Inter-arm Blood Pressure Difference is Associated with Recurrent Stroke in Non-cardioembolic Stroke Patients

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Recurrent stroke increases mortality and aggravates the disability of stroke patients. We hypothesized that increased inter-arm systolic blood pressure difference and inter-arm diastolic blood pressure difference would be related to recurrent stroke in non-cardioembolic stroke patients. A total of 1226 consecutive non-cardioembolic first-ever ischemic stroke patients, in whom bilateral brachial blood pressures were measured by an automated ankle-brachial index measuring device, were included in our study. Recurrent stroke was defined as newly developed neurologic symptoms with relevant lesions on brain CT and/or MRI after 7 days or hospital discharge. Inter-arm systolic and diastolic blood pressure differences ≥10 mmHg were noted in 9.7% (120/1226) and 5.0% (62/1226) of patients, respectively. During a median 24 months of follow-up, 105 (8.5%) patients experienced recurrent stroke. Patients who had inter-arm systolic blood pressure difference ≥10 mmHg showed increased risk of recurrent stroke (hazard ratio: 1.77, 95% confidence interval: 1.04–3.00, p = 0.033). Moreover, inter-arm diastolic blood pressure difference ≥10 mmHg was also independently associated with increased risk of recurrent stroke (hazard ratio: 2.92, 95% confidence interval: 1.59–5.34, p = 0.001). In conclusion, inter-arm blood pressure difference ≥10 mmHg may be associated with increased risk of recurrent stroke in non-cardioembolic stroke patients.

Systolic and diastolic blood pressures are important risk factors for occurrence and recurrence of stroke. The latest guideline for management of hypertension recommended to check blood pressure in both arms, and different result is often found when checked bilaterally. These inter-arm blood pressure differences (IABDs) are reported in general population (4%), diabetic patients (7%) and stroke patients (10%).

Stroke is one of the leading causes of disability, loss of productivity, and poor functional outcome including mortality. Disability and poor functional outcome from stroke cause serious burden to patients themselves and their caregivers. Additionally, recurrent stroke accounts for 10–25% of the total stroke. Recurrent stroke increases mortality and exacerbates the disability of stroke patients. Therefore, identifying and modifying factors associated with recurrent stroke are important tasks for treating stroke patients.

IABD can be easily measured at outpatient clinic and can be used as an important indicator or predictor in clinical fields. The major cause of IABD includes atherosclerosis and stenosis due to various diseases in the aorta, subclavian arteries and their branches. In stroke patients, considering the relationship between extensive atherosclerosis and poor clinical outcome, IABD may also have an association with recurrent stroke. However, few studies have reported these issues. Our hypothesis is that increased IABD would be related with recurrent stroke in non-cardioembolic stroke patients.

Results

Demographics and comparisons of clinical variables according to IABD ≥10 mmHg. There were no statistical difference of baseline demographics between patients included in the analysis and those excluded, except for age (Supplementary Table 1). Overall, 61.4% (753/1226) were male, and the mean age was 65.0 ± 11.8
years. The ankle-brachial index (ABI) examination was performed at median 4 days [interquartile range 3–6 days]. In total, 148 (12.1%) patients were prescribed antihypertensive medications before performing ABI. Among these 148 patients, 99 (66.9%) had been prescribed intravenous labetalol only, while 23 (15.3%) patients were prescribed intravenous perdipine and labetalol. Patients who received both oral and intravenous antihypertensive agents were 11 (7.4%), and 15 (10.1%) patients were prescribed oral antihypertensive agents only.

The systolic (IASBD) and diastolic (IADBD) blood pressure difference ≥10 mmHg was noted in 9.7% (120/1226) and 5.0% (62/1226), respectively. The patients with IASBD ≥10 mmHg had more frequent history of hypertension, coronary artery disease (CAD), metabolic syndrome, regular alcohol intake, left ventricular hypertrophy, large artery atherosclerosis stroke subtype, cerebral atherosclerosis, and high-grade white matter hyper-intensities. Moreover, body mass index, pulse rate, systolic blood pressure, diastolic blood pressure, and baPWV were higher in patients with IASBD ≥10 mmHg compared to those with IASBD <10 mmHg (Table 1). Patients with IADBD ≥10 mmHg had more frequent history of CAD, regular alcohol intake, left ventricular hypertrophy, cerebral atherosclerosis, and high-grade white matter hyper-intensities. In addition, body mass index, National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale (NIHSS) score, pulse rate, systolic blood pressure, and diastolic blood pressure were higher in patients with IASBD ≥10 mmHg compared to those with IADBD <10 mmHg (Table 1).

