Enhanced leptin synthesis and secretion \textit{In vitro} by human adipocytes from type 2 diabetic donors occurs only under hyperinsulinaemic conditions

Abstract

Leptin is 16kDa, 146 amino acid residue peptide hormone that is thought to play a central role in the regulatory role of adipose tissue on energy metabolism. Leptin is synthesised by adipocytes and released to the circulation, where it acts as an afferent signal to the central nervous system, relaying information about the degree of adiposity to the hypothalamus. Hyperthalamic leptin resistance is associated with obesity and an increased risk of type 2 diabetes and hyperinsulinemia. However, the direct effects of hyperinsulinemia on leptin secretion by adipocytes remain unclear. The aim of this study was to examine leptin secretion \textit{In vitro} by adipocytes from type 2 diabetic and normal donors under normoinsulinaemic and hyperinsulinaemic conditions. The results of this study showed that for normal adipocytes, exposure to 10 and 100ng/ml insulin for 72 hours caused an increased leptin secretion of 5.68±0.82pg/ml/10^6 cells (P<0.001) and 16.21±2.72pg/ml/10^6 cells (P<0.001) respectively. For type 2 diabetic adipocytes, however, 72 hours insulin exposure at 10 and 100ng/ml produced non-significant and 3.10±0.36 ng/ml/10^6 cells (P<0.039) levels of leptin secretion. Following exposure for 120 hours diabetic adipocytes exposed to 10 and 100ng/ml insulin showed increased leptin secretion of 25.92±1.74ng/ml/10^6 cells (P<0.001) and 38.56±2.48ng/ml/10^6 cells (P<0.001) respectively. These values were significantly greater than those for normal adipocytes (P=0.003 and P=0.013 respectively). These results suggest that both normal and supraphysiological insulin concentrations directly stimulate secretion of leptin by adipocytes from both normal and type 2 diabetic donors, but the effect is greatest for type 2 diabetic adipocytes following extended periods of supraphysiological insulin treatment. The relationship between insulin and leptin concentrations in obesity and type 2 diabetes warrants further investigation to uncover potential therapeutic targets.

**Keywords:** adipocyte, type 2 diabetes, insulin, leptin, adipokines, hormones, steroidogenesis

**Abbreviations:** AP, alkaline phosphatase; BMI, body mass index; ELISA, enzyme-linked immnosorbent assay; PAGE, polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis; PBS, phosphate buffered saline; PTEN, phoshatase and tensin homolog; TBS, tris buffered saline

**Introduction**

Prior to the last two decades adipose tissue was often regarded as simply a storage site for excess energy. More recently, however, it has emerged as a complex endocrine organ; the full complexity of which is yet to be understood. Research has shown that adipocytes are capable of secreting many varied bioactive peptides and proteins called adipokines. These act as autocrine, paracrine and endocrine signalling molecules.\textsuperscript{1,2,3}

A greater understanding of the importance of adipose tissue in whole body homeostasis as well as its effects on particular physiological processes has occurred with the discovery of roles for adipose tissue in inflammation, blood pressure regulation, lipid metabolism, insulin sensitivity and coagulation.\textsuperscript{4} In particular, irregularities in adipokine secretion may be associated with weight gain since adipokine dysfunction has been shown to cause dysfunction in the energy regulatory mechanisms of the body.\textsuperscript{2,5,6}

The adipokine leptin contributes to an endocrine circuit that regulates energy homeostasis.\textsuperscript{7,8} It activates receptors in the hypothalamus to modulate the release of the anorexigenic and exogenic peptides, and in this regard leptin acts as an afferent signal in a negative feedback loop from adipocytes to the hypothalamus that regulates adiposity in mammals.\textsuperscript{9} Changes to the normal physiological regulation of leptin may therefore be expected to lead to weight gain and obesity, and may have also other physiological consequences in other hormonal circuits. Understanding the causative factors that may affect the production, availability and function of leptin is therefore important in order to understand and potentially treat obesity and its consequences.

