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Extracellular matrix is required for the survival and differentiation of transplanted hepatic progenitor cells

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ABSTRACT

Engelbreth–Holm–Swarm (EHS) gel has been reported to maintain the mature hepatocyte phenotypes in primary cultured hepatocytes. We investigated the effect of EHS gel on the differentiation of fetal liver cells, which contain stem/progenitor cells. The isolated fetal liver cells cultured on EHS gel formed a spherical shape and increased liver-specific gene expressions compared with cells cultured on collagen. The hepatic progenitor cells that were transplanted subcutaneously to BALB/c nude mice could survive and express hepatocyte marker alpha-fetoprotein when the cells were suspended with EHS gel. These findings demonstrate that EHS gel supports cytodifferentiation from immature progenitor cells to hepatocytes and maintain its differentiated phenotypes *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

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Extracellular matrix (ECM) plays an important role in cell survival, proliferation, and differentiation [1]. Adhesive interactions between hepatocyte and ECM retain its differentiated phenotypes and maintain liver-specific functions, accompanied with up-regulation of the liver-enriched transcription factors including hepatocyte nuclear factor (HNF)s [2,3]. Laminin-rich ECM, Engelbreth–Holm–Swarm sarcoma (EHS) gel has been reported to keep a high expression of liver-specific products such as albumin, and normal cell polarity and structure for prolonged periods in primary cultured hepatocytes [4]. On the other hand, culture on dried type 1 collagen leads the cells to dedifferentiated phenotypes such as flattened monolayer and low expression of liver-specific proteins [2,5].

Liver transplantation is the primary treatment for severe liver diseases. However, the therapy is limited because of insufficient organ availability, and cell transplantation is believed to become alternative therapy. Various types of cells are reported as candidates for cell transplantation for liver diseases. THLE-5b cells, an immortalized non-tumorigenic human cell line, were well localized in the peritoneal cavity of BALB/c nude mice for 3 weeks after cell transplantation [6]. Immortalized human hepatocytes provide life saving metabolic supports in rats when they are transplanted into spleen [7].

Abbreviations: EHS gel, Engelbreth–Holm–Swarm gel; AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; ECM, extracellular matrix; HNF, hepatocyte nuclear factor; GFP, green fluorescent protein; CK-19, cytokeratin-19; GAPDH, glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase; C/EBP, CCAAT/enhancer binding protein.

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Recently, stem cells have been thought to be suitable source of cell transplantation for liver diseases. Bone marrow derived mesenchymal stem cells rescued experimental mouse liver failure when they were engrafted to the liver [8]. Human embryonic stem cells [9], oval cells [10], and cord blood cells [11] are also reported to have the potential to develop into viable hepatocytes. However, these cells might be too immature to be directed to mature differentiated hepatocytes. Fetal liver cells contain stem/progenitor cells, which are able to differentiate bipotentially into hepatocytes and cholangiocytes, and represent differentiated property of hepatocyte by transduction of HNF-4 gene [12] or culture on ECM [13]. However, it is still not known if the cells cultured on EHS gel survive and function as the mature hepatocytes. In this study, we investigated if the hepatic stem/progenitor cells obtain and retain the differentiated hepatocyte phenotypes under such condition *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

Materials and methods

Fetal liver cell isolation and culture. The beta-actin promoter-driven GFP-transgenic mice (GFP mice) were bred for studies. Pregnant female C57BL/6J mice were purchased from Nippon SLC (Sizuoka, Japan). Fetal mouse liver parenchymal cells were harvested as previously reported [12]. Briefly, the cells were isolated from the embryonic day 14.5 livers by mechanical pipetting. Hematopoietic cells were removed by magnetically activated cell sorter using a Lineage cell depletion kit (Miltenyi Biotec, Bergisch Gladbach, Germany). Then the separated fetal liver cells were plated on either normal plastic, EHS gel coated (BD Bioscience,

Bedford, MA, USA), or type 1 collagen coated dishes (Iwaki, Tokyo, Japan) (5×10^6 cells/100 mm dish) in DMEM/F12 medium (Gibco BRL, Gaithersburg, MD, USA) supplemented with 10^{-6} M insulin (Wako, Osaka, Japan), 10^{-7} M dexamethasone (Wako), 10% fetal bovine serum (ThermoTrace, Melbourne, Australia), 10 mM nicotinamide (Wako), 50 μ M β -mercaptoethanol (Sigma Chemical Co., St. Louis, MO, USA), 5 mM HEPES (Wako), and 100 U/ml penicillin and 100 μ g/ml streptomycin (Gibco). The medium was replaced every other day. Animal use and experimentation was performed under the strict guidelines of the Institutional Animal Use and Care Committee at the Gifu University Graduate School of Medicine.

Immunohistochemistry. The cells were fixed by methanol at -20°C for 10 min, and washed in PBS including 0.05% polyoxyethylene sorbitan monolaurate (Tween 20) (Wako). Nonspecific binding was blocked with 10% nonimmune rabbit serum. Fixed cells were incubated with the rabbit primary antibodies, fluorescein isothiocyanate-conjugated anti-mouse albumin (BETHYL, Montgomery, TX, USA) and anti-mouse cytokeratin 19 (CK19, gift from Dr. N. Tanimizu, Kanagawa Academy of Science and Technology, Japan), in a moist chamber at 4°C for 16 h. After washing in PBS-Tween 20, cells were incubated with Texas Red-conjugated goat anti-rabbit IgG (Invitrogen, CA, USA) at 4°C for 3 h to detect CK19. Nuclear counterstain was performed with 4',6-diamidino-2-phenylindole. The signal was detected using a fluorescence microscope (Olympus, Tokyo, Japan).

Quantitative real-time RT-PCR. Fetal liver cells were cultured for 4 days and detached by cell scraper. Total RNA was isolated from the cells using ISOGEN (Wako). For each sample, 2.0 μ g of total RNA was reverse-transcribed using a high-capacity complementary DNA reverse transcription kit as described by the manufacturer (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA). The mRNA quantification was performed using a 2-step real-time RT-PCR (Light Cycler, Roche Diagnostics, IN, USA) with Light cycler TaqMan Master and Universal ProbeLibrary Probes (Roche). The PCR primers and probes were as follows; albumin (sense, 5'-CCAAAGTCAACAAGGAGTGCT-3'; antisense 5'-TCGCCTGGTTTTACACAT-3'; probe #62), HNF-4 (sense, 5'-CCGAGGACGATGTAGTCAT-3'; antisense 5'-CAAGAGGTCCATGGTGTCA-3'; probe #68), CK19 (sense, 5'-CCTCAGGGCAGTAATTCCTC-3'; antisense 5'-TGACCTGGAGATG CAGATTG-3'; probe #17). Target complementary DNAs were normalized to the endogenous mRNA levels of 18S ribosomal RNA (sense, 5'-GCTCTAGAATTACCACAGTTATCC-3'; antisense, 5'-AATCAGTTATGGTTCCTTTGTCG-3'; probe #55).

Western blot analysis. For the preparation of total cell proteins, the cells cultured for 4 days on the dishes were homogenized in the radioimmunoprecipitation lysis buffer (Santa Cruz, CA, USA). The protein concentration was measured using a DC-protein assay (Bio-Rad). The extracted proteins (10 μ g) were separated by SDS-PAGE and then transferred onto a nitrocellulose membrane (Bio-Rad). The membranes were first incubated with the primary antibodies against albumin (Santa Cruz, sc-46293), HNF-4 (Santa Cruz, sc-6556), HNF-1 (Santa Cruz, sc-8986), CK19 (Santa Cruz, sc-33119), alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) (Santa Cruz, sc-8108) and glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) (Cell Signaling, #2118) and then incubated with the HRP-coupled secondary antibodies (Santa Cruz). Detection was performed using ECL system (Amersham Biosciences, NJ, USA).

Cell transplantation to nude mice. To determine the effect of EHS gel on cell survival and cytodifferentiation *in vivo*, the fetal liver cells (1×10^5 cells) isolated from GFP mice were suspended in EHS gel, collagen gel (0.3% Cellmatrix type 1-A, Nitta-Gelatin), or DMEM/F12 medium, and then injected subcutaneously to 6-week-old male BALB/c nude mice (Nippon SLC). The grafts were removed with skin tissue at 3 weeks after transplantation, and observed with fluorescent microscope to detect GFP. The sections were stained with hematoxylin and eosin (HE). Immunohistochemical staining for AFP were performed with anti-AFP antibody (Santa Cruz, sc-8108) using avidin-biotin-peroxidase complex technique (Vector, Burlingame, CA, USA).

Results

Morphology and hepatic gene expression of fetal liver cells on different culture substrate

We have previously shown that the fetal liver contains hepatic stem/progenitor cells [12]. When the fetal liver cells were cultured on EHS gel coated dishes, cells formed clusters like a spherical shape 4 days after inoculation. In contrast, the cells showed a flattened and extended shape on type 1 collagen coated or normal plastic dish (Fig. 1). The spherical cells on EHS gel and flattened, extended cells on collagen or plastic dishes expressed albumin, a hepatocyte marker, and CK19, a cholangiocyte marker. In cells on collagen and plastic, cells located in the center of colonies were stained by albumin antibody, whereas the peripheral cells were mainly stained by CK19 antibody. These results indicate that fetal liver cells have bipotent differentiation ability.

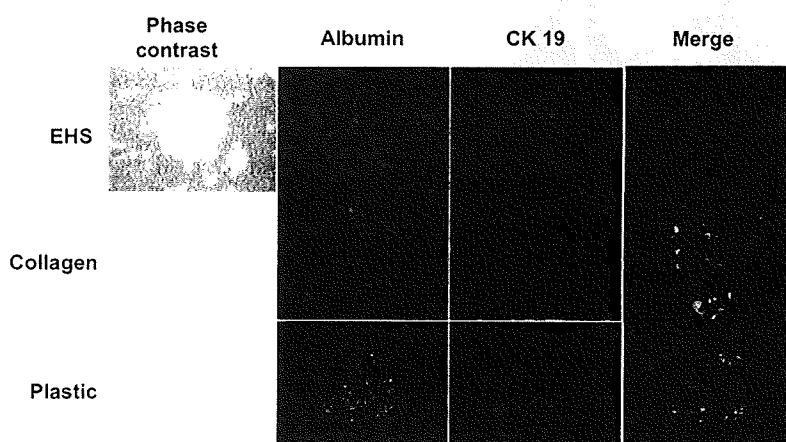


Fig. 1. Morphological changes of the fetal liver cells cultured on ECMs. The isolated fetal liver cells were cultured on each indicated ECMs for 4 days. Expression of albumin (green) and CK19 (red) were examined by double immunofluorescent staining with anti-albumin and CK 19 antibodies. The fluorescence was visualized with fluorescent confocal microscope. (Original magnification $\times 200$.)

Effects of ECMs on the liver-specific genes and proteins

As observed in immunohistochemistry, Western blot analysis also showed that the protein level of albumin was higher in the cells cultured on EHS gel than in the cells on type 1 collagen or plastic dish 4 days after culture. Reversely, CK19 was higher in the cells on type 1 collagen or plastic dish (Fig. 2A). Another hepatocyte marker AFP was also higher in the cells on EHS gel (A). Moreover, HNF-4 and -1 proteins were also higher in the cells on EHS gel. In parallel with the protein expressions, mRNA of albumin was higher in the cells cultured on EHS gel and CK19 mRNA was

higher in the cells on type 1 collagen (Fig. 2B). These results demonstrate that EHS gel supports cytodifferentiation of hepatic stem/progenitor cells to hepatocytes.