**Association between IABD and recurrent stroke.** During follow-up (median 24 months, interquartile range 14–32 months), 105 (8.6%) patients had experienced recurrent stroke. The recurrent stroke was more frequently demonstrated in the IASBD ≥10 mmHg group compared with the IASBD <10 mmHg group (17.5% vs. 7.5%, p < 0.001) and in the IADBD ≥10 mmHg group compared with the IADBD <10 mmHg group (24.2% vs. 7.7%, p < 0.001), respectively. Considering recurrent stroke subtypes, large artery atherosclerosis (71.4% vs. 28.6%) and two or more causes identified (19% vs. 17.9%) were more frequently noted in the IASBD ≥10 mmHg group compared with the IASBD <10 mmHg group (p = 0.007). Furthermore, hemorrhagic stroke occurred less frequently in the IASBD ≥10 mmHg group compared with the IASBD <10 mmHg group (0.0% vs. 6.0%) (Table 2). For diastolic blood pressure differences, there was no statistical significance between patients with IADBD ≥10 mmHg or IADBD <10 mmHg (Table 2), even though a similar tendency of recurrent stroke subtypes was noted for those with systolic blood pressure differences. Considering the location of recurrent stroke, patients with IASBD ≥10 mmHg had a tendency of recurrent stroke in posterior circulation (61.9% vs. 40.5%, p = 0.077). In contrast, there was no difference in the location of recurrent stroke in patients with IADBD ≥10 mmHg compared to IADBD <10 mmHg. (Recurrence stroke in posterior circulation: 53.3% vs. 43.3%, p = 0.471).

Kaplan–Meier curves demonstrated that recurrent stroke depended on IASBD ≥10 mmHg (p = 0.001) and IADBD ≥10 mmHg (p = 0.001) (Fig. 1). In multivariate analysis, IASBD ≥10 mmHg was significantly related with recurrent stroke (HR: 1.77, 95% CI: 1.04–3.00, p = 0.033). Furthermore, IADBD ≥10 mmHg was significantly associated with recurrent stroke (HR: 2.92, 95% CI: 1.59–5.34, p = 0.039) (Table 3). Patients with both IASBD and IADBD ≥10 mmHg were also associated with recurrent stroke (HR: 3.02, 95% CI: 1.54–5.91, p = 0.001) (Table 3).

In subgroup analysis regarding the relationship of recurrent stroke with IABD, no subgroups showed significant difference except IASBD with increased baPWV (>20.0 m/s) (Supplementary Table 2). The IASBD ≥10 mmHg was associated with recurrent stroke in patients with increased baPWV (>20.0 m/s) (HR: 3.83, 95% CI: 2.20–6.65), (p for interaction = 0.007).

**Discussion**

Our study showed that IASBD and/or IADBD ≥10 mmHg was associated with recurrent stroke after adjustment for stroke severity (NIHSS), cerebral atherosclerosis, baPWV, and high-grade white matter hyper-intensities, which were closely related factors for stroke. Thus, our study suggests that IASBD or IADBD, which can be easily measured in a clinical field, may be an independent factor for associating or predicting recurrent stroke in non-cardioembolic stroke patients.

Our study demonstrated that IASBD and/or IADBD ≥10 mmHg was associated with recurrent stroke after non-cardioembolic stroke. Previous studies reported that IABD is related with vascular death and all-cause mortality12, and these results were consistently noted in populations without known cardiovascular disease13 and in chronic kidney disease patients14. In elderly patients with hypertension, IASBD ≥10 mmHg was an independent risk factor for increasing the risk of cardiovascular disease and mortality15. In contrast, the Framingham Heart Study reported no significant relationship with IABD and mortality16. However, up to now, preceding studies regarding IABD and recurrent stroke are rare. In a previous study of patients with acute ischemic stroke, IASBD and/or IADBD ≥10 mmHg was associated with long-term mortality17. In patients with non-cardioembolic stroke, cerebral artery stenosis, which is a major predictor for poor prognosis after stroke, was diversely associated with IABD4. Another study showed low ABI was associated with recurrent stroke in patients with acute cerebral infarction17. Our study supports these findings and may give additive information for the associations of IABD and stroke recurrence. Moreover, bi-brachial blood pressure measurements might play a role as a screening tool for stroke patients to estimate the possibility of recurrent stroke in non-cardioembolic stroke patients.

