Aspirin-induced small bowel injuries and the preventive effect of rebamipide

Kazuhiko Mizukami, Kazunari Murakami, Takashi Abe, Kunimitsu Inoue, Masahiro Uchida, Tadayoshi Okimoto, Masaaki Kodama, Toshio Fujioka

Kazuhiko Mizukami, Kazunari Murakami, Takashi Abe, Kunimitsu Inoue, Masahiro Uchida, Tadayoshi Okimoto, Masaaki Kodama, Toshio Fujioka, Department of General Medicine and Gastroenterology, Faculty of Medicine, Oita University, Yufu, Oita 879-5593, Japan

Author contributions: Mizukami K, Murakami K, and Fujioka T designed and performed research, analyzed data, and wrote the paper; Abe T, Inoue K, Uchida M, Okimoto T and Kodama M performed research and analyzed data.

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Correspondence to: Kazuhiko Mizukami, Dr., MD, Department of General Medicine and Gastroenterology, Faculty of Medicine, Oita University, 1-1, Idaigaoka, Hasama, Yufu, Oita 879-5593, Japan. mizkaz0809@oita-u.ac.jp

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Abstract

AIM: To evaluate the influence of taking low-dose aspirin for 4 wk on small intestinal complications and to examine the preventive effect of rebamipide.

METHODS: This study was conducted as a single-center, randomized, double-blind, cross-over, placebo-controlled study. Eleven healthy male subjects were enrolled. Each subject underwent video capsule endoscopy after 1 and 4 wk of taking aspirin and omeprazole, along with either rebamipide or placebo therapy. The primary endpoint was to evaluate small bowel damage in healthy subjects before and after taking low-dose aspirin for 4 wk.

RESULTS: The number of subjects with mucosal breaks (defined as multiple erosions and/or ulcers) were 1 at 1 wk and 1 at 4 wk on the jejunum, and 6 at 1 wk (P = 0.0061) and 7 at 4 wk on the ileum (P = 0.0019). Rebamipide significantly prevented mucosal breaks on the ileum compared with the placebo group (P = 0.0173 at 1 wk and P = 0.0266 at 4 wk).

CONCLUSION: Longer-term, low-dose aspirin administration induced damage in the small bowel. Rebamipide prevented this damage, and may be a candidate drug for treating aspirin-induced small bowel complications.

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Key words: Healthy subjects; Low-dose aspirin; Small bowel injury; Capsule endoscopy; Rebamipide

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INTRODUCTION

Video capsule endoscopy (VCE)[1-3] is a practical technique that can be used to identify the causes and sites of obscure gastrointestinal bleeding. VCE allows for prospective investigation of small intestinal injuries, which frequently occur following the administration of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as aspirin. For example, Graham et al[3] used VCE and reported that small intestinal injury occurred in 71% of chronic NSAID users.

Low-dose aspirin is currently recommended for the secondary prevention of cardiovascular and cerebral diseases[4-6]. An observational registry reported that 70% to 80% of patients with a high risk of atherothrombosis...
were receiving low-dose aspirin to prevent future vascular events\[7\]. Nonetheless, low-dose aspirin is not without risks. For instance, Lanas et al\[8\] reported that taking an anti-platelet agent induced lower, as well as upper, gastrointestinal (GI) events (16.9% and 15.5%, respectively). To date, there has been considerable interest in preventing upper gastrointestinal complications of NSAIDs; however, it has become clear that a strategy to prevent small bowel complications may also be needed\[9\].

It is not yet clear what duration of low-dose aspirin ingestion causes small bowel damage. Moreover, the frequency and severity of small bowel damage from taking low-dose aspirin is not yet known. Three recent reports investigating aspirin-induced small bowel damage were all short-term (1 to 2 wk) investigations\[10-12\]. These studies reported mild injuries (20% to 60%), such as erosion, in addition to more serious injuries (0 to 10%), such as ulcers\[10-12\]. The use of low-dose aspirin for cardiovascular prophylaxis is generally long-term, and it is clear that longer term observational studies are needed to examine damage to the small intestines.

The aims of this study were to investigate the frequency and type of small bowel damage associated with a 4 wk administration of low-dose aspirin in healthy subjects and to investigate the preventive effect of the cytoprotective agent, rebamipide, on aspirin-induced small bowel damage.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committees of Oita University, and written informed consent was obtained from all subjects. Eligible subjects were aged 20 to 65 years, who had taken no drugs during the one-month period prior to the start of this study and who had normal physical examinations. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) subjects who did not have a full length, small bowel VCE prior to the start of the study; (2) subjects with stenosis, tumors, ulcers, erosions, or bleeding in the small bowel; (3) subjects who had active GI disease or a history of ulcers, surgery, or bleeding; and (4) subjects who had used any medication, including NSAIDs or aspirin, within 4 wk of the start of the study.

**Treatment protocol and post-treatment capsule endoscopy**

This study was conducted using a cross-over design as shown in Figure 1. Medication groups A and B were defined as follows: group A: placebo plus aspirin (Bayer Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) plus omeprazole (Sawai Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., Osaka, Japan) for 4 wk; and group B: rebamipide (Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) plus aspirin plus omeprazole for 4 wk (rebamipide 300 mg or placebo tid, aspirin 100 mg od, omeprazole 20 mg od). Omeprazole was used primarily for ethical reasons to avoid the effect