NADPH oxidase 4 protects against development of endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis in LDL receptor deficient mice

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Abstract: AIMS Endothelial dysfunction is an early step in the development of atherosclerosis. Increased formation of superoxide anions by NADPH oxidase Nox1, 2, and 5 reduces nitric oxide availability and can promote endothelial dysfunction. In contrast, recent evidence supports a vasoprotective role of H2O2 produced by main endothelial isoform Nox4. Therefore, we analysed the impact of genetic deletion of Nox4 on endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis in the low-density lipoprotein receptor (Ldlr) knock-out model. METHODS AND RESULTS Ex vivo analysis of endothelial function by Mulvany myograph showed impaired endothelial function in thoracic aorta of Nox4(-/-)/Ldlr(-/-) mice. Further progression of endothelial dysfunction due to high-fat diet increased atherosclerotic plaque burden and galectin-3 staining in Nox4(-/-)/Ldlr(-/-) mice compared with Ldlr(-/-) mice. Under physiological conditions, loss of Nox4 does not influence aortic vascular function. In this setting, loss of Nox4-derived H2O2 production could be partially compensated for by nNOS upregulation. Using an innovative optical coherence tomography approach, we were able to analyse endothelial function by flow-mediated vasodilation in the murine saphenous artery in vivo. This new approach revealed an altered flow-mediated dilation in Nox4(-/-) mice, indicating a role for Nox4 under physiological conditions in peripheral arteries in vivo. CONCLUSIONS Nox4 plays an important role in maintaining endothelial function under physiological and pathological conditions. Loss of Nox4-derived H2O2 could be partially compensated for by nNOS upregulation, but severe endothelial dysfunction is not reversible. This leads to increased atherosclerosis under atherosclerotic prone conditions.

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NADPH oxidase 4 protects against development of endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis in LDL receptor deficient mice

Heike Langbein1†, Coy Brunssen1†, Anja Hofmann1, Peter Cimalla2, Melanie Brux1, Stefan R. Bornstein3, Andreas Deussen4, Edmund Koch2, and Henning Morawietz1*  

1Division of Vascular Endothelium and Microcirculation, Department of Medicine III, University Hospital Carl Gustav Carus Dresden, Technische Universität Dresden, Fetscherstr. 74, 01307 Dresden, Germany; 2Department of Anesthesiology and Intensive Care Medicine, Clinical Sensing and Monitoring, University Hospital Carl Gustav Carus Dresden, Technische Universität Dresden, Dresden, Germany; 3Department of Medicine III, University Hospital Carl Gustav Carus Dresden, Technische Universität Dresden, Dresden, Germany; and 4Institute of Physiology, Medical Faculty Carl Gustav Carus, Technische Universität Dresden, Dresden, Germany  

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Aims Endothelial dysfunction is an early step in the development of atherosclerosis. Increased formation of superoxide anions by NADPH oxidase Nox1, 2, and 5 reduces nitric oxide availability and can promote endothelial dysfunction. In contrast, recent evidence supports a vasoprotective role of H2O2 produced by main endothelial isoform Nox4. Therefore, we analysed the impact of genetic deletion of Nox4 on endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis in the low-density lipoprotein receptor (Ldlr) knockout model.

Methods and results Ex vivo analysis of endothelial function by Mulvany myograph showed impaired endothelial function in thoracic aorta of Nox4−/−/Ldlr−/− mice. Further progression of endothelial dysfunction due to high-fat diet increased atherosclerotic plaque burden and galectin-3 staining in Nox4−/−/Ldlr−/− mice compared with Ldlr−/− mice. Under physiological conditions, loss of Nox4 does not influence aortic vascular function. In this setting, loss of Nox4-derived H2O2 production could be partially compensated for by nNOS upregulation. Using an innovative optical coherence tomography approach, we were able to analyse endothelial function by flow-mediated vasodilation in the murine saphenous artery in vivo. This new approach revealed an altered flow-mediated dilation in Nox4−/− mice, indicating a role for Nox4 under physiological conditions in peripheral arteries in vivo.

Conclusions Nox4 plays an important role in maintaining endothelial function under physiological and pathological conditions. Loss of Nox4-derived H2O2 could be partially compensated for by nNOS upregulation, but severe endothelial dysfunction is not reversible. This leads to increased atherosclerosis under atherosclerotic prone conditions.