Our study demonstrated that large artery atherosclerosis stroke subtype was more frequently noted in the IASBD ≥10 mmHg group than in the IADBD <10 mmHg group for the stroke subtype of recurrent stroke. These results are consistent with previous findings that IABD is associated with cerebral atherosclerosis, which is an important risk factor for ischemic stroke occurrence or recurrence. Another study also revealed association of arterial stiffness index and large artery atherosclerosis stroke subtype18, and the results of previous studies in which large artery atherosclerosis was associated with asymptomatic lacunar infarction19. Meanwhile, hemorrhagic stroke subtype was less frequently noted in the IASBD ≥10 mmHg group than in those with IASBD <10 mmHg. In contrast to our results, previous studies have revealed large artery atherosclerosis, such as aortic atheroma, was significantly associated with cerebral microbleeds that act as imaging biomarkers for future events.
cerebral haemorrhage. These results suggest that a large IABD causes cerebral hypoperfusion in the brain, resulting in an ischemic prone state rather than a hemorrhagic prone state, but further research is needed.

Several hypotheses may explain the relationship of IABD with recurrent stroke. IABD is related with advanced atherosclerotic disease in the aorta and its large branches, which may cause an insufficient cerebral blood flow, resulting in an ischemic prone state rather than a hemorrhagic prone state, but further research is needed.

Table 1. Clinical characteristics and comparison of study patients with IASBD and IADBD ≥10 mmHg. Data are shown as n (%) or mean ± standard deviation. IASBD: inter-arm systolic blood pressure difference, IADBD: inter-arm diastolic blood pressure difference, NIHSS: National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale, SBP: systolic blood pressure, DBP: diastolic blood pressure, baPWV: brachial-ankle pulse wave velocity, HWHs: high-grade white matter hyperintensities, CMBs: cerebral microbleeds, HPVSs: high-grade perivascular spaces, ALIs: asymptomatic lacunar infarctions.
The hemodynamic dysfunction may be a part of the cause of recurrent stroke or poor clinical outcome. Furthermore, larger atherosclerotic burden is correlated with early poor clinical outcome in stroke population. Previous study discovered that IABD resulting from one-arm ischemia in hypertensive or normotensive patients was related with flow-mediated dilatation, which represents endothelial dysfunction. Increased arterial stiffness may be a link for our study. Arterial stiffness is associated with worse outcome in patients with acute cerebral infarction. A population-based study showed large IABD was related with arterial stiffness, which is in line with our study.

There are some limitations in our research. First, although consecutive patients were included in this study, the possibility of selection bias exists because of the retrospective study design. Second, it is difficult to generalize our findings to another population or cohort considering that our study population is limited to a single comprehensive center. Third, multiple, automatic, and simultaneous assessments are recommended for accurate IABD measurements rather than a single, manual, and sequential evaluation methods. We used an automatic and simultaneous measurement device; however, IABD was investigated only once during the ABI assessment and additional follow up data was lacking.

In conclusion, our results demonstrated that IASBD $\geq 10$ mmHg and/or IADBD $\geq 10$ mmHg is associated with recurrent stroke. An IABD $\geq 10$ mmHg could be a useful indicator of risk of recurrent stroke in non-cardioembolic stroke patients.

**Methods**

**Study population.** Patients admitted to our stroke center between January 2010 and August 2016, with first-ever transient ischemic attack or acute ischemic stroke within 24 hours after symptom onset were enrolled. For total 1782 patients, medical history, demographics, previous history of cardiovascular risk factors, neuroimaging findings and neurologic examination data were collected. All admitted stroke patients underwent chest x-ray,
Table 3. Frequency of developing clinical events and results of uni and multivariate analysis for recurrent stroke according to IABD. Cox proportional hazards regression were used for uni- and multivariate analysis. Data are shown as percent (number of case/numbers of total patients for each group) or hazard ratio (95% confidence interval). *p < 0.05. HR: hazard ratio, CI: confidence interval, IADB: inter-arm systolic blood pressure difference, IASBD: inter-arm systolic blood pressure difference, IADBD: inter-arm diastolic blood pressure difference, N/A: not applicable. a: adjusted for sex, age, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, smoking, coronary artery disease, metabolic syndrome, National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale, stroke subtype, cerebral atherosclerosis, brachial-ankle pulse wave velocity, and high-grade white matter hyperintensities.

