB203580, a p38 inhibitor.

In the presence of 10  $\mu$ M U0126, after treatment with  $10^{-8}$  M,  $10^{-7}$  M, or  $10^{-6}$  M dexamethasone,  $18.8\% \pm 1.40\%$ ,  $83.6\% \pm 2.72\%$ , and  $93.6\% \pm 2.02\%$  of cells were positive for annexin V binding, respectively. U0126 alone had no effect on the annexin V binding (Fig. 2A), suggesting that ERK may inhibit glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis. In order to investigate the dose dependency of U0126, CC7 cells were untreated, or treated with 0.1  $\mu$ M, 1  $\mu$ M, or 10  $\mu$ M U0126 in the presence of  $10^{-7}$  M dexamethasone. As a result,  $37.3\% \pm 3.88\%$ ,  $42.0\% \pm 2.42\%$ ,  $83.5\% \pm 1.27\%$ , and  $91.0\% \pm 1.41\%$



**Figure 1.** Dexamethasone-sensitive cell line CC7 and dexamethasone-resistant cell line CC3. The dexamethasone-sensitive cell line CC7 and dexamethasone-resistant cell line CC3 were isolated from the CCRF-CEM cell line. Both CC7 cells and CC3 cells were cultured for 48 hours in the presence or absence of  $10^{-6}$  M dexamethasone, and tested for the externalization of phosphatidylserine by annexin V binding using a flow cytometer. The dot plots represent one of three independent experiments.



**Figure 2.** The effects of the MAPK inhibitors on the externalization of phosphatidylserine. Dexamethasone-sensitive CC7 cells (A) and dexamethasone-resistant CC3 cells (B) were cultured for 48 hours with different concentrations of dexamethasone in the presence or absence of 10  $\mu$ M U0126 or 10  $\mu$ M SB203580. Externalization of phosphatidylserine was detected by annexin V binding, and the percentage of annexin V-binding cells was calculated. White, gray, and black bars indicate no treatment, and treatments with 10  $\mu$ M U0126 and 10  $\mu$ M SB203580, respectively. To test the dose dependency, CC7 cells were cultured for 48 hours with different concentrations of U0126 (C) or SB203580 (D) in the presence or absence of  $10^{-7}$  M dexamethasone. The data are the mean  $\pm$  SE of three independent experiments.

of cells became positive for annexin V binding, respectively, showing that U0126 enhanced the action of dexamethasone in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 2C).

On the other hand, in the presence of 10  $\mu$ M SB203580, after treatment with  $10^{-8}$  M,  $10^{-7}$  M, or  $10^{-6}$  M dexamethasone,  $7.50\% \pm 0.20\%$ ,  $12.0\% \pm 0.92\%$ , and  $15.6\% \pm 2.52\%$  of cells were positive for annexin V binding, respectively. SB203580 alone had no effect on the annexin V binding (Fig. 2A), suggesting that p38 may enhance glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis. In other words, p38 may be necessary for glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis. In order to investigate the dose dependency of SB203580, CC7 cells were untreated, or treated with 0.1  $\mu$ M, 1  $\mu$ M, or 10  $\mu$ M SB203580 in the presence of  $10^{-7}$  M dexamethasone. As a result,  $35.2\% \pm 2.22\%$ ,  $23.5\% \pm 1.87\%$ ,  $14.3\% \pm 0.81\%$ , and  $7.27\% \pm 1.92\%$  of cells became positive for annexin V binding, respectively, showing that SB203580 inhibited the action of dexamethasone in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 2D).

Next, dexamethasone-resistant CC3 cells were untreated, or treated with  $10^{-8}$  M,  $10^{-7}$  M, or  $10^{-6}$  M dexamethasone in the presence of 10  $\mu$ M U0126. As a result,  $6.1\% \pm 1.39\%$ ,  $11.6\% \pm 1.48\%$ ,  $15.9\% \pm 2.31\%$ , and  $40.9\% \pm 1.76\%$  of cells became positive for annexin V binding, respectively (Fig. 2B), suggesting that suppression of the activation pathway of ERK may make glucocorticoid-resistant cells glucocorticoid sensitive.

#### Effects of U0126 and SB203580 on several steps of apoptosis

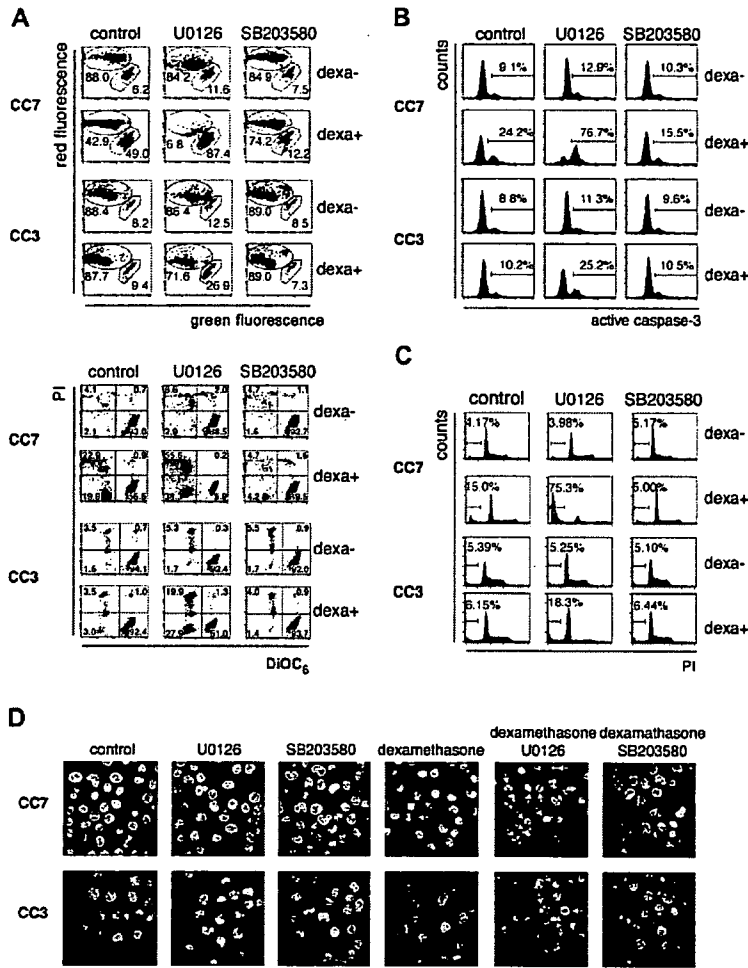
Next, the effects of U0126 and SB203580 on several steps of apoptosis, including the mitochondrial membrane