Cell transplantation to nude mice

On the basis of these findings, we performed a further experiment to examine the cytodifferentiation ability of EHS gel *in vivo*. The fetal liver cells were isolated from GFP mice, were suspended with EHS gel, collagen gel, or DMEM medium, and were transplanted into subcutaneous tissues of BALB/c nude mice. The

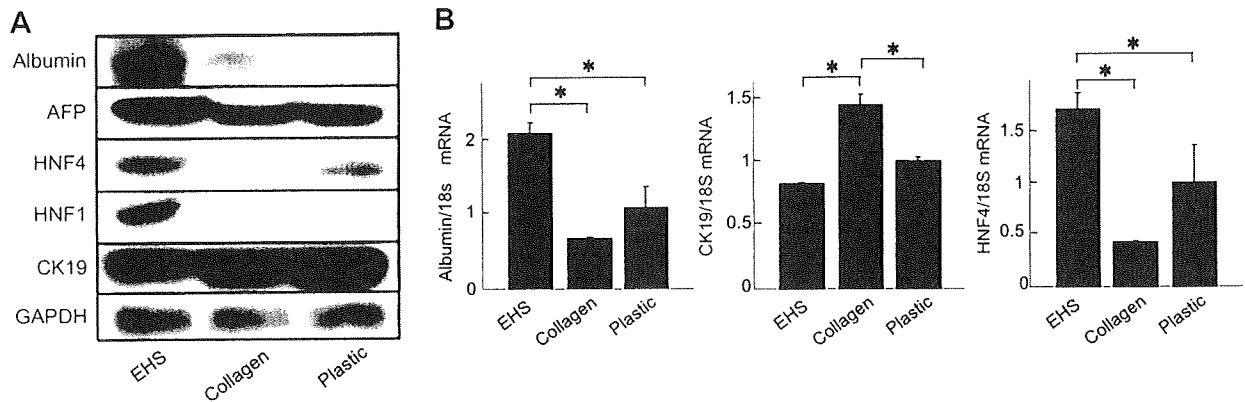


Fig. 2. Liver-specific protein and gene expressions of the fetal liver cells cultured on ECMs. The isolated fetal liver cells were cultured on each indicated ECMs for 4 days. (A) Extracted proteins were subjected to SDS-PAGE, and immunoblotting was performed with anti-albumin, AFP, HNF-4, HNF-1, CK19, and GAPDH antibodies. (B) mRNA levels of albumin, CK19, and HNF-4 in the cultured cells were determined by quantitative real-time RT-PCR. Data are means \pm SD from at least three independent experiments. *, $P < 0.05$ using Student's *t*-test.

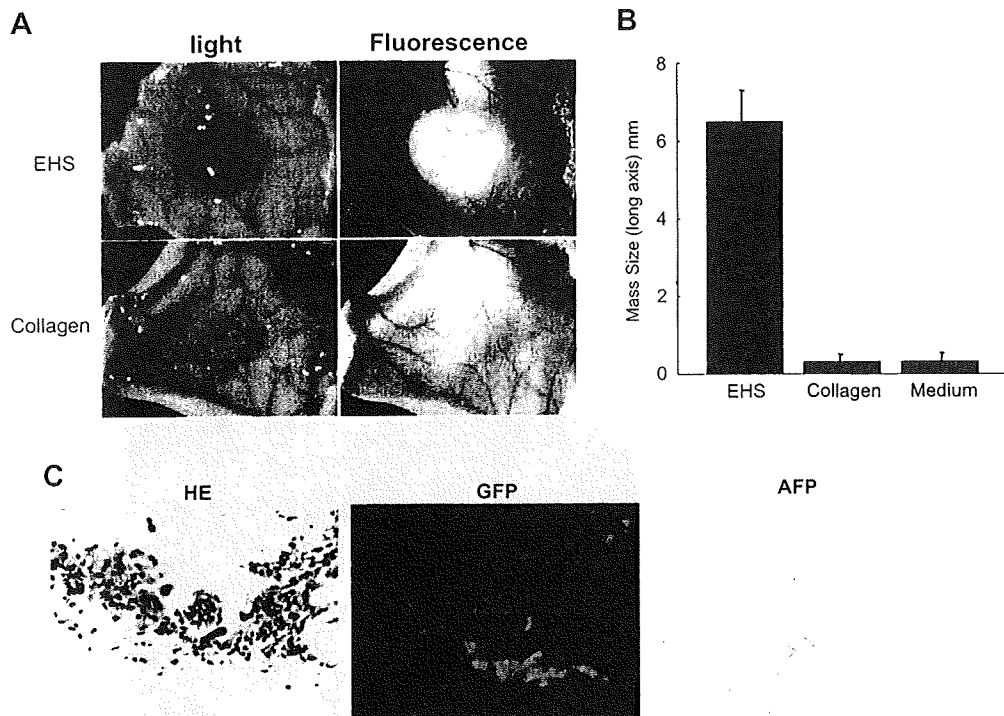


Fig. 3. Transplantation of the fetal liver cells with ECMs into BALB/c nude mice. (A) The fetal liver cells were isolated from GFP mice. The cells were suspended with EHS gel, collagen gel, or DMEM medium, and then transplanted subcutaneously into BALB/c nude mice. The animals were killed at 3 weeks after transplantation, and subcutaneous tissue was excised and photographed with light (left panels) or fluorescence (right panels). (B) The mass size (long axis) of the GFP positive area was measured. Data are means \pm SD from at least three independent experiments. (C) The grafts of fetal liver cells with EHS gel were excised and stained with HE (left panel). GFP fluorescence was detected with fluorescence confocal microscope (middle panel). Expression of AFP was examined 12 days after transplantation by immunohistochemistry with anti-AFP antibody (right panel). (Original magnification $\times 200$.)

grafted fetal liver cells with EHS gel remained even 3 weeks after transplantation, whereas cells with collagen gel or DMEM medium showed faint GFP signals (Fig. 3A and B). Moreover, the transplanted cells with EHS gel expressed AFP (Fig. 3C). These results suggest that EHS gel is able to maintain the cell survival and supports cytodifferentiation to hepatocyte *in vivo*.

Discussion

Cell transplantation has been investigated for an alternative therapy of liver organ transplantation. Differentiated hepatoma cell lines or primary cultured hepatocytes from adult liver have been thought as potential candidates [9]. However, hepatoma cells provide low levels of liver functions, and primary cultured hepatocytes rapidly lose their differentiated phenotypes and show a reduction of liver-specific gene expression once they are plated on plastic dishes [14]. Several ECMs are reported to maintain differentiated hepatocyte phenotypes. EHS gel modulates the shapes of cultured rat hepatocytes [14] and rat small hepatocytes [15]. EHS gel keeps hepatocyte-phenotypic gene expression through high expression of liver-enriched transcription factors, such as HNF-4 [16], and enhances many liver-specific functions [17]. EHS gel or sandwich culture with collagen gel maintains features of mature hepatocytes such as albumin expression, and they are attempted to use for development of bioartificial liver system [3]. However, insufficient availability of donor organ is still a problem because primary cultured hepatocytes have less regenerative ability. Thus, it would be greatly beneficial for cell transplantation if functional hepatocytes could be generated from other sources. Recently, stem cells, which have abilities of self-renewal and multilineage differentiation, are highlighted as candidates for cell transplantation. Liver stem cells can be isolated from the fetal liver, and these cells have extensive replication ability and maintain the expression of liver-specific genes, such as albumin and CK19, for prolonged cultured period [12].

In this study, we demonstrated that EHS gel promoted cytodifferentiation of hepatic progenitor cells to hepatocytes and maintained their efficiency as hepatocytes consistent with primary cultured adult hepatocytes. Interaction with ECM influenced the cell morphology and maturation of fetal liver cells. In matured hepatocytes, cells in spheroids retain the *in vivo* levels of albumin and glucokinase, whereas cells in monolayer lose the differentiated phenotypes [18]. Organization of the cytoskeleton by cell-cell and cell-ECM interaction associates with liver-specific gene expression [19]. Indeed, actin depolymerization in hepatocytes by EHS gel increases HNF-4 and albumin expression [20]. In small hepatocytes, morphological changes of the cells induce specific liver-enriched transcription factors such as HNF-4 α , HNF-6, C/EBP α , and C/EBP β [21]. HNF-4 is a key molecule for fetal liver development [22]. Overexpression of HNF-4 in hepatic progenitor cells increases liver-specific gene expression such as albumin and ApoA1 [12]. Conversely, blockage of HNF-4 expression by siRNA inhibits the up-regulation of the liver-specific gene expression in primary cultured hepatocytes cultured on EHS gel [20]. These findings and our results indicate that EHS gel induces the morphological change of hepatic progenitor cells to a spherical shape, and that HNF-4 expression via the organization of the cytoskeleton might be required for the cytodifferentiation of hepatic progenitor cells.

The differentiation potential of fetal liver cells to hepatocytes was also supported by EHS gel *in vivo*. The fetal liver cells suspended with EHS gels kept their viability and AFP expression, suggesting that cell-ECM interaction is also required for cell survival and cytodifferentiation to the hepatocyte *in vivo*. Hepatocyte transplantation into liver has been performed via portal vein for various liver diseases [23,24]. The transplanted cells might interact with

ECM of the liver. Consistent with our results, it has been reported that ECM components are the predominant factor to maintain hepatocytes at heterotopic sites [25]. Ectopic subcutaneous hepatocyte transplantation may have advantages as follows; (i) surgical operation is not required, (ii) risk of embolisms is low, and (iii) the transplanted cells are removable or replaceable. Of note, the ectopic cells require additional ECMs such as EHS gel to maintain hepatocyte functions.

In conclusions, our results indicate that EHS gel promotes the differentiation of hepatic progenitor cells to functional hepatocytes. We also demonstrated that EHS gel supports cytodifferentiation and maintains the cell survival and functions *in vivo*. Our findings may therefore have relevance to the clinical application of ectopic liver stem/progenitor cell transplantation as an option to treat liver diseases.

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Applied nutritional investigation

Elevated serum tumor necrosis factor- α and soluble tumor necrosis factor receptors correlate with aberrant energy metabolism in liver cirrhosis

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Abstract

Objective: Protein–energy malnutrition is frequently observed in patients with liver cirrhosis and is associated with their poor prognosis. Tumor necrosis factor- α (TNF- α) is elevated in those patients and may contribute to the alterations of energy metabolism. Our aim was to characterize the aberrant energy metabolism in cirrhotic patients with regard to TNF- α .

Methods: Twenty-four patients (mean age 65 ± 6 y) with viral liver cirrhosis who did not have hepatocellular carcinoma or acute infections were studied. Twelve healthy volunteers were recruited after matching for age, gender, and body mass index with the patients and served as controls (59 ± 8 y). Serum levels of TNF- α , soluble 55-kDa TNF receptor (sTNF-R55), soluble 75-kDa TNF receptor (sTNF-R75), and leptin were determined by immunoassay. Substrate oxidation rates of carbohydrate and fat were estimated by indirect calorimetry after overnight bedrest and fasting.

Results: In cirrhotic patients, serum levels of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 were significantly higher than those in the controls and correlated with the increasing grade of disease severity as defined by Child-Pugh classification. Serum leptin concentration was not different between cirrhotics and controls but correlated with their body mass index. The decrease in substrate oxidation rate of carbohydrate and the increase in substrate oxidation rate of fat significantly correlated with serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 concentrations.

Conclusion: Tumor necrosis factor- α might be associated with the aberrant energy metabolism in patients with liver cirrhosis. © 2009 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords:

Liver cirrhosis; Tumor necrosis factor- α ; Soluble 55-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; soluble 75-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; Leptin; Indirect calorimetry; Protein–energy malnutrition

Introduction

A significant proportion of patients with liver cirrhosis shows protein–energy malnutrition (PEM) [1,2], and PEM leads to poor prognosis in these cases [3–5]. Energy metabolism and nutritional status can be estimated, for example, by indirect calorimetry [5,6] and by anthropometry, such as triceps skinfold thickness (TSF) and arm muscle circumference (AMC) [7]. Impaired energy metabolism significantly

correlates with a worse event-free survival of cirrhotics [5,7,8]. However, the mechanisms underlying energy malnutrition in cirrhosis have not been elucidated enough [2]. Candidate causes for this state include enhanced secretion of cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor- α (TNF- α) and adipokines represented by leptin in liver cirrhosis, because both induce anorexia and increase energy expenditure, leading to physical wasting [9–11].