| Frequency of recurrent stroke | Increased IABD group | Reference group | Univariate HR (95% CI) | Multivariatea HR (95% CI) |
|------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| IASBD | | | | |
| ≥10 mmHg vs. reference (<10 mmHg) | 17.5% (21/120) | 7.5% (84/1106) | 2.26 (1.40–3.65)* | 1.77 (1.04–3.00)* |
| ≥15 mmHg vs. reference (<15 mmHg) | 23.8% (15/63) | 7.7% (90/1163) | 3.20 (1.85–5.54)* | 1.92 (1.03–3.58)* |
| Absolute difference, mmHg (continuous variable) | N/A | N/A | 1.06 (1.03–1.08)* | 1.04 (1.02–1.07)* |
| IADBD | | | | |
| ≥10 mmHg vs. reference (<10 mmHg) | 24.2% (15/62) | 7.7% (90/1164) | 4.86 (2.35–7.84)* | 2.92 (1.59–5.34)* |
| ≥15 mmHg vs. reference (<15 mmHg) | 38.1% (8/21) | 8.0% (97/1205) | 6.09 (2.95–12.57)* | 3.61 (1.63–7.99)* |
| Absolute difference, mmHg (continuous variable) | N/A | N/A | 1.12 (1.08–1.17)* | 1.10 (1.05–1.15)* |
| IASBD and IADBD ≥10 mmHg vs. reference (<10 mmHg) | 28.2% (11/39) | 7.9% (94/1187) | 4.40 (2.35–8.22)* | 3.02 (1.54–5.91)* |

Measuring blood pressure in both arms and inter-arm blood pressure differences. Details for measurement of ABI were described in previous study34. In brief, The ABI test was performed by a well-trained examiner with more than 5 years of experience. Before taking the exam, patients had at least 5 minutes rest in a quiet room. The bilateral brachial systolic and diastolic blood pressures were measured automatically and simultaneously with an automated device for ABI test (VP-1000; Colin Co. Ltd, Komaki, Japan) in supine position after discharge of the bowels/bladder in the morning. Pressure cuffs were wrapped on both the brachial and posterior tibial arteries to measure the arterial blood pressure using the oscillometric method34. The ABI test was performed before the patients became neurologically stable. A large systolic (IASBD) or diastolic IABD (IADBD) was defined as an absolute inter-arm blood pressure difference ≥10 mmHg, which is frequently used and validated for major cardiovascular outcome as a cut-off value35.

Cerebral atherosclerosis and high-grade white matter hyperintensities. The degree of intracranial and extracranial cerebral atherosclerosis (ICAS and ECAS) stenosis was measured using brain CT angiography, MR angiography and/or digital subtraction angiography19. The existence of arterial stenosis was defined as more than 50% reduction in luminal diameters36,37. The Fazekas score of ≥2 in the deep or periventricular white matter on T2-weighted image or fluid-attenuated inversion recovery were defined as high-grade white matter hyperintensities38.

Outcome measures. The follow up schedule for the patients was three months, one year, and every year after discharge. In each follow up, vital signs, newly developed vascular risk factors, and recurrence of stroke were
assessed by a well-trained stroke nurse and/or stroke specialist. If a patient could not make routine follow up, clinical data was obtained by telephone interview. Recurrent stroke was defined as newly developed neurologic symptoms with relevant lesions on brain CT and/or MRI after 7 days after an index stroke or hospital discharge. We estimated time from admission to the first recurrent stroke23.

Statistical analysis. For statistical analysis, we used R package (version 3.0.2; R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria) and SPSS package (version 23.0, Chicago, IL, USA) programs for Windows. To compare groups according to the presence of IABD ≥ 10 mmHg, independent t-test, Mann–Whitney U test, Chi-square test, and Fisher’s exact test were performed. To investigate the association of IABD with recurrent stroke, the Kaplan–Meier estimator, log-rank test and Cox proportional hazards regression analysis were used. In multivariate analyses, age, sex and variables with p < 0.1 in univariate analysis were included. For sensitivity analysis, IASBD ≥ 15 mmHg, IADB ≥ 15 mmHg, and any increased IABD (systolic or diastolic) were also investigated4. Subgroup analyses included sex, age, body mass index, cerebral atherosclerosis, stroke subtype (non-lacunar stroke vs. lacunar stroke subtype) and baPWV. The p value of less than 0.05 by two-tailed was considered as having statistical significance.

Data Availability
The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in figshare at https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.7542770.

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Acknowledgements
The study was supported by grants from the Basic Science Research Program through the National Research Foundation of Korea funded by the Ministry of Education (2018R1D1A1B07040959).

Author Contributions
Yoonkyung Chang and Tae-Jin Song contributed to data collection and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Jinkwon Kim performed data analysis. Yong-Jae Kim contributed to the design and implementation of the research. Tae-Jin Song supervised the project. All authors discussed the results and commented on the manuscript.

Additional Information
Supplementary information accompanies this paper at https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-49294-8.

Competing Interests: The authors declare no competing interests.

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