potential, caspase-3-like activity, DNA fragmentation, and chromatin condensation, were analyzed in CC7 cells.

First, we analyzed the loss of mitochondrial membrane potential using the fluorescent probes JC-1 and DiOC<sub>6</sub>. JC-1 has been shown to be specific for measuring changes in the mitochondrial membrane potential. Loss of the mitochondrial membrane potential is indicated by a shift in the fluorescence from red to green [17]. In Figure 3A, the outlined region 1 (R1) and region 2 (R2) indicate J aggregates (red fluorescence) and JC-1 monomers (green fluorescence), respectively. The percentage of the R2 population was 6.2% and 49.0% in the absence or presence of  $10^{-6}$  M dexamethasone for 48 hours, respectively. This increase in the R2 population induced by dexamethasone was enhanced by U0126 (R2; 87.4%) and inhibited by SB203580 (R2; 12.2%). U0126 or SB203580 alone had little effect on the R1 and R2 populations. In the presence of U0126, there was a small decrease in the red fluorescence of R1 in either the presence or absence of dexamethasone. The meaning of this phenomenon is not clear.

Figure 3A also shows the results of the analysis using the other fluorescent probe, DiOC<sub>6</sub>. Both PI-negative and DiOC<sub>6</sub>-positive cells were in the normal mitochondrial membrane potential state. Treatment with dexamethasone resulted in a decrease in the intensity of DiOC<sub>6</sub>. The low-intensity population of DiOC<sub>6</sub> in the presence of dexamethasone (42.7%) was enhanced by U0126 (93.9%), and inhibited by SB203580 (8.9%). U0126 or SB203580 alone had little effect on the mitochondrial membrane potential.

Activated caspase-3 was then measured using anti-active caspase-3 antibody as described in the experimental



**Figure 3.** Effects of U0126 and SB203580 on several steps of apoptosis. Both CC7 cells and CC3 cells were cultured for 48 hours with or without dexamethasone in the presence or absence of 10  $\mu$ M U0126 or 10  $\mu$ M SB203580. The concentration of dexamethasone was 10<sup>-6</sup> M unless described. (A) Loss of mitochondrial membrane potential was detected with the cationic fluorescence probes JC-1 and DiOC<sub>6</sub>. (B) Caspase-3 activity was analyzed with anti-active caspase-3 antibody. The number in each histogram indicates the percentage of cells containing activated caspase-3. (C) DNA fragmentation was detected with PI using a flow cytometer. The percentage of the sub-G<sub>0</sub>/G<sub>1</sub> fraction was calculated as described in the Materials and methods, and is shown in each histogram. (D) Nuclear morphology was observed with Hoechst 33342 staining under a confocal microscope. White arrows show apoptotic cells. The dot plots, histograms, and micrographs represent one of three independent experiments.

procedures. Caspase-3 activity was represented by an increase in the phycoerythrin fluorescence intensity.

As shown in Figure 3B, the population of cells containing activated caspase-3 increased from 9.1% to 24.2% after treatment with 10<sup>-7</sup> M dexamethasone for 48 hours. Concomitant use of 10  $\mu$ M U0126 or SB203580 changed the population of cells containing activated caspase-3 to 76.7% and 15.5%, respectively. U0126 or SB203580 alone had little effect on the caspase-3-like activity.

DNA fragmentation was then analyzed. Apoptotic cells containing fragmented DNA were represented by the so-called sub-G<sub>0</sub>/G<sub>1</sub> population in the cell-cycle analysis using PI. As shown in Figure 3C, the sub-G<sub>0</sub>/G<sub>1</sub> population increased from 4.17% to 15.0% after treatment with 10<sup>-6</sup> M dexamethasone for 48 hours. Concomitant use of 10  $\mu$ M U0126 or SB203580 changed the sub-G<sub>0</sub>/G<sub>1</sub>

population to 75.3% and 5.00%, respectively. U0126 or SB203580 alone had little effect on the sub-G<sub>0</sub>/G<sub>1</sub> population.

As another apoptotic change in the nucleus in addition to DNA fragmentation, chromatin condensation was also analyzed. Chromatin condensation was actually induced by treatment with dexamethasone, and concomitant use of U0126 or SB203580 augmented or inhibited it, respectively (Fig. 3D).

The above data showed that U0126 enhanced and SB203580 inhibited dexamethasone-induced apoptosis during several steps of apoptosis including the externalization of phosphatidylserine, loss of mitochondrial membrane potential, caspase-3 activity, DNA fragmentation, and chromatin condensation in CC7 cells, supporting the idea that ERK inhibits and p38 enhances glucocorticoid-induced T-cell apoptosis. These data also suggest that ERK and