The role of leptin in obesity has been shown to involve complex interactions with other adipokines and insulin resistance.\textsuperscript{10,11} Kolaczyński et al.\textsuperscript{12} found serum leptin concentrations to be correlated with body mass index (BMI) and also to be raised in response to long-term hyperinsulinaemia \textit{in vitro}. Additional rodent studies have suggested that high leptin concentrations result in decreased hypothalamic sensitivity to leptin.\textsuperscript{13} Such changes to the insulin and leptin system are characterized as obesity-associated insulin resistance, a condition that is associated to the onset of type 2 diabetes.\textsuperscript{14}

Although the development of high circulatory leptin levels may be affected by decreased hypothalamic sensitivity, no examination of leptin synthesis and secretion by adipocytes taken from diabetic donors has been undertaken under hyperinsulinaemic conditions. Such an examination is important because it may show a direct influence of insulin on leptin secretion by adipocytes, and this may contribute

**References**

1. Institute of Cancer and Genomic Sciences, University of Birmingham, UK
2. Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Staffordshire University, UK

**Correspondence:** David Cadagan, Staffordshire University, Biological and Biomedical Sciences, Science Centre, Leek Road, Stoke-on-Trent ST4 2DF, UK, Tel 017 8229 5400, E-mail David.Cadagan@staffs.ac.uk

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to the high circulatory levels seen in obesity. Furthermore, the identification of raised insulin as a therapeutic target for the reversal of the raised levels of leptin seen in obesity could consequently provide a mechanism to reverse hypothalamic leptin insensitivity. We therefore examined the interaction that may exist between insulin and leptin at the level of the adipocyte by measuring the effects of insulin treatment on leptin secretion by adipocytes derived from normal and from diabetic donors which have been shown to exhibit insulin resistance in vitro. A study in vitro was designed to avoid potential confounding influences from other factors that have been shown to enhance leptin secretion from adipocytes such as angiotensin II, ghrelin, oleic acid and Wnt pathway activation.

Materials and methods

Cell culture

Murine 3T3-L1 cells (kindly donated by Nottingham University, UK) and pooled human preadipocytes from normal and type 2 diabetic donors (Lonza) were maintained in 25cm² tissue culture flasks at 37°C in RPMI 1640 medium supplemented with 10% foetal bovine serum and with a gas phase of 3% CO₂ in air. Cell suspensions were prepared by trypsinisation and viable cells (those excluding 0.2% trypan blue) were counted in a Neubauer haemocytometer. Normal and type 2 diabetic human adipocytes were compared for glucose uptake and differentiation following passage to ensure the phenotype was retained. Murine 3T3-L1 cells cultured in medium supplemented with 10ng/ml insulin were used as positive controls. For leptin secretion assays 5×10⁴ normal or type 2 diabetic human preadipocytes were plated into the wells of triplicate 24 well plates in 300µl of medium. Differentiation of human preadipocytes was induced by adding medium supplemented with 200µM indomethacin, 3-Isobutyl-1-methylxanthine, 0.1µM dexamethasone, 1µM insulin, 1% L-Glutamine, 10% foetal bovine serum and GA-1000 (Lonza). After 10days, when oil red O staining showed lipid droplet formation, the medium was replaced with medium containing 0, 10 or 100ng/ml insulin and the cells were incubated for a further 0, 4, 8, 24, 48, 72 or 120hours prior to removing both the conditioned medium and harvesting the cells to form lysates. Leptin was estimated in the in the medium using ELISA and in the lysates by western blotting.

ELISA

Leptin in cell culture medium was measured using the Human Leptin Quantikine ELISA Kit (R&D Systems) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Absorbance was measured at 570nm and the range of sensitivity of the kit was 1.56-100pg/ml/10⁶ cells.

Western blotting

To prepare lysates cell monolayers were washed with phosphate buffered saline (PBS) and harvested by trypsinisation. Cells were counted, centrifuged at 250 x g for 10minutes at 4°C and resuspended in lysis buffer (25mM Tris pH 7.5, 300mM sucrose, 10mM monothioglycerol, 1 mM EDTA, 1%(v/v) Igepal, 0.002% protease inhibitor cocktail, 0.01% phosphatase inhibitor II (Sigma)). Lysates were stored at -80°C. Proteins were resolved using 10% SDS-PAGE and transferred onto nitrocellulose membrane in ice cold transfer buffer (25mM Tris, 80mM glycine, 20% (v/v) methanol) using a Miniprotein blotting system (Bio-Rad) at 100V for 2hours.