Tumor necrosis factor- α , or cachectin, is a proinflammatory cytokine and is released mainly from monocytes and lymphocytes in response to inflammatory stimuli [12]. TNF- α is also postulated to play a role in the development of anorexia or physical wasting and to regulate energy

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Table 1
Baseline demographic characteristics, body composition, blood biochemistry, and calorimetric data in cirrhotic patients and control subjects*

	Controls (n = 12)	Cirrhosis (n = 24)	P [†]	Child A (n = 9)	Child B (n = 9)	Child C (n = 6)	P [‡]
Age (y)	58.5 (48–68)	64 (64–75)	0.31	63 (58–69)	67 (63–75)	61 (54–76)	0.10
Male/female	8/4	16/8	0.58	6/3	5/4	5/1	0.90
Height (cm)	168 (153–175)	159 (143–173)	<0.05	159 (145–170)	156 (143–166)	161 (144–173)	0.67
Weight (kg)	62 (54–66)	59 (47–87)	0.36	64 (48–74)	56 (39–67)	59 (47–87)	0.51
Body mass index (kg/m ²)	22.0 (20.8–24.3)	21.3 (17.3–26.9)	0.42	22.9 (19.0–26.9)	22.1 (17.0–29.0)	18.5 (17.7–22.5)	0.11
Arm muscle circumference (%)	101 (85–107)	96 (78–107)	0.59	104 (87–112)	91 (72–108)	95 (78–105)	<0.01
Triceps skinfold thickness (%)	139 (82–200)	92 (46–180)	<0.01	104 (84–181)	92 (46–138)	80 (55–168)	0.05
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	0.7 (0.4–0.9)	1.4 (0.7–6.6)	<0.01	1.2 (0.7–1.9)	1.4 (0.4–2.5)	3.5 (1.4–6.5)	<0.01
Albumin (g/dL)	4.6 (4.2–4.8)	3.1 (2.4–4.4)	<0.01	3.3 (2.4–4.4)	3.0 (2.5–3.3)	2.8 (2.0–3.4)	0.07
Alanine aminotransferase (IU/L)	18 (8–25)	50 (22–140)	<0.01	71 (22–140)	39 (26–106)	46 (38–69)	0.10
Prothrombin time (%)	98 (94–102)	69 (30–150)	<0.01	83 (55–150)	62 (47–87)	50 (30–65)	<0.01
TNF- α (ng/L)	3.0 (2.0–3.5)	8.3 (5.0–19.0)	<0.01	6.6 (5.0–11.0)	9.4 (7.4–15.1)	12.3 (7.0–19.0)	<0.01
sTNF-R55 (ng/L)	1025 (773–1450)	2505 (1390–5000)	<0.01	1575 (1350–5000)	2680 (2000–5000)	3240 (2840–5000)	<0.01
sTNF-R75 (ng/L)	1805 (1460–2360)	4255 (1840–5000)	<0.01	3210 (1840–5000)	4900 (3920–5000)	4800 (4000–5000)	<0.01
Leptin (μ g/L)	4.3 (3.2–5.4)	4.7 (1.5–17.5)	0.95	6.3 (2.9–17.5)	3.8 (1.5–13.9)	2.8 (1.7–8.3)	0.09
REE (kcal/d)	1330 (1140–1450)	1188 (892–1830)	0.41	1507 (981–1830)	1188 (1011–1826)	1655 (1011–1342)	0.36
BMR (kcal/d)	1355 (1163–1428)	1170 (1077–1760)	0.09	1250 (1110–1530)	1160 (850–1380)	1170 (1077–1760)	0.47
npRQ	0.91 (0.87–0.94)	0.84 (0.70–0.97)	<0.01	0.88 (0.84–0.97)	0.83 (0.77–0.86)	0.75 (0.70–0.80)	<0.01
CHO (%)	50.4 (42.0–56.3)	39.9 (18.4–61.6)	<0.01	42.3 (25.7–61.6)	39.7 (18.4–48.7)	25.4 (19.9–30.6)	<0.01
FAT (%)	29.1 (22.6–37.2)	37.5 (23.0–61.6)	<0.01	31.0 (25.9–53.9)	38.0 (23.0–55.5)	61.0 (45.9–61.6)	<0.01
PRO (%)	20.7 (11.6–26.4)	22.7 (5.2–32.3)	0.43	23.8 (11.8–33.0)	25.2 (5.2–32.3)	14.5 (12.9–23.5)	0.08

BMR, basal metabolic rate predicted by the Harris-Benedict formula; Child, Child-Pugh grade; CHO, substrate oxidation rate of carbohydrate; FAT, substrate oxidation rate of fat; PRO, substrate oxidation rate of protein; REE, resting energy expenditure; TNF- α , tumor necrosis factor- α ; npRQ, non-protein respiratory quotient; sTNF-R55, soluble 55-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; sTNF-R75, soluble 75-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor.

* Values are expressed as median (range).

[†] Between controls and cirrhosis by Fisher's exact test or Mann-Whitney U test.

[‡] For distribution among Child-Pugh grades by chi-square test or one-way analysis of variance.

metabolism [9,10]. The actions of TNF- α are mediated by two distinct cell-surface receptors, soluble 55-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor (sTNF-R55) and soluble 75-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor (sTNF-R75) [12–14]. These two receptors also exist in soluble form after their extracellular domains have been cleaved proteolytically from the cell surface. These soluble receptors can block TNF- α activity by competing with cell-surface TNFR or prolong the biological effect of TNF- α as a buffer system. Because circulating TNFR levels remain elevated for a longer period than TNF- α , it is proposed that sTNFR levels may serve as a more sensitive means of monitoring the activity of the TNF- α system. In previous reports, serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 concentrations were elevated in cirrhotic patients [15,16], correlating with severity of liver damage [16–18]. However, little has been studied regarding the relation between TNF- α and alternations of energy metabolism in cirrhosis [19].

Leptin, a 16-kDa protein product by adipocytes, is postulated to regulate energy balance by suppressing appetite and increasing energy expenditure [11]. In several studies, serum leptin concentrations were elevated in cirrhotic patients, which suggested that leptin might play a role in the development of anorexia or physical wasting associated with cirrhosis [20–22].

Thus, in this study we aimed to test whether elevated serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, sTNF-R75, and leptin are associated with the aberrant energy metabolism in patients with liver cirrhosis.

Materials and methods

Patients

Twenty-four patients with liver cirrhosis (16 men and 8 women, mean age 65 ± 6 y) participated in this study. Liver cirrhosis was diagnosed by clinical and laboratory profiles and by histologic examination of liver biopsy specimens. Child-Pugh grade of disease severity [23] was A in nine cases, B in nine cases, and C in six cases. Hepatitis C virus was the cause of cirrhosis in all cases. Patients with physically detectable ascites or peripheral edema of moderate to severe grade [8] were excluded. Patients with hepatocellular carcinoma, fever, human immunodeficiency virus infection, overt infectious disease (septicemia, pneumonia, urinary tract infection), renal insufficiency, or under immunomodulatory therapy were also excluded. Clinical profiles of the patients are presented in Table 1. Twelve healthy volunteers were recruited after matching for age, gender, and body mass index (BMI) with the patients and served as controls (eight men and four women, mean age 59 ± 8 y). The study protocol was approved by the institutional review board for human research, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The study protocol was in agreement with the 1975 Helsinki Declaration as revised in 1983. We matched the patients and the controls not only by age and gender but also by BMI, because obesity is reported to affect significantly the histologic grade of hepatic fat deposition, inflammation, and fibrosis even in

chronic viral hepatitis [24,25], thus reducing the functional reserve of the liver.

Methods

Blood was drawn in the early morning for fasting serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, sTNF-R75, leptin, and routine laboratory examinations on the day of metabolic studies. Serum albumin, total bilirubin, alanine aminotransferase, prothrombin activity, and urinary nitrogen (UN) were measured with a standard clinical analyzer at the central laboratory in our hospital. Serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 were determined in duplicate with an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA). Serum leptin was measured in duplicate by radioimmunoassay (Linco Research, Inc., St. Louis, MO, USA).

Metabolic studies were carried out using an indirect calorimeter (Deltatrac Metabolic Monitor, Datax Division Instrumentarium Corp., Helsinki, Finland) to estimate non-protein respiratory quotient (npRQ), resting energy expenditure (REE), and substrate oxidation rates of carbohydrate (%CHO), fat (%FAT), and protein (%PRO) from measured oxygen consumption per minute (V_{O_2}), carbon dioxide production per minute (V_{CO_2}) and total UN using the following equations [26–28].

$$REE = 5.50 V_{O_2} + 1.76 V_{CO_2} - 1.99 UN$$

$$CHO(g/24 h) = 5.926 V_{O_2} - 4.189 V_{CO_2} - 2.539 UN$$

$$FAT(g/24 h) = 2.432 V_{O_2} - 2.432 V_{CO_2} - 1.943 UN$$

$$PRO(g/24 h) = 6.250 UN$$

$$npRQ = (1.44 \times V_{CO_2} - 4.890 UN) / (1.44 \times V_{O_2} - 6.04 UN)$$

$$\%CHO = CHO \times 4.18 / REE \times 100$$

$$\%FAT = FAT \times 9.46 / REE \times 100$$

$$\%PRO = PRO \times 4.32 / REE \times 100$$

Measurements were performed between 07:00 and 09:00 h while the patients were still lying in bed. The last meal was served 18:00 h on the previous day. The basal metabolic rate was predicted by the Harris-Benedict formula [29].

We measured height and body weight and calculated BMI. Arm circumference and TSF were measured with an Insertape and Adipometer (Abbott Japan Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan), and AMC was estimated. Anthropometric data were standardized according to age- and gender-stratified Japanese anthropometric reference data [30] and expressed as percentages of TSF and AMC.

Statistical analysis

Values were expressed as median and range. Comparisons between groups were analyzed using Mann-Whitney U or Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric test. Comparison between measured REE and corresponding Harris-Benedict prediction was performed by paired *t* test. The relation among blood test parameters and substrate oxidation rates or Child-Pugh grade was determined by Spearman's correlation.

All analyses were carried out using JMP 5.0 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA) and statistical significance was accepted at $P < 0.05$.

Results

Serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, sTNF-R75, and leptin

Cirrhotic patients had significantly lower %TSF and %AMC in parallel with the increasing Child-Pugh score (Table 1), suggesting the presence of PEM in these subjects.

The median serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 were significantly higher in cirrhotic patients than in controls (Table 1). Serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 levels correlated with the increasing grade of disease severity as defined by the Child-Pugh classification in patients with liver cirrhosis (Table 1, Fig. 1).

Serum leptin concentration did not differ between cirrhotic patients and controls or correlate with Child-Pugh score (Table 1), but correlated with their BMI (Fig. 2).

Energy metabolism

Measured REE (1188 kcal/d, 892–1830 kcal/d) was significantly higher than the basal metabolic rate (1170 kcal/d, 1077–1760 kcal/d) predicted by the Harris-Benedict formula in liver cirrhosis ($P < 0.01$), whereas both agreed well in control subjects.

The npRQ in patients with liver cirrhosis (0.84, 0.70–0.97) was significantly lower than that in control subjects (0.91, 0.87–0.94, $P < 0.01$). Decrease in npRQ was brought about by a significantly lower oxidation rate of carbohydrate and a higher oxidation rate of fat in patients with liver cirrhosis compared with control subjects (Fig. 3). A decrease in %CHO and an increase in %FAT significantly correlated with the progression of disease severity in patients with liver cirrhosis as defined by the Child-Pugh classification (Fig. 3).