Keywords NADPH oxidase 4 • Nox4 • Endothelial dysfunction • Ldlr−/− mice • Atherosclerosis • Flow-mediated dilation

Translational perspective Genetic deletion of the hydrogen peroxide producing NADPH oxidase 4 (Nox4), as shown in the present study, leads to endothelial dysfunction and increased atherosclerosis under pathological conditions. Consequently, endothelial activation of Nox4 may represent a promising novel strategy for preventing endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis and its severe clinical complications. This also suggests that in contrast to the deleterious effects of oxidative stress certain reactive oxygen species might mediate beneficial effects in the vessel wall.

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Introduction

Endothelial dysfunction is an early event in atherosclerosis that precedes clinical symptoms and has prognostic value for future cardiovascular events. It is characterized by an imbalance between vasodilation and vasoconstriction, inhibition and promotion of proliferation and migration of smooth muscle cells, prevention and stimulation of adhesion of monocytes and aggregation of platelets. Furthermore, increased formation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) such as superoxide anions can contribute to impaired endothelium-dependent vasodilation by decreased bioavailability of nitric oxide (NO).

NADPH oxidase (Nox) enzyme complexes are predominant sources of ROS in the vessel wall. Isoforms Nox1, Nox2, Nox4, and Nox5 are expressed in the human vasculature. Nox4 is the predominant isoform in endothelial cells and mainly produces H$_2$O$_2$, which might explain functional differences to superoxide anion producing Nox isoforms.

The role of different Nox isoforms in cardiovascular physiology and pathophysiology is controversial. Increased expression of Nox4 in the cardiovascular system, overexpression of Nox4 reduced angiotensin II-induced increase in blood pressure. Mechanistically, H$_2$O$_2$ increases endothelial NO release by AKT-dependent (Ser473/Thr308) phosphorylation. In addition, H$_2$O$_2$ acts as an endothelium-derived hyperpolarizing factor (EDHF) in mice and man leading to vasorelaxation.

Global Nox4 knockout mice revealed contractile impairment, cardiac hypertrophy, and intestinal fibrosis after chronic overload. In tamoxifen-inducible Nox4 knockout mice, angiotensin II-mediated aortic inflammation, media hypertrophy, and endothelial dysfunction were enhanced. On the other hand, Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice were protected from oxidative stress, blood–brain barrier leakage, and neuronal apoptosis in a stroke model. Cardiac hypertrophy, fibrosis, and apoptosis after pressure overload were reduced in a model of cardiac-specific deletion of Nox4. These data suggest different cell- and dose-dependent effects of Nox4 in cardiovascular diseases.

To investigate the diverse role of Nox4, we analysed the effects of genetic deletion of Nox4 in the development of endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis in mice in vivo.

Methods

All materials and methods are available in Supplementary material online.

Results

Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice develop endothelial dysfunction

First, we analysed endothelial function in aortas of 10-week-old C57BL/6J (wild type), Ldlr$^{-/-}$, and Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice. We observed no changes in endothelium-dependent relaxation. In contrast, Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ double knockout mice of the same age developed endothelial dysfunction (Figure 1A and B). No changes in smooth muscle function were observed between the strains of mice (Figure 1C). In addition, endothelial dysfunction could be induced by application of catalase to aortic segments of Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice (Figure 1D and E). By blocking the calcium-activated potassium channels with large conductance (BK channels) with paxilline endothelial function of Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice, but not wild-type mice, was declined to the level of endothelial dysfunction in aortic rings of Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice (Figure 1F and G).

Hydrogen peroxide release of aortas revealed significantly higher levels in Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice. Aortas of Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice released significantly lower levels of hydrogen peroxide compared with the Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice (Figure 1H). Interestingly, both Ldlr$^{-/-}$ and Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice expressed significant lower eNOS mRNA in the aorta compared with wild-type mice. This suggests that hydrogen peroxide might partially compensate NO as a vasodilator in Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice (Figure 1I and J). In vitro experiments in human umbilical vein endothelial cells showed activation of pAKT1 (Ser473) by high laminar flow of 30 dyn/cm$^2$. Downregulation of NOX4 by shRNA diminished pAKT1 (Ser473) phosphorylation (Figure 1K and L). We assume that hydrogen peroxide derived from NOX4 acts via pAKT1 (Ser473) phosphorylation on eNOS activation. We observed severely increased levels of LDL cholesterol, total cholesterol, and triglyceride in the serum of Ldlr$^{-/-}$ and Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice (see Supplementary material online). Thus, hydrogen peroxide seems to be particularly essential under pathological conditions.

Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice on high-fat diet develop increased atherosclerosis

To determine the outcome of the severe endothelial dysfunction, we investigated Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice after 20 weeks on a high-fat diet. Body weight development, energy intake, blood glucose, serum lipid parameters, weight of white adipose tissue, kidney, heart, and liver did not differ between Ldlr$^{-/-}$ and Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice (see Supplementary material online, Figure S3 and Tables S2, S3). Plaque burden in the aortic arch of Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice was significantly higher, compared with Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice, as indicated by Elastic van Gieson staining (Figure 2A). Similarly, Galectin-3 staining was significantly higher in aortic arch sections of Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice, compared with Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice, further supporting a more severe atherosclerotic phenotype in the double knockout mouse (Figure 2B). Collagen content in the media analysed by Sirius Red staining was significantly increased in Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice (Figure 2C). Under the severe conditions of LDL receptor knockout, the loss of Nox4 led to a higher progression of atherosclerosis.

Compensation of hydrogen peroxide release in older Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice

The importance of hydrogen peroxide is also supported by the fact that decreased aortic H$_2$O$_2$ levels in young Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice were restored to levels of wild-type mice at 26 weeks of age (Figure 3A and B). This effect could be blocked when incubating aortic segments with NOS blocker L-NAME (Figure 3B), indicating a role of nNOS.
Nox4 prevents endothelial dysfunction
as potential source of H$_2$O$_2$. Similar to the compensation of hydrogen peroxide in the 26-week-old Nox4$^{−/−}$ mice, nNOS mRNA expression was significantly increased in aortas of 26-week-old but not 10-week-old Nox4$^{−/−}$ mice (Figure 3C and D). Aortic endothelial function of 26-week-old Nox4$^{−/−}$ was not altered (Figure 3E). However, NO availability seemed to be decreased in aortic segments of Nox4$^{−/−}$ mice. These mice showed a trend to decreased L-NAME-induced endothelium-dependent constriction (Figure 3F).

### Discussion

In the present study, we were able to show that loss of H$_2$O$_2$-releasing Nox4 in a genetic background of hypercholesterolaemia leads to severe endothelial dysfunction. The reduced vasodilation capacity in the Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice was identical to the declined maximal acetylcholine-induced relaxation of aortic segments of Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice which were pre-incubated with hydrogen peroxide-degrading catalase or BK$_{Ca}$ channel inhibitor pixilline. This implies a role of H$_2$O$_2$ as a vasodilator under pathological conditions. In agreement with this assumption, we did not find changes in vascular function in 10-week-old Nox4$^{−/−}$ mice. It was recently shown that increased H$_2$O$_2$ release by overexpression of Nox4 enhances vasodilation in mice. Aortas of Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice released more H$_2$O$_2$ than wild-type mice. Compared with Ldlr$^{−/−}$, Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ double knockout mice showed significantly lower levels of H$_2$O$_2$. This indicates a specific role for Nox4-released H$_2$O$_2$ in Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice. In support of this, we found a lower eNOS mRNA expression in Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice as well as Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$, which could explain the importance of H$_2$O$_2$ for vasorelaxation in these mice. H$_2$O$_2$ might act as an EDHF in mice and man. Endothelium-derived hyperpolarizing factors can open calcium-activated potassium channels leading to a hyperpolarized membrane of the vascular smooth muscle cell and subsequent vasorelaxation. Under pathological conditions of atherosclerosis and hypertension H$_2$O$_2$ can be involved in compensation of vasorelaxation in large vessels. In mice with DOCA-salt hypertension and uncoupled eNOS, endothelium-derived H$_2$O$_2$ compensated to maintain vasodilation. We observed an altered endothelial function in Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice after application of BK$_{Ca}$ channel inhibitor pixilline. The reduction was comparable with the endothelial dysfunction found in Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice. This suggests that H$_2$O$_2$ in Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice leads via opening of potassium channels to hyperpolarization-mediated dilation. Thereby, H$_2$O$_2$ compensates the loss of other vasodilator mechanisms. Furthermore, unlike superoxide, H$_2$O$_2$ does not further decrease bioavailability of NO. H$_2$O$_2$ is also described as increasing expression and activation of AKT/eNOS pathway. Our observation, that downregulation of NOX4 leads to less phosphorylation of pAKT1 (Ser473) under laminar shear stress, suggests a protective role of Nox4 generated H$_2$O$_2$ via this pathway.