Membranes were then blocked by immersion in 5% dried milk in 25mM Tris, 150mM NaCl (TBS) for 1hour. Anti-leptin antibody (antiOB, R&D Systems) was then added and membranes were incubated overnight at 4°C, washed (10minutes x 6) with 0.1% Tween in TBS followed by washes (10minutes x 3) with TBS. Membranes were then incubated with alkaline phosphatase (AP) conjugated secondary antibodies (Bio-Rad) in 3% dried milk in TBS for 2hours at room temperature with gentle agitation. The membrane was washed again as described above and visualized by incubating (10minutes) with Immuno-Star AP Chemiluminescence enhancer (50µl) and substrate solution (2.5ml, Bio-Rad) evenly coating the nitrocellulose blot. Blots were stripped using glycine buffer (200mM glycine pH 2.2, 0.1% sodium dodecyl sulphate, 1% Tween 20) prior to treatment with anti-β-actin antibody (Sigma). Results were analyzed by densitometry and normalised using a Chemi Doc (v. 4.2.1) imaging system with β-actin as reference.

Data and statistical analysis

All experiments were repeated at least once on different occasions and data are presented from typical experiments involving five replicates. Data sets were subjected to Shapiro-Wilk normality tests and expressed as mean±s.d. Subsequent comparisons were made using two tailed Student’s t-test with Bonferroni correction. Values of P<0.05 were considered significant. Graph Pad Prism software (v. 5.0b) was used.

Results

Increased leptin production in response to insulin was not observed at time points earlier than 72hours. Data are therefore presented for 72 and 120hours treatments only.

Effect of insulin on leptin secretion from adipocytes from normal human donors

ELISA showed that insulin treatment of normal human adipocytes for 72hours caused an increased leptin secretion of 5.68±0.82pg/ml/10⁶ cells (P<0.001) at a physiological concentration (10ng/ml) and of 16.21±2.72pg/ml/10⁶ cells (P<0.001) at a supraphysiological concentration (100ng/ml, Figure 1). Insulin treatment of these cells for 120hours increased leptin secretion approximately a further twofold at both physiological (12.76±1.04pg/ml/10⁶ cells, P<0.001) and supraphysiological (26.94±0.95pg/ml/10⁶ cells, P<0.001) concentrations (Figure 1).

Effect of insulin on leptin secretion from adipocytes from human type-2 diabetic donors

ELISA showed that, unlike normal adipocytes, insulin treatment for 72hours of type 2 diabetic human adipocytes at a physiological concentration (10ng/ml) demonstrated no observable stimulation of leptin secretion. However, a supraphysiological insulin concentration (100ng/ml) for 72hours did increase significantly leptin secretion to 3.10±0.36pg/ml/10⁶ cells (P<0.039). Incubation periods of 120hours increased leptin secretion at least twofold at both physiological (25.92±1.74pg/ml/10⁶ cells, P<0.001) and supraphysiological (38.56±2.48pg/ml/10⁶ cells, P<0.001) insulin concentrations (Figure 2).

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Cells were treated with media supplemented with 0ng/ml, 10ng/ml or 100ng/ml insulin for 72 or 120hours. Leptin concentrations in the media were then determined by ELISA. Treatment at both insulin concentrations and times resulted in significant (P<0.001, n=5) increases in leptin secretion from basal levels. The insulin effect is seen to be both concentration dependent and time dependent. Error bars are omitted when their range would be smaller that the symbol used to indicate mean value.

**Figure 1** Effect of insulin on leptin secretion by normal human adipocytes.

Cells were treated with media supplemented with 0ng/ml, 10ng/ml or 100ng/ml insulin for 72 or 120hours. Leptin concentrations in the media were then determined by ELISA. Insulin treatment at 10ng/ml resulted in a significant (P<0.001, n=5) increase in leptin secretion from basal levels only after 120hours. Insulin treatment at 100ng/ml for both times resulted in significant (P<0.001, n=5) increases in leptin secretion from basal levels. The insulin effect is seen to be both concentration dependent and time dependent with the time dependency particularly marked (P<0.001, n=5 at both insulin concentrations). Error bars are omitted when their range would be smaller that the symbol used to indicate mean value.