Correlation between serum cytokine levels and oxidation rates of nutrients in patients with liver cirrhosis

Inverse correlations were found between %CHO and serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 (Fig. 4, Table 2). Significant correlations were observed between %FAT and serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-

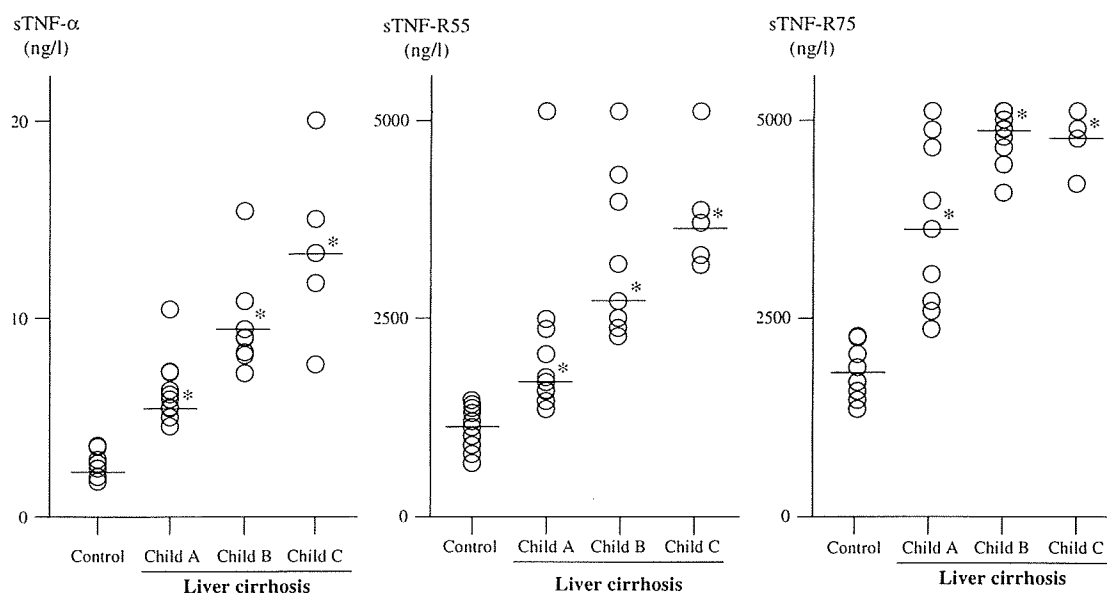


Fig. 1. Serum levels of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 in control subjects ($n = 12$) and in patients with liver cirrhosis ($n = 24$) graded by Child-Pugh classification ($n = 9, 9,$ and 6 for grades A, B, and C, respectively). Horizontal line indicates the median. * $P < 0.05$ compared with control. Child, Child-Pugh grade; sTNF-R55, soluble 55-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; sTNF-R75, soluble 75-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; TNF- α , tumor necrosis factor- α .

R55, and sTNF-R75 (Fig. 5, Table 2). However, %PRO did not correlate with serum concentrations of these cytokines.

Other intercorrelations among cytokines, leptin, substrate oxidation rates, and Child-Pugh grade in patients with liver cirrhosis are presented in Table 2. Serum leptin did not correlate with %CHO or %FAT. Serum leptin did not correlate with TNF- α , sTNF-R55, or sTNF-R75.

Correlations of serum cytokine and leptin levels with parameters of liver damage in cirrhotic patients

The serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 correlated significantly with Child-Pugh score

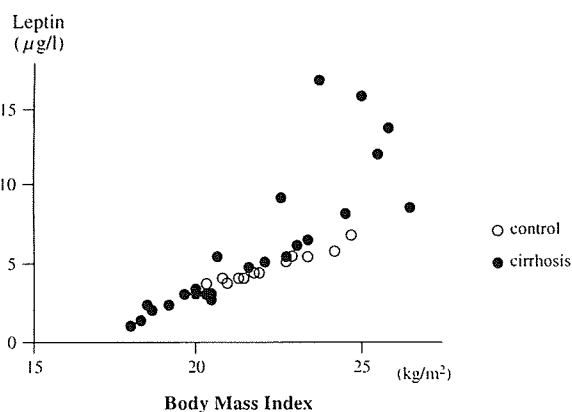


Fig. 2. Correlation between body mass index and serum leptin level in cirrhotic patients (closed circles) and controls (open circles; $n = 36$, $r = 0.735$, $P < 0.05$).

(Table 2), prothrombin time, total bilirubin, and albumin in patients with liver cirrhosis. However, serum leptin level showed no correlation with such parameters (data not shown).

Discussion

Because the liver plays a central role in fuel and energy metabolism, PEM is common in patients with liver cirrhosis [1,2]. Recently, several studies have elucidated the relation between PEM and event-free survival in patients with liver cirrhosis [3–5,31,32]. Thus, PEM is an important outcome marker and a therapeutic target in cirrhotic patients.

It has been reported that the fasting oxidation rate of glucose is decreased and that of fat is increased in patients with liver cirrhosis [5,6,26]. Such aberrant energy metabolism consequently decreases npRQ in cirrhotics [5,6,26]. It also has been reported that this decrease of npRQ closely correlates with survival in patients with liver cirrhosis [5]. As confirmed in this study, npRQ in liver cirrhosis was significantly lower than that in control subjects. The decrease in npRQ was brought about by a significantly lower oxidation rate of carbohydrate and higher oxidation rate of fat in patients with liver cirrhosis compared with control subjects. A decrease in %CHO and an increase in %FAT significantly correlated with the progression of disease severity in patients with liver cirrhosis as defined by the Child-Pugh classification. These characteristics of energy metabolism in liver cirrhosis agree well with those in previous reports [5,6,26], suggesting that the patients recruited in the present study can be regarded as representative of a general cirrhotic cohort. Regarding

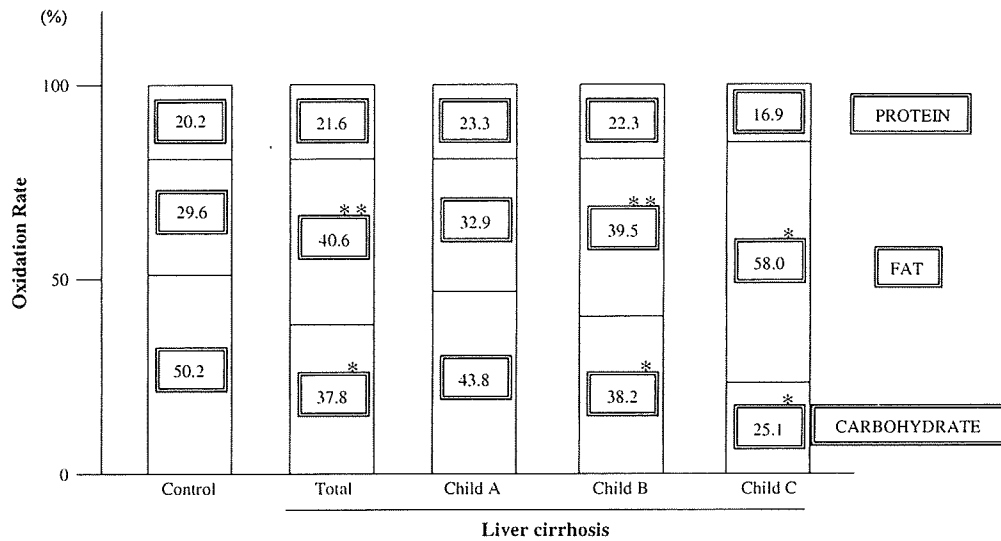


Fig. 3. Substrate oxidation rates of protein, fat, and carbohydrate in control subjects ($n = 12$) and in patients with liver cirrhosis ($n = 24$) graded by Child-Pugh classification ($n = 9, 9,$ and 6 for grades A, B, and C, respectively). Values are expressed as mean. * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$ compared with control. Child, Child-Pugh grade.

%TSF as another parameter of energy nutrition, the patients actually showed a significantly lower value than the controls with a similar BMI. However, we should point out the possibility that the patients could have had an overestimated BMI due to the presence of excess fluid before the appearance of detectable ascites or moderate to severe peripheral edema.

Tumor necrosis factor- α is a proinflammatory cytokine and postulated to regulate energy metabolism [9,10,33]. In previous reports, TNF- α increased glucose ($\sim 10\%$) and free fatty acid ($\sim 126\%$) turnover and raised REE ($\sim 34\%$) [9,10,33]. The actions of TNF- α are mediated by two distinct

cell-surface receptors. We measured not only serum TNF- α concentration but also sTNF-R55 and sTNF-R75 concentrations for a couple of reasons. First, it is known that sTNF-R shedding is induced by the same stimuli that activate TNF- α production. Second, it has been shown that sTNF-R levels remain elevated for a longer time than TNF- α itself. Taken together, sTNF-R levels could confirm the stimulated state of the TNF- α system and could reflect the state until later after stimuli.

In this study, serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 concentrations were significantly higher in cirrhotic patients

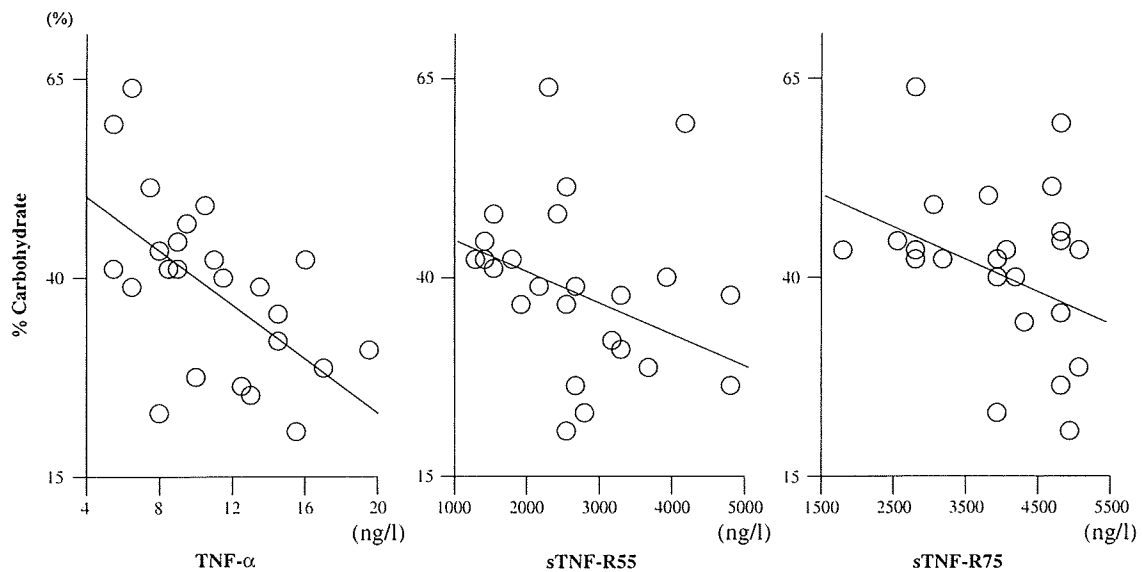


Fig. 4. Correlation between the oxidation rate of carbohydrate and serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, or sTNF-R75 in patients with liver cirrhosis ($n = 24$). For correlation coefficients and statistical significance, see Table 2. sTNF-R55, soluble 55-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; sTNF-R75, soluble 75-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; TNF- α , tumor necrosis factor- α .

Table 2
Intercorrelation coefficients among cytokines, leptin, substrate oxidation rates, and Child-Pugh score in patients with liver cirrhosis

	TNF- α	sTNF-R55	sTNF-R75	%CHO	%FAT	Leptin
sTNF-R55	0.32					
sTNF-R75	0.43*	0.85 [†]				
%CHO	-0.56 [†]	-0.44*	-0.41*			
%FAT	0.72 [†]	0.61 [†]	0.61 [†]	-0.82 [†]		
Leptin	-0.15	-0.01	0.06	0.08	-0.02	
Child-Pugh score	0.63 [†]	0.61 [†]	0.61 [†]	-0.64 [†]	0.78 [†]	-0.36

%CHO, substrate oxidation rate of carbohydrate; %FAT, substrate oxidation rate of fat; TNF- α , tumor necrosis factor- α ; sTNF-R55, soluble 55-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; sTNF-R75, soluble 75-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor.

* $P < 0.05$.

[†] $P < 0.01$.

than in controls, and they correlated with the increasing grade of disease severity as defined by the Child-Pugh classification in patients with liver cirrhosis. Among damaged liver functions in cirrhosis, the high activity of the TNF- α system may particularly be related to a decrease in hepatic clearance of endotoxins, the presence of portosystemic shunts, and the systemic spillover of intestinal endotoxins by portal hypertension [15,34]. Another explanation is that the presence of chronic viral inflammation could be the reason for the elevated proinflammatory cytokines including TNF- α [35,36].

Moreover, inverse correlations were found between %CHO and serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 in this study. Significant correlations were observed between %FAT and serum concentrations of TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75. As described previously, TNF-

α induces free fatty acid oxidation more efficiently than glucose oxidation [6,9,10]. In addition, the production of adenosine triphosphate by β -oxidation of free fatty acids is much greater than that by glucose oxidation. Hence, TNF- α seems to raise %FAT more directly and to contribute to whole aberrant energy metabolism subsequently in liver cirrhosis by altering the proportion of fat oxidation to carbohydrate oxidation.

Serum leptin is another candidate factor to alter energy balance by its wasting action and is reported to be actually high in patients with liver cirrhosis [11,20–22]. However, in this study, serum leptin concentration did not differ between cirrhotic patients and controls. Moreover, serum leptin level showed no correlation with energy metabolism parameters measured by indirect calorimetry. Most previous studies regarding leptin recruited patients with alcoholic cirrhosis [20,22], whereas all patients in our investigation had cirrhosis caused by hepatitis C virus. This difference in the cause of liver damage may account for the disagreement between previous reports and the present one.

Regarding the correlation between TNF and aberrant energy metabolism, we should point out a possibility that the correlation may merely arise from an association between cytokine levels and Child-Pugh grade, as shown in Figure 1, and that between substrate oxidation rates and the grade, as presented in Table 2. To support our hypothesis that the correlation between TNF and energy metabolism is independent of the degree of liver damage, we statistically tested the relation by confining subjects to those with each Child-Pugh grade. In each subgroup that was controlled for grade, TNF and %FAT retained the significant correlation (e.g., $r = 0.81$, $P < 0.01$ in Child-Pugh grade A). These results strengthen our statement

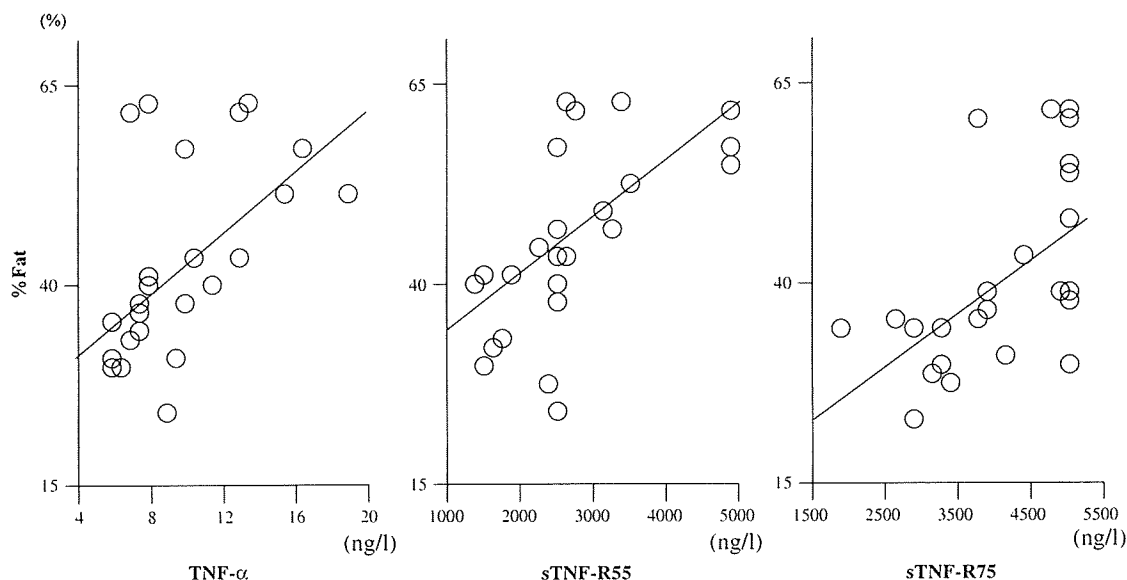


Fig. 5. Correlation between the oxidation rate of fat and serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, or sTNF-R75 in patients with liver cirrhosis ($n = 24$). For correlation coefficients and statistical significance, see Table 2. sTNF-R55, soluble 55-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; sTNF-R75, soluble 75-kDa tumor necrosis factor receptor; TNF- α , tumor necrosis factor- α .

that TNF- α might be associated with aberrant energy metabolism in patients with liver cirrhosis.

Taken together, it seems more likely that the high activity of the TNF- α system mediates the aberrant energy metabolism in patients with liver cirrhosis. To directly demonstrate this possibility, future clinical trials would be required to test whether or not the therapy to decrease the high TNF- α activity might correct the aberrant energy metabolism in patients with liver cirrhosis, by using such modalities as antibiotics and lactulose that control the intestinal bacterial flora or anti-TNF- α antibody.

In summary, the TNF- α system in patients with liver cirrhosis was activated and correlated with disease activity. The significant correlation of serum TNF- α , sTNF-R55, and sTNF-R75 with the aberrant energy metabolism suggested that activation of the TNF- α system contributed to cirrhosis-associated PEM.

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Dietary supplementation with branched-chain amino acids suppresses diethylnitrosamine-induced liver tumorigenesis in obese and diabetic C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice

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Obesity and related metabolic abnormalities, including insulin resistance, are risk factors for hepatocellular carcinoma in non-alcoholic steatohepatitis as well as in chronic viral hepatitis. Branched-chain amino acids (BCAA), which improve insulin resistance, inhibited obesity-related colon carcinogenesis in a rodent model, and also reduced the incidence of hepatocellular carcinoma in obese patients with liver cirrhosis. In the present study, we determined the effects of BCAA on the development of diethylnitrosamine (DEN)-induced liver tumorigenesis in obese C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* (*db/db*) mice with diabetes mellitus. Male *db/db* mice were given tap water containing 40 ppm DEN for an initial 2 weeks and thereafter they received a basal diet containing 3.0% of BCAA or casein, which served as a nitrogen content-matched control of BCAA, throughout the experiment. Supplementation with BCAA significantly reduced the total number of foci of cellular alteration, a premalignant lesion of the liver, and the expression of insulin-like growth factor (IGF)-1, IGF-2, and IGF-1 receptor in the liver when compared to the casein supplementation. BCAA supplementation for 34 weeks also significantly inhibited both the development of hepatocellular neoplasms and the proliferation of hepatocytes in comparison to the basal diet or casein-fed groups. Supplementation with BCAA improved liver steatosis and fibrosis and inhibited the expression of α -smooth muscle actin in the DEN-treated *db/db* mice. The serum levels of glucose and leptin decreased by dietary BCAA, whereas the value of the quantitative insulin sensitivity check index increased by this agent, indicating the improvement of insulin resistance and hyperleptinemia. In conclusion, oral BCAA supplementation improves insulin resistance and prevents the development of liver tumorigenesis in obese and diabetic mice. (*Cancer Sci* 2010; 101: 460–467)

Hepatocellular carcinoma is a major health problem worldwide. The development of HCC is frequently associated with chronic inflammation of the liver induced by a persistent infection with the hepatitis B virus or hepatitis C virus.⁽¹⁾ The risk of HCC is also elevated in those with metabolic syndrome, also called insulin resistance syndrome, which is commonly associated with obesity and impaired glucose tolerance.^(1–4) Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease is known to be a hepatic manifestation of the metabolic syndrome. Diabetes mellitus, a condition associated with hyperinsulinemia, has been proposed as a risk factor for both chronic liver disease and HCC through the development of NASH, which is observed in a subset of patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and involves inflammation, cell damage, and/or fibrosis in the liver.^(5–7) In 1998, Day and James proposed, in their “two hit theory,” that insulin resistance is regarded as a critical factor in the etiology of NASH.⁽⁸⁾

C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* (*db/db*) mice are a genetically altered animal model with phenotypes of obesity and diabetes mellitus. A functional defect in the long-form leptin receptor, which plays a significant role in the regulation of food intake and the control of body weight, leads to hyperleptinemia in these mice.⁽⁹⁾ Because of such obesity, hyperinsulinemia, and hyperleptinemia, the *db/db* mice represent a suitable animal model that uniquely mimics the metabolic syndrome in humans.⁽¹⁰⁾ It is also reported that the *db/db* mice are susceptible to chemically induced carcinogenesis in certain tissues. For instance, the *db/db* mice are sensitive to AOM-induced colon carcinogenesis; putative precursor lesions for colorectal cancer are greatly enhanced in *db/db* mice compared to *db/+* or *+/+* mice.⁽¹¹⁾ With respect to the liver, feeding *db/db* mice with a methionine and choline-deficient diet developed accelerated hepatic inflammation and fibrosis, very similar to those seen in human NASH.⁽¹²⁾

An improvement of insulin resistance by nutritional or pharmaceutical intervention might therefore be an effective and attractive strategy to inhibit the obesity-related carcinogenesis, as already reported experimentally for the colon.⁽¹³⁾ Candidate modalities include dietary supplementation with BCAA (leucine, isoleucine, and valine) because BCAA prevents progressive hepatic failure and improves the event-free survival in patients with chronic liver diseases, at least in part, by improving insulin resistance.^(14–16) In addition, BCAA supplementation has been shown to prevent obesity-related colon carcinogenesis initiated with AOM⁽¹⁷⁾ and, furthermore, to reduce the risk of HCC in obese patients with chronic viral liver disease.⁽¹⁸⁾ In an obesity-related colon cancer model, the effects of BCAA in inhibiting the development of colonic premalignancies might be associated with improvement of insulin resistance.⁽¹⁷⁾ However, whether BCAA prevents obesity-related liver carcinogenesis, and the precise mechanisms of that prevention, have not been explored.

In the present study, we examined the effects of BCAA supplementation on the development of HCC, liver cell adenoma, and FCA in obese and diabetic *db/db* mice initiated with DEN by focusing on the improvement of insulin resistance, liver steatosis, and fibrosis. We also examined whether BCAA supplementation in the diet alters the expression of IGF-1, IGF-2, and IGF-1R in the liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice. The IGF/IGF-1R axis is closely associated with the development of HCC and might be regarded as a critical target for both HCC treatment and chemoprevention.^(19,20)

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Materials and Methods

Animals, chemicals, and diets. Four-week-old male *db/db* mice were obtained from Japan SLC (Shizuoka, Japan). All mice received humane care and were maintained at Gifu University Life Science Research Center (Gifu, Japan), according to the Institutional Animal Care Guidelines. DEN was purchased from Sigma Chemical Co. (St. Louis, MO, USA). BCAA and casein were obtained from Ajinomoto Co. (Tokyo, Japan). The BCAA composition (2:1:1.2 = leucine:isoleucine:valine) was set at the clinical dosage that is used for the treatment of decompensated liver cirrhosis in Japan.^(16,18) The basal diet, CRF-1 (Oriental Yeast Co., Tokyo, Japan), contained 22.4 g of protein (1.65 g leucine, 0.83 g isoleucine, and 1.03 g valine) per 100 g of total volume.