We analysed the consequences of the endothelial dysfunction in Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice by feeding a high-fat diet for 20 weeks. Plaque burden was significantly higher in the Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ double knockout compared with Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice. Inflammation marker Galectin-3 and collagen content was also increased in Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ compared with Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice. Therefore, we are the first to document a potential protective role of Nox4 in the background of hypercholesterolaemia.

The role of other Nox isoforms in atherosclerosis is controversial. Some studies using knockouts of subunits of the Nox2 complex showed anti-atherosclerotic effects while others did not. The non-selective Nox1/Nox4 inhibitor GKT137831 slightly reduced atherosclerotic plaque area in diabetic ApoE$^{−/−}$ mice. Furthermore, Nox1 deletion, but not Nox4, decreased vascular adhesion of leukocytes and expression of inflammation markers, indicating that the effects of inhibitor GKT137831 might mainly result from blocking Nox1. Nox4 expression was mainly upregulated

**Figure 1** Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice develop endothelial dysfunction. (A) Concentration–response curve for acetylcholine in aortic segments of 10-week-old wild-type, Ldlr$^{−/−}$, Nox4$^{−/−}$, and Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice (n ≥ 10) precontracted with phenylephrine. (B) Maximal effect of 30 μmol/L ACh on aortic segments of wild-type, Ldlr$^{−/−}$, Nox4$^{−/−}$, and Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice (n ≥ 10). (C) Concentration–response curves for sodium nitroprusside in aortic segments of wild-type, Ldlr$^{−/−}$, Nox4$^{−/−}$, and Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice (n ≥ 7). (D and E) Concentration–response curve for acetylcholine in aortic segments of 10-week-old wild-type and Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice with catalase (n ≥ 9). (F and G) Concentration–response curve for acetylcholine in aortic segments of 10-week-old wild-type and Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice with catalase (n ≥ 9). (H) Amplex red assay for hydrogen peroxide generation of Aorta thoracalis segments of wild-type, Ldlr$^{−/−}$, Nox4$^{−/−}$, and Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice with pixilline (n ≥ 9). (I and J) Real-time polymerase chain reaction of murine aorta from wild-type, Ldlr$^{−/−}$, Nox4$^{−/−}$, and Nox4$^{−/−}$/Ldlr$^{−/−}$ mice (n ≥ 5). (K) Western blot analysis of pAKT1 (Ser473) in human umbilical vein endothelial cells transduced with shControl or shNOX4 for 48 h. Cells were either kept under static conditions or exposed to laminar shear stress (30 dyn/cm$^2$) for 5 min (n=4, Statistical analysis: one-way analysis of variance Duncan’s method). (L) Real-time polymerase chain reaction of NOX4 in human umbilical vein endothelial cells. Cells were transduced for 72 h with shControl or shNOX4 (n=4).
in the atheroma stage of plaques, but downregulated in more advanced stages of atherosclerosis. For the NADPH oxidase inhibitor apocynin protective effects for the vascular function are described as well. Apocynin is described to inhibit Nox activity by blocking p47phox phosphorylation. Thereby, apocynin has a lower effect on the Nox4/p22phox complex than on Nox2 activity. Furthermore, apocynin has been suggested to be not a specific inhibitor of vascular Nox but rather an antioxidant. Therefore, the protective effects of apocynin observed in the study by Liang et al. might be more due to inhibition of Nox2 rather than Nox4.