**Figure 2** Effect of insulin on leptin secretion by type 2 diabetic human adipocytes.

Cells were treated with media supplemented with 0ng/ml, 10ng/ml or 100ng/ml insulin for 72 or 120hours. Leptin concentrations in the media were then determined by ELISA. Insulin treatment at 10ng/ml resulted in a significant (P<0.039, n=5) increase in leptin secretion from basal levels only after 120hours. Insulin treatment at 100ng/ml for both times resulted in significant (P<0.001, n=5) increases in leptin secretion from basal levels. The insulin effect is seen to be both concentration dependent and time dependent with the time dependency particularly marked (P<0.001, n=5 at both insulin concentrations). Error bars are omitted when their range would be smaller that the symbol used to indicate mean value.

**Comparison of insulin effects on adipocytes from normal and type-2 diabetic samples**

Leptin concentrations following 120hours of insulin treatment were examined in both culture media (n=5) and cell lysates (n=3) using ELISA and western blotting respectively. ELISA data (previously shown as Figure 1 & 2) showed that type 2 diabetic human adipocytes secreted significantly more leptin than normal human adipocytes following treatment with physiological (10ng/ml, P<0.003) and supraphysiological (100ng/ml, P<0.003) insulin for 120hours. ELISA data for 120hour treatments were supported by western blot results showing increased leptin band intensity at this time point following treatment of both normal human and type 2 diabetic human adipocytes with insulin at physiological (10ng/ml, P<0.001) and supraphysiological (100ng/ml, P<0.001) concentrations (Figure 3).

**Figure 3** Effect of insulin on leptin concentrations in normal and type 2 diabetic human adipocyte cell lysates.

Leptin concentrations following 120hours of insulin treatment were examined in both culture media (n=5) and cell lysates (n=3) using ELISA and western blotting respectively. ELISA data (previously shown as Figure 1 & 2) showed that type 2 diabetic human adipocytes secreted significantly more leptin than normal human adipocytes following treatment with physiological (10ng/ml, P<0.003) and supraphysiological (100ng/ml, P<0.003) insulin for 120hours. ELISA data for 120hour treatments were supported by western blot results showing increased leptin band intensity at this time point following treatment of both normal human and type 2 diabetic human adipocytes with insulin at physiological (10ng/ml, P<0.001) and supraphysiological (100ng/ml, P<0.001) concentrations (Figure 3).

**Discussion**

Starvation has been shown to decrease both plasma insulin and leptin concentrations in non-diabetic rodents.\textsuperscript{23} Conversely, obesity in humans is often associated with hyperinsulinaemia and hyperleptinaemia\textsuperscript{12,24} with serum leptin concentrations correlated with BMI.\textsuperscript{12,25} Since obesity is associated with the development of metabolic conditions such as type 2 diabetes,\textsuperscript{125} relationships between insulin and leptin secretion have become of great interest to researchers. In particular, leptin may be a therapeutic target to circumvent both obesity and diabetes. Cammisotto & Bukowiecki\textsuperscript{26} found that insulin stimulated leptin expression and secretion in adipocytes \textit{in vitro} and these results have been replicated \textit{in vivo}.\textsuperscript{25,26}

While studies have shown that leptin secretion in the absence of diabetes is positively associated to insulin,\textsuperscript{12,27,28} others have produced conflicting results with Mac Dougald et al.\textsuperscript{2} and Sliecker et al.\textsuperscript{29} both reporting no or very modest leptin rises following insulin treatment. To attempt to resolve these conflicting findings and to further extend the data to include adipocytes from type 2 diabetics, the present study investigated the effect of both physiological (10ng/ml) and supraphysiological (100ng/ml) concentrations of insulin on leptin secretion by adipocytes from normal human and type 2 diabetic human donors. The insulin concentrations chosen reflect typical values observed in the serum of non-diabetic and diabetic humans, and also those used in previous investigations of the role of leptin.\textsuperscript{12,27}

Our data showed leptin to be produced and secreted in an insulin dose dependent manner in both cell types. However, increasing incubation times with insulin 1.7-fold from 72 to 120hours resulted in an approximately 2-fold increase in the amount of leptin secretion in an approximately 2-fold increase in the amount of leptin secretion from basal levels. The insulin effect is seen to be both concentration dependent and time dependent with the time dependency particularly marked (P<0.001, n=5 at both insulin concentrations). Error bars are omitted when their range would be smaller that the symbol used to indicate mean value.