Experimental procedure. The experimental protocol was approved by the Institutional Committee of Animal Experiments of Gifu University. At 5 weeks of age, a total of 41 *db/db* mice were divided into three groups. All the mice in Group 1 ($n = 11$), Group 2 ($n = 15$), and Group 3 ($n = 15$) were given tap water containing 40 ppm DEN for the initial 2 weeks. After treatment with DEN, Group 3 was given the CRF-1 supplemented with 3.0% BCAA (w/w) through to the end of experiment, whereas mice in Group 2 were given the basal diet supplemented with 3.0% casein (w/w) and served as a nitrogen content-matched control for the BCAA-treated group. Group 1 was given the CRF-1 diet throughout the experiment. In order to examine the effect of BCAA on the development of FCA in early phase, four mice each in groups 2 and 3 were starved for 6 h and killed by CO₂ asphyxiation at 23 weeks of age (after 16 weeks supplementation with BCAA or casein). At 41 weeks of age (after 34 weeks supplementation with the experimental diet), all remaining animals (total 33 mice) were killed to determine the development of HCC, liver cell adenoma, and FCA.

Histopathology and immunohistochemical analyses for α -SMA and PCNA. After the mice were killed, the livers were immediately removed and macroscopically inspected for the presence of neoplasms. Maximum sagittal sections of each lobe (six lobes) were used for histological examination. The tissue specimens were fixed in 10% buffered formaldehyde then embedded in paraffin. Serial sections (3–4 μ m thick) were cut from the tissue blocks and stained with H&E for histopathology or Azan stain to observe liver fibrosis. The liver neoplasms (HCC and liver cell adenoma) and FCA were diagnosed according to criteria described previously.⁽²¹⁾ The multiplicity of FCA was assessed on the per area basis (per cm²).

Immunohistochemistry of α -SMA, an indicator of HSC activation, was carried out using a primary anti- α -SMA antibody (Dako, Glostrup, Denmark).⁽²²⁾ Immunohistochemistry of PCNA, a G₁-to-S phase marker, was carried out to estimate the cell proliferative activity of the hepatocyte using a primary anti-PCNA antibody (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, CA, USA).⁽²³⁾ PCNA-positive nuclei in the hepatocytes were counted and expressed as the percentage of the total number of hepatocyte nuclei. The PCNA-labeling index (%) was determined by counting at least 500 hepatocytes in each section (total of 3000 hepatocytes per mouse).

Clinical chemistry. After the mice were killed, blood samples were collected from inferior vena cava to determine the serum concentrations of ALT, glucose, insulin, leptin, and BCAA. The levels of serum glucose, insulin, and BCAA were assayed as described previously.^(24,25) The serum leptin level was determined by ELISA (R&D Systems, Minneapolis, MN, USA) according to the manufacturer's protocol.⁽¹⁷⁾ The serum ALT activity was measured with a standard clinical automatic analyzer (type 726; Hitachi, Tokyo, Japan). Insulin resistance was estimated by QUICKI as follows: $QUICKI = 1/[\log(I_0) + \log(G_0)]$, where I_0 is the fasting insulin and G_0 is the fasting glucose, which correlates with the glucose clamp method.⁽²⁶⁾

Hepatic lipid analysis. To visualize intrahepatic lipids, Sudan III stain was carried out with frozen sections using the standard procedure. The hepatic lipids were also extracted from the frozen livers. Approximately 200 mg of liver was homogenized and the lipids were then extracted using chloroform:methanol (2:1 v/v) solution, as described by Folch.⁽²⁷⁾ The levels of triglyceride in the liver were measured using the triglyceride E-test kit (Wako Pure Chemical Co., Osaka, Japan) according to the manufacturer's protocol.

Hepatic hydroxyproline analysis. Hepatic hydroxyproline content was quantified colorimetrically in duplicate samples from approximately 200 mg wet-weight of liver tissue, as previously described.⁽²²⁾ The hydroxyproline contents were expressed as μ mol/g wet liver.

Protein extraction and Western blot analysis. Equivalent amounts of protein lysates (30 μ g/lane) from the liver of experimental mice were subjected to a Western blot analysis of α -SMA (Dako), as described previously.^(22,23) An antibody to GAPDH (Chemicon International, Temecula, CA, USA) served as a loading control. The intensities of the blots were quantified with NIH image software version 1.62.

RNA extraction and quantitative real-time RT-PCR analysis. A quantitative real-time RT-PCR analysis was carried out as described previously.⁽²⁸⁾ Total RNA was isolated from the liver of the mice using the RNAqueous-4PCR kit (Ambion Applied Biosystems, Austin, TX, USA). The cDNA was synthesized from 0.2 μ g total RNA using the SuperScript III First-Strand Synthesis System (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA, USA). The primers used for the amplification of *IGF-1*, *IGF-2*, and *IGF-1R* specific genes were as follows: *IGF-1* forward, 5'-CTGGACCAGAGACCCCTTGC-3' and reverse, 5'-GGACGGGGACTTCTGAGTCTT-3'; *IGF-2* forward, 5'-GTGCTGCATCGCTGCTTAC-3' and reverse, 5'-ACGTCCCTCTCGGACTTGG-3'; and *IGF-1R* forward, 5'-GTGGGGGCTCGTGTTCCTC-3' and reverse, 5'-GATCACCGTGCAGTTTTCCA-3'. Real-time PCR was done in a LightCycler (Roche Diagnostics Co., Indianapolis, IN, USA) with SYBR Premix Ex Taq (TaKaRa Bio, Shiga, Japan). The expression levels of the *IGF-1*, *IGF-2*, and *IGF-1R* genes were normalized to the β -actin gene expression level.⁽²⁸⁾

Statistical analysis. The results are presented as the mean \pm SD, and they were analyzed using the GraphPad InStat software program version 3.05 (GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA) for Macintosh. Differences among the groups were analyzed by either one-way ANOVA or, as required, by two-way ANOVA. When ANOVA showed a statistically significant effect ($P < 0.05$), comparisons of each experimental group with the control group were then made using Dunnett's test, which corrects for multiple comparisons. The differences were considered to be significant when the two-sided P value was < 0.05 .

Results

General observations. As shown in Table 1, there were no significant differences in the body, liver, kidney, or fat (white adipose tissue of the periorchis and retroperitoneum) weights among the groups at the end of the study. Male *db/db* mice well-tolerated the treatment with DEN together with casein or BCAA. The body weight gains did not differ significantly among the groups during the experiment (data not shown). A histopathological examination suggested the absence of toxicity of BCAA in important organs, including liver, kidney, and spleen (data not shown). In addition, no clinical signs indicating the toxicity of BCAA were observed in the mice during the experiment.

Incidence and multiplicity of DEN-induced liver neoplasms and FCA in *db/db* mice. Macroscopically, nodular lesions (Fig. 1a) were observed in the livers of experimental mice at the termination of the study (41 weeks of age). Histopathologically, these lesions were liver cell adenoma (Fig. 1b) or HCC (Fig. 1c).

Table 1. Body, liver, kidney, spleen, and fat weights of the experimental mice

Group no.	Diet	No. of mice	Weight (g) (mean ± SD)			
			Body	Liver	Kidney	Fatt
1	CRF-1	11	73.0 ± 9.2	4.4 ± 0.9	0.9 ± 1.0	7.8 ± 2.2
2	Casein	11	66.0 ± 12.0	3.8 ± 1.2	0.6 ± 0.2	5.4 ± 1.0
3	BCAA	11	68.2 ± 12.4	3.4 ± 1.3	0.6 ± 0.1	6.2 ± 1.4

†White adipose tissue of the periorchis and retroperitoneum.

FCA (Fig. 1d) also developed in the liver of experimental mice. Simultaneously, we put supplemental groups to support that *db/db* mice are actually susceptible to DEN-induced liver tumorigenesis (data not shown; see Supporting Information Table S1) and found no neoplasms in C57B6 or C57BL/KsJ-*+/+* mice, genetic controls for *db/db* mice, regardless of DEN treatment. No tumors developed in the CRF-1-fed and DEN-untreated *db/db* mice.

Effects of BCAA supplementation on DEN-induced liver tumorigenesis in *db/db* mice. The incidence and multiplicity of liver neoplasms (adenoma plus HCC) and FCA at 41 weeks of age are summarized in Table 2. Compared with the CRF-1-fed mice (Group 1), dietary supplementation with BCAA (Group 3) significantly inhibited the incidence ($P < 0.05$) of adenoma. BCAA supplementation also reduced the incidence ($P < 0.05$) and multiplicity of adenoma ($P < 0.01$) compared to the casein-supplementation mice (Group 2). HCC was developed in the CRF-1-fed (9%) and casein-supplementation mice (27%), but not in the mice supplemented with BCAA (0%), and the multiplicity of total liver neoplasms was significantly inhibited by supplementation with BCAA when compared to CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.05$) or Casein-supplementation mice ($P < 0.01$), respectively. The number of FCA, which were developed in all experimental mice, was also significantly decreased by supplementation with BCAA when compared to CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.05$) or casein-supplementation mice ($P < 0.001$), respectively.

Effects of BCAA supplementation on the expression levels of *IGF-1*, *IGF-2*, and *IGF-1R* mRNAs in the liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice. When the mice were killed at 23 weeks of age, the development of FCA was also significantly inhibited by dietary supplementation with BCAA compared with casein-supplemented

mice ($P < 0.01$) (Fig. 2a). In addition, semiquantitative RT-PCR analyses showed that there was a significant decrease in the expression level of *IGF-1* ($P < 0.05$), *IGF-2* ($P < 0.05$), and *IGF-1R* mRNAs ($P < 0.05$) in the livers of the mice supplemented with BCAA when compared to that of the livers in casein-supplemented mice (Figs 2b–d). These findings suggest that BCAA supplementation prevents the development of FCA, at least in part, by inhibiting the expression of the IGF/IGF-1R axis.

Effects of BCAA supplementation on serum levels of BCAA, ALT, and leptin in DEN-treated *db/db* mice. BCAA supplementation caused a significant increase in the serum levels of BCAA compared to the CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.05$) and casein-supplemented mice ($P < 0.05$) (Fig. 3a). These findings suggest that supplementation with 3.0% BCAA is sufficient to raise the serum concentration of BCAA. The serum ALT levels markedly increased in the *db/db* mice when compared to the genetic control mice (data not shown; see Supporting Information Table S1). However, BCAA supplementation significantly decreased this value in comparison to the CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.01$) and casein-supplemented mice ($P < 0.001$) (Fig. 3b), thus indicating an improvement of liver damage. In addition, the mice supplemented with BCAA showed a decrease in the serum levels of leptin compared with the CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.001$) and casein-supplemented mice ($P < 0.001$) (Fig. 3c).

Effects of BCAA supplementation on the hepatic steatosis in DEN-treated *db/db* mice. Examination of Sudan III stained sections revealed that there was a marked macrovesicular steatosis in the DEN-treated *db/db* mice, which were fed CRF-1 or casein, but BCAA supplementation significantly improved the accumulation of the lipid in the liver (Fig. 4a). The histological findings were consistent with the results of the measurement of liver triglyceride contents; the levels of triglyceride in the liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice were significantly decreased by the supplementation with BCAA compared to those in the CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.001$) and casein-supplementation groups ($P < 0.01$) (Fig. 4b).