The importance of Nox4-released H$_2$O$_2$ might be emphasized by the fact that loss of Nox4 led to compensation of H$_2$O$_2$ release in 26-week-old Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice. This upregulation to a level found in wild-type mice was partially blocked by NOS inhibitor L-NAME. In agreement with these findings, nNOS mRNA expression was significantly elevated in the older Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice compared with wild-type mice. A role for nNOS in vascular function has been
described. In eNOS knockdown mice, nNOS inhibition reduced 
H$_2$O$_2$ production and further reduced vasorelaxation. Finally, we analysed flow-mediated dilation in saphenous 
arteries of 26-week-old wild-type and Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice using OCT.

Figure 3 Compensation of hydrogen peroxide release during aging in Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice. (A and B) Amplex red assay for hydrogen peroxide 
generation of Aorta thoracalis segments of 10-week-old wild-type and Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice ($n \geq 9$) or 26-week-old mice with or without L-NAME pre-
incubation ($n \geq 6$). H$_2$O$_2$ formation was measured as the catalase-sensitive part of the signal. (C and D) Real-time polymerase chain reaction 
of murine aorta from 10- and 26-week-old wild-type, Ldlr$^{-/-}$, Nox4$^{-/-}$, and Nox4$^{-/-}$/Ldlr$^{-/-}$ mice ($n \geq 6$). (E) Concentration–response 
curves of acetylcholine in aortic segments of 26-week-old wild-type and Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice ($n \geq 12$) precontracted with phenylephrine. (F) 
L-N$^3$-Nitroarginine methyl ester induced constriction of aortic segments of 26-week-old wild-type and Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice ($n \geq 4$).

We observed a significantly lower flow-mediated dilation in the 
Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice compared with wild-type mice. Although ex vivo 
analysis of vascular function in the aorta of Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice showed 
no difference in endothelium-dependent relaxation compared

...
with wild-type mice, flow-mediated dilation in saphenous artery in the Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice was significantly reduced. This supports a much higher sensitivity of the in vivo method to objectify alterations in vessel function. While ex vivo vessel ring analyses are based on the effects of pharmacological stimuli, the OCT approach allows us to monitor the effects of endogenous mechanical and chemical stimuli. Furthermore, this novel approach allows measurements of vasodynamics of a blood vessel segment integrated in the complex anatomical and physiological vascular network. Our data show evidence for a role of Nox4-released $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ in vascular function of smaller arteries like the saphenous artery and vessels of microcirculation. Paravicini et al. showed a role for Nox-derived $\text{H}_2\text{O}_2$ in flow-induced cerebral vasodilation by performing cranial window preparation in rats. Catalase transgenic mice show impaired endothelium-dependent relaxation in mesenteric resistance arteries. These mice also revealed a reduction in blood flow recovery and capillary formation after hindlimb ischaemia and disorganized microvasculature. Significantly attenuated blood flow recovery was also described for Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice.33

**Figure 4** Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice show altered flow-mediated dilation in vivo. (A) Representative optical coherence tomography images of Arteria saphe- na and evaluation of images of 26-week-old (A) wild-type, (B) Ldlr$^{-/-}$, and (C) Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice under control conditions (basal), flow-mediated dilation and after application of sodium nitroprusside. (D) Representative optical coherence tomography scan of the Arteria saphena of 26-week-old wild-type, Ldlr$^{-/-}$, and Nox4$^{-/-}$ mice showing the process of flow-mediated dilation during 10 min after occlusion ($n = 10$).
In conclusion, Nox4 plays an important role under physiological and pathological conditions in maintaining endothelial function. In states of increased proatherosclerotic risk such as hypercholesterolemia, Nox4 can protect against endothelial dysfunction and atherosclerosis.

**Authors’ contributions**

H.L., C.B.: performed statistical analysis; C.B., S.R.B., A.D., E.K., H.M.: handled funding and supervision; H.L., C.B., M.B.: acquired the data; H.L., C.B., A.D., E.K., H.M.: conceived and designed the research; H.L., C.B., H.M.: drafted the manuscript; H.L., C.B., A.H., P.C., S.R.B., A.D., E.K., H.M.: made critical revision of the manuscript for key intellectual content.

**Supplementary material**

Supplementary material is available at European Heart Journal online.

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**Conflict of interest**:

Faculty Carl Gustav Carus of the Technische Universität Dresden.

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