**Figure 2** Effect of insulin on leptin secretion by type 2 diabetic human adipocytes.

Cells were treated with media supplemented with 0ng/ml, 10ng/ml or 100ng/ml insulin for 120hours. Leptin production (16kDa MW) was then determined by densitometry of immunostained western blots of cell lysates. At both insulin concentrations type 2 diabetic adipocytes showed greater amounts of leptin compared to their non-diabetic counterparts (P<0.003, n=5,10ng/ml; P<0.001, n=5, 100ng/ml).
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 increases for type 2 diabetic human adipocytes (Figure 2). A possible interpretation of these findings is a combination of

i. The onset of secretion of leptin in the case of the diabetic adipocytes was delayed compared to their normal counterparts and

ii. When stimulated, the rate of secretion of leptin by diabetic adipocytes was greater than their normal counterparts. The eventual amount of leptin secreted by type 2 diabetic human adipocytes at a supraphysiological insulin concentration was significantly higher than that secreted by normal adipocytes (P<0.013).

These findings were obtained from determinations of leptin concentrations in cell culture supernatants using ELISA. They were mirrored by determinations of leptin in cell lysates using antibody staining of western blots (Figure 3). Overall, our data provide some explanations for the previously described conflicting results concerning the reduced sensitivity of type 2 diabetic adipocytes to insulin; a phenomenon termed insulin resistance.30,31 If adipocytes of type 2 diabetics, compared to their normal counterparts, have

i. a delayed response to insulin and

ii. a wider range of eventual responsiveness to changes in insulin concentration, the extent of insulin treatment that they receive will have major effect on their observed cellular responses.

In this context Kolaczynski et al.22 found that short-term hyperinsulinaemia (74 to >10,000µU/ml; equivalent to approximately 3 to >300ng/ml) had no effect on circulating leptin concentration or levels of leptin in vitro. Similar results were also obtained by Haffner et al.,25 but MacDougald et al.,23 found that insulin treatment of rats with induced diabetes increased leptin mRNA in adipose tissue to 60% of that of their non-diabetic counterparts within 4 hours. We propose support for the theory of Haffner et al.,25 of a control mechanism for the regulation of leptin secretion, which is in place for the fasting or low circulatory insulin state. This typically leads to insulin sensitivity in adipocytes of non-diabetics. However, this mechanism seems to be delayed in our diabetic human adipocytes and results in hypersensitivity following prolonged exposure to insulin. The work of Kurlawalla-Martinez et al.,24 supports such a control mechanism and identified phosphatase and tensin homolog (PTEN) as a potential negative regulator of insulin sensitivity within the PI3K/Akt pathway because loss of PTEN in mutant mice models led to improved insulin sensitivity. Intracellular calcium may also be an important factor because it is upregulated by insulin,33 which causes robust Akt phosphorylation leading to increased leptin secretion. It is possible that prolonged exposure of adipocytes to insulin may increase leptin secretion by a combination of such mechanisms. Furthermore, it has been suggested that a delayed effect of insulin treatment on leptin secretion in adipocytes is compatible with the effect being indirect32 and additional physiological factors may be involved in vivo with strong candidates being hormonal48 and inflammatory5,56 influences, and a role for the hypothalamus.33 Should the delayed effect of insulin treatment on leptin secretion in adipocytes from type 2 diabetic donors be proven in subsequent studies, the phenomenon may be analogous to the biphasic response of insulin secretion to changes in insulin concentration. We propose further examination of induced leptin secretion and subsequent PI3-Akt pathway activation following prolonged insulin incubation within type 2 diabetic human adipocytes and, in particular, the role of intercellular calcium in mediating these effects.

Conclusion

In conclusion our results suggest that insulin stimulates leptin secretion by both type 2 diabetic and non-diabetic adipocytes in a dose dependent manner. Secretion is also increased following extended insulin incubation. For normal human adipocytes there was a two-fold rise in leptin secretion between 72-120hours. For type 2 diabetic human adipocytes, however, shorter-term insulin incubation produced limited leptin secretion and significant increases (>12-fold) occurred between 72-120hours. The data from diabetic human adipocytes contrast greatly with those obtained from normal human adipocytes and suggest that the cells from diabetic donors may have a delayed response to insulin and also a wider range of eventual responsiveness to changes in insulin concentration. We propose further examination of induced leptin secretion and subsequent PI3-Akt pathway activation following prolonged insulin incubation within type 2 diabetic human adipocytes and, in particular, the role of intercellular calcium in mediating these effects.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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