Effects of BCAA supplementation on liver fibrosis in DEN-treated *db/db* mice. As shown in Figure 5a, examination of Azan-stained sections indicated that DEN-treated *db/db* mice of CRF-1-fed and casein-supplemented groups showed the development of peri-central venous and peri-cellular fibrosis. However, supplementation with BCAA yielded an improvement in liver fibrosis (Fig. 5a). Similar findings were also observed in

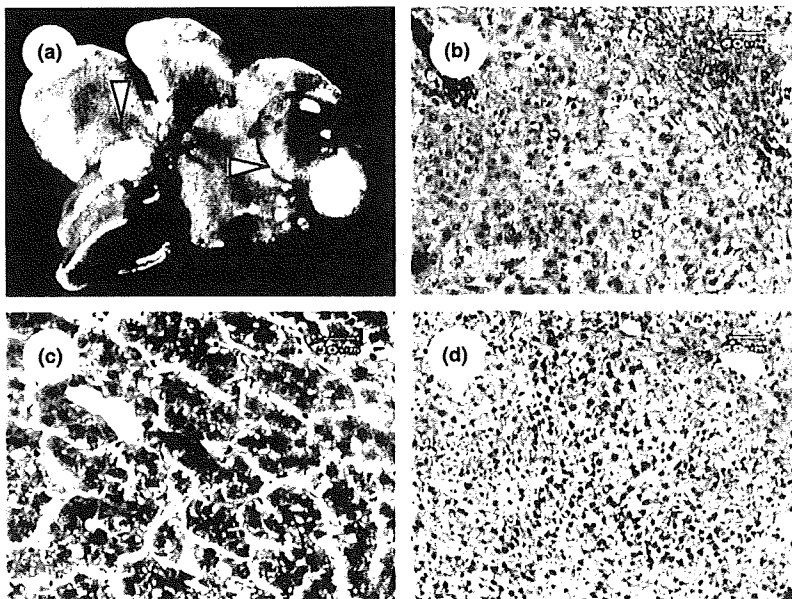


Fig. 1. Macroscopic (a) and microscopic (b–d) analyses of liver neoplasms in diethylnitrosamine-treated *db/db* mice. (a) Macroscopically, white tumors (hepatocellular carcinoma; indicated by arrowheads) were detected in the liver of diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice. (b–d) Paraffin-embedded sections were stained with H&E. Representative photomicrographs show adenoma (b), hepatocellular carcinoma (c), and foci of cellular alteration (d) in liver of experimental mice.

Table 2. Incidence and multiplicity of hepatic neoplasms and foci of cellular alteration (FCA) in obese diabetic C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice fed basal (CRF-1), casein-supplemented, or branched-chain amino acid (BCAA)-supplemented diets

Group no.	Diet	No. of mice	Incidence (%)		Multiplicity (no. of neoplasms/mouse) (mean \pm SD)			FCA (No./cm ²) (mean \pm SD)
			Adenoma	HCC	Total	Adenoma	HCC	
1	CRF-1	11	7/11 (64)	1/11 (9)	1.0 \pm 1.1	0.9 \pm 1.1	0.1 \pm 0.3	14.4 \pm 4.4
2	Casein	11	8/11 (73)	3/11 (27)	1.7 \pm 1.3	1.5 \pm 1.1	0.3 \pm 0.5	19.1 \pm 5.7
3	BCAA	11	2/11 (18)*,**	0/11 (0)	0.2 \pm 0.4*,**	0.2 \pm 0.4***	0	9.6 \pm 5.1*,****

* $P < 0.05$, significantly different from Group 1; ** $P < 0.05$, significantly different from Group 2; *** $P < 0.01$, significantly different from Group 2; **** $P < 0.001$, significantly different from Group 2. HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma.

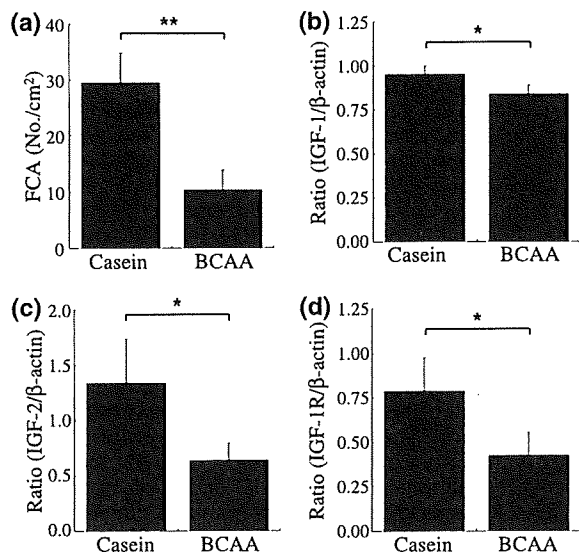


Fig. 2. Effect of branched-chain amino acid (BCAA) supplementation on the development of foci of cellular alteration (FCA) and on the expression of insulin-like growth factor (IGF)-1, IGF-2 and IGF-1 receptor (IGF-1R) mRNAs in the liver of diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice. Livers were excised from treated mice supplemented with casein or BCAA for 16 weeks. (a) Paraffin-embedded liver sections were stained with H&E and the total numbers of FCA were counted. Values are the means \pm SD ($n = 4$). (b-d) Total RNA was isolated from the removed liver and the expression of *IGF-1* (b), *IGF-2* (c), and *IGF-1R* (d) genes were examined by quantitative real-time RT-PCR. The expression of each gene was normalized to β -actin expression. Each experiment was done in triplicate. * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$.

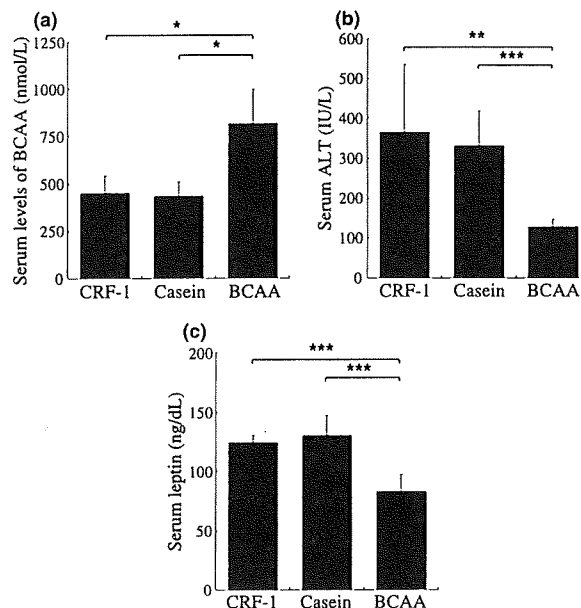


Fig. 3. Effect of branched-chain amino acid (BCAA) supplementation on the serum levels of BCAA, alanine aminotransferase (ALT), and leptin in diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice. After mice were killed, blood samples were collected and the serum levels of BCAA (a), ALT (b), and leptin (c) were then assayed. Values are the means \pm SD ($n = 8$). * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$.

the measurement of liver hydroxyproline contents, a useful marker of hepatic fibrosis;⁽²²⁾ when compared to CRF-1 feeding ($P < 0.05$) and casein supplementation ($P < 0.01$), BCAA supplementation caused a significant decrease in the amounts of hydroxyproline in the liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice (Fig. 5b). In addition, both the immunohistochemical (Fig. 6a) and Western blot analyses (Fig. 6b) showed the expression levels of α -SMA in the liver to be elevated in the CRF-1-fed and casein-supplemented mice, whereas supplementation with BCAA significantly decreased the expression of this protein ($P < 0.05$ and $P < 0.01$, respectively).

Effects of BCAA supplementation on insulin resistance and serum level of glucose in DEN-treated *db/dbdb* mice. Insulin resistance plays a critical role in obesity-related HCC development.⁽¹⁻⁴⁾ Therefore, the effects of BCAA supplementation on the value of QUICKI and the serum levels of glucose were examined in DEN-treated *db/db* mice. As shown in Figure 7a, supple-

mentation with BCAA caused a significant increase in the value of QUICKI compared to the CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.01$) and casein-supplemented mice ($P < 0.01$), thus indicating an improvement of insulin resistance. The serum glucose level also decreased after the supplementation with BCAA compared to CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.001$) and casein-supplementation ($P < 0.01$) (Fig. 7b).

Effects of BCAA supplementation on cell proliferative activity in liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice. The PCNA-labeling index of non-lesional hepatocytes in DEN-treated *db/db* mice was determined based on the findings of PCNA-immunohistochemical sections (Fig. 8a). As illustrated in Figure 8b, the mean PCNA-labeling index in the BCAA-supplemented mice was significantly lower than that of the CRF-1-fed ($P < 0.01$) and casein-supplemented mice ($P < 0.05$), thus indicating that BCAA supplementation significantly inhibited cell proliferation in the liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice.

Discussion

Recent studies have shown that obesity and diabetes mellitus are risk factors for HCC through the development of NASH.⁽⁵⁻⁷⁾ The

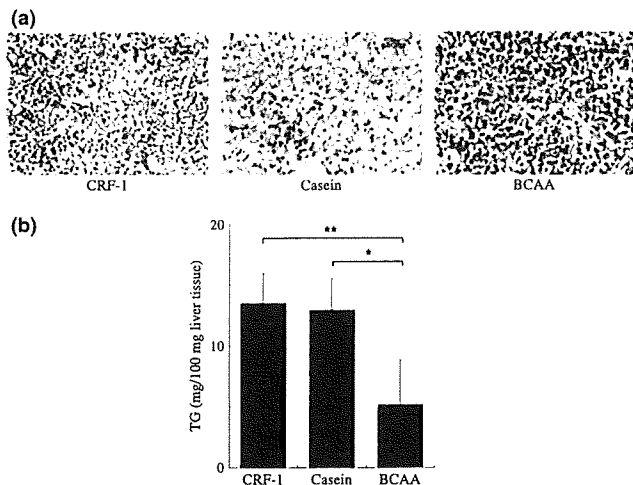


Fig. 4. Effect of branched-chain amino acid (BCAA) supplementation on hepatic steatosis in diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice. (a) Frozen sections of basal diet (CRF-1)-fed, casein-supplemented, or BCAA-supplemented treated mice were stained with Sudan III stain to show steatosis. (b) Hepatic lipids were extracted from the frozen livers and the levels of triglyceride were then measured. Values are the means \pm SD ($n = 8$). * $P < 0.01$; ** $P < 0.001$.

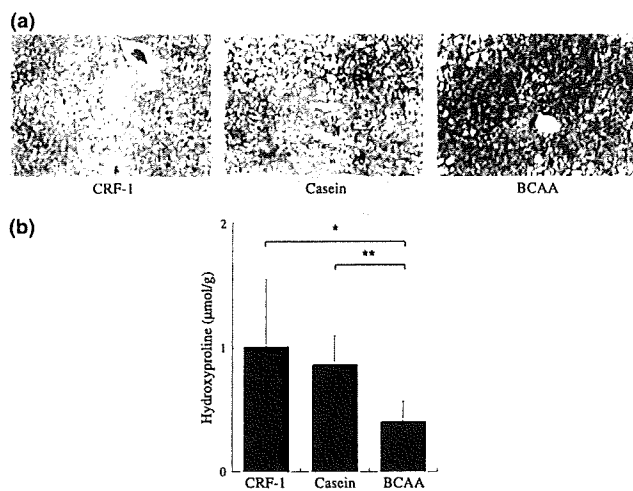


Fig. 5. Effect of branched-chain amino acid (BCAA) supplementation on hepatic fibrosis in diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice. (a) Paraffin-embedded sections of basal diet (CRF-1)-fed, casein-supplemented, or BCAA-supplemented treated mice were stained with Azan stain to show fibrosis. (b) Hepatic hydroxyproline contents were quantified colorimetrically. Values are the means \pm SD ($n = 8$). * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$.

present study clearly indicated that *db/db* mice, which develop obesity and severe diabetes mellitus, easily developed steatosis-related liver neoplasms by treatment with liver carcinogen DEN (Table 2 and Fig. 1), whereas background C57B6 or C57BL/KsJ-+/+ mice did not. Furthermore, this study showed that dietary supplementation with BCAA effectively decreased the serum levels of ALT (Fig. 3b), which increase due to severe steatosis (Fig. 4a) and fibrosis (Fig. 5a), and inhibited the development of liver neoplasms (Table 2) in DEN-treated *db/db* mice. A clinical trial recently indicated that dietary supplementation with BCAA can reduce the risk of HCC in cirrhotic patients who

are obese.⁽¹⁸⁾ How can BCAA exert chemopreventive effects on obesity-related HCC? Presumably, the improvement of insulin resistance by BCAA (Fig. 7a) plays a critical role in this beneficial effect because, in addition to the role of insulin in glucose uptake and glycogen biosynthesis in liver and skeletal muscle, insulin has oncogenic properties on HCC cells, including the stimulation of cell growth and induction of anti-apoptotic activity.^(29,30) These reports, therefore, suggest the possibility that BCAA inhibits the excessive cell proliferation in the whole liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice (Fig. 8) by improving insulin resistance (Fig. 7a). Recent studies have also revealed that BCAA improves glucose tolerance by modulating the insulin-independent glucose uptake into skeletal muscle.^(31,32) Isoleucine increased muscle glucose uptake and depressed gluconeogenesis in the liver without causing significant elevation of the plasma insulin level, thereby leading to the hypoglycemic effect in a rodent model.⁽³³⁾ Both improved insulin resistance and glucose tolerance by BCAA have also been indicated in clinical trials.^(14,34)

In addition to the improvement of insulin resistance (Fig. 7a), the present study also indicated that dietary supplementation with BCAA significantly decreased the expression levels of *IGF-1*, *IGF-2*, and *IGF-1R* mRNAs in the liver of DEN-treated *db/db* mice (Figs 2b–d). These findings seem to be significant because abnormal activation of the IGF/IGF-1R axis, which is caused by insulin resistance, is involved in the development of HCC and, therefore, might be a critical target to prevent this malignancy.^(19,20) These findings are also consistent with those of a previous report that showed BCAA supplementation decreased the serum levels of both IGF-1 and IGF-2 while also inhibiting the expression of IGF-1R on the colonic mucosa, thereby preventing the development of AOM-induced colonic neoplastic lesions in *db/db* mice.⁽¹⁷⁾ This previous report,⁽¹⁷⁾ together with our present findings (Fig. 2), suggest the possibility that the inhibition of IGF/IGF-1R activation is one of the critical mechanisms to suppress obesity-related tumorigenesis in specific organs, such as the colon and liver, and BCAA might be able to exert its chemopreventive effect on obesity-associated carcinogenesis by targeting this axis.

Insulin stimulates glucose uptake and triglyceride biosynthesis, which are stored in adipose tissue. The improvement of insulin resistance by BCAA, therefore, inhibits the release of free fatty acid from adipose tissue, improves hypertriglyceridemia, and thus resulted in improvement of hepatic steatosis in the present study (Fig. 4). Ectopic triglyceride accumulation in the liver is directly responsible for the development of insulin resistance.⁽³⁵⁾ In addition, several studies support the concept that hepatic steatosis promotes the development of HCC.⁽³⁶⁾ For instance, HCV core protein gene transgenic mice, a model for HCV-related hepatocarcinogenesis,⁽³⁷⁾ show marked hepatic steatosis and insulin resistance.^(38,39) Hepatic steatosis is a major accelerating factor of hepatocarcinogenesis in chronic HCV infected patients.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In addition, a significant relationship has also been reported between steatosis and hepatic fibrosis, a potent risk factor for HCC development.⁽³⁶⁾ Therefore, the reduction of hepatic lipid accumulation might be an effective strategy for HCC chemoprevention. The improvement of hepatic steatosis (Fig. 4) and fibrosis (Fig. 5) by BCAA is thus considered to be advantageous to accomplish this objective.

There are two study limitations that might suggest additional investigations. The first is that the incidence of HCC itself was not very high in the present study (Table 2) because the duration of the experiments (41 weeks) might have been sufficient to develop adenoma but not HCC. Therefore, future study should recruit longer-term experiments to see that DEN-treated *db/db* mice develop HCC more frequently. The second is that, although our model seems to be useful to elucidate the pathogenesis underlying NASH-associated HCC, there is one difference between the liver of *db/db* mice and human NASH, as hepatic fibrosis was

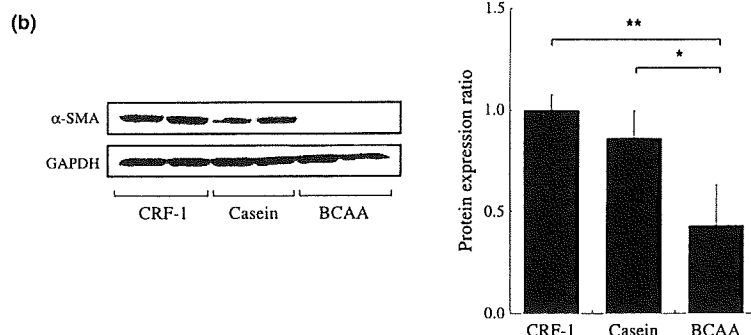
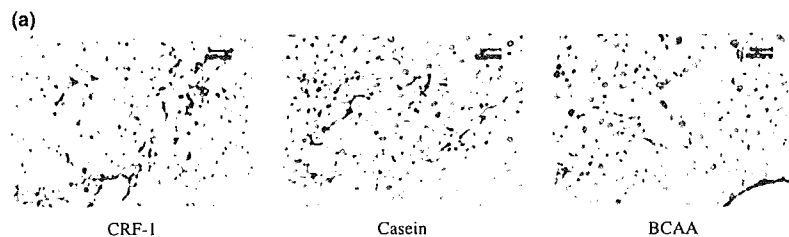


Fig. 6. Effect of branched-chain amino acid (BCAA) supplementation on the expression of α -smooth muscle actin (α -SMA) in diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice. (a) Immunohistochemical expression of α -SMA in the liver of basal diet (CRF-1)-fed, casein-supplemented, or BCAA-supplemented treated mice. (b) Total protein was extracted from the liver of experimental mice and the expression of α -SMA protein was examined by Western blot analysis. An antibody to GAPDH served as a loading control. Repeat Western blots gave similar results. The results obtained were quantitated by densitometry and are shown in the right-hand panels. Values are the means \pm SD ($n = 5$). * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$.

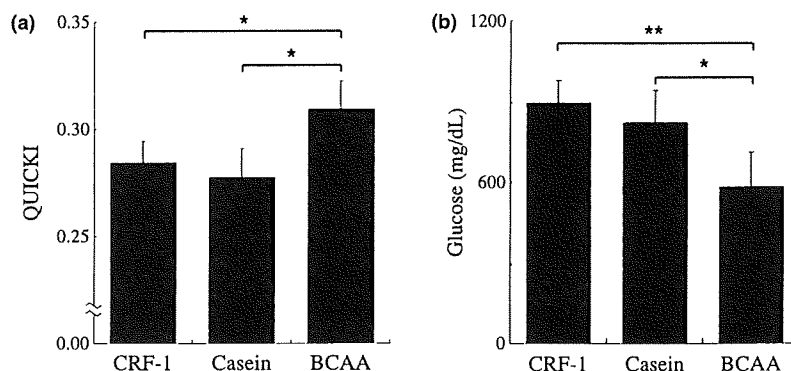


Fig. 7. Effect of branched-chain amino acid (BCAA) supplementation on insulin sensitivity and the serum level of glucose in diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice fed basal diet (CRF-1), or supplemented with casein or BCAA. (a) The value of the quantitative insulin sensitivity check index (QUICKI), was calculated to evaluate the insulin sensitivity. (b) The serum concentration of glucose was measured by the hexokinase method. Values are the means \pm SD ($n = 8$). * $P < 0.01$; ** $P < 0.001$.

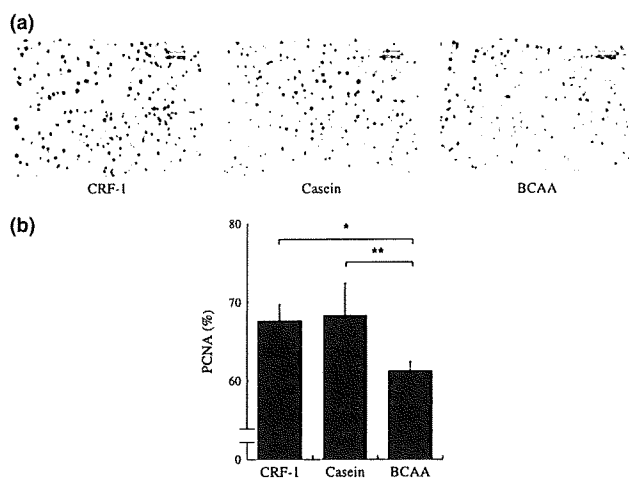


Fig. 8. Effect of branched-chain amino acid (BCAA) supplementation on hepatic cell proliferation in diethylnitrosamine-treated C57BL/KsJ-*db/db* mice. (a) Immunohistochemical expression of proliferating cell nuclear antigen (PCNA) in the liver of basal diet (CRF-1)-fed, or casein- or BCAA-supplemented treated mice. (b) PCNA-labeling index in non-lesional hepatocytes was determined by counting the PCNA-positive nuclei in the hepatocytes. * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$.

severe but did not reach liver cirrhosis at the end point of this experiment (Fig. 5a). This might be explained by a functional defect in the long-form leptin receptor because leptin exerts a pro-fibrogenic activity in the injured liver.^(41,42) However, BCAA supplementation significantly decreased the serum levels of leptin (Fig. 3c), inhibited the development of liver fibrosis (Fig. 5), and suppressed the expression of α -SMA (Fig. 6), thus indicating the inhibition of HSC activation. These findings seem to be significant because activated HSCs are a major cellular source of collagen in the injured liver and thus may be a critical target for inhibiting the development of liver fibrosis.⁽⁴³⁾ Therefore, BCAA supplementation prevents the development of hepatic fibrosis, at least in part, by inhibiting the HSC activation (Fig. 6). In addition, a previous study also indicated that supplementation with BCAA effectively suppressed the hyperleptinemia in *db/db* mice with colonic carcinogenesis model.⁽¹⁷⁾ These findings suggest that leptin is also one of the critical targets of BCAA in obese mice. Future studies would be important to evaluate whether BCAA could also prevent the development of liver fibrosis using a more aggressive fibrotic model, such as methionine and choline-deficient diet-fed *db/db* mice, known to be a good model of progressive NASH.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Finally, it should be emphasized again that, in a recent study, BCAA supplementation in the basal diet was shown to improve insulin resistance, thereby preventing the development of colonic

pre malignancies in an obesity-related colon cancer model.⁽¹⁷⁾ Both obesity and insulin resistance are strongly associated with the development of not only HCC, but also colorectal cancer.⁽⁴⁵⁾ These previous reports, therefore, further strengthen our conclusion that the prevention of HCC by targeting the dysregulation of energy homeostasis, particularly an increased insulin resistance, might be a promising strategy for obese people who are at increased risk for developing HCC. BCAA appears to be a potentially effective and critical candidate for this purpose because it can improve insulin resistance (Fig. 7a), hepatic steatosis (Fig. 4), and fibrosis (Fig. 5) in obese and diabetic *db/db* mice.

In conclusion, BCAA might therefore represent a new effective strategy for chemoprevention against HCC, especially in obese people. Among the beneficial effects of BCAA shown in this study, the improvement of insulin resistance might play a crucial role to prevent the development of obesity-related liver tumorigenesis because the state of insulin resistance is closely associated with the activation of the IGF/IGF-1R axis, the development of hepatic steatosis and fibrosis.⁽⁵⁻⁷⁾ In addition, a recent study revealed that BCAA supplementation also suppressed hepatic neovascularization in insulin-resistance-based hepatocarcinogenesis in obese rats.⁽⁴⁶⁾

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Abbreviations

α -SMA	α -smooth muscle actin
ALT	alanine aminotransferase
AOM	azoxymethane
BCAA	branched-chain amino acids
DEN	diethylnitrosamine
FCA	foci of cellular alteration
HCC	hepatocellular carcinoma
HCV	hepatitis C virus
HSC	hepatic stellate cell
IGF	insulin-like growth factor
IGF-1R	insulin-like growth factor-1 receptor
NASH	non-alcoholic steatohepatitis
PCNA	proliferating cell nuclear antigen
QUICKI	quantitative insulin sensitivity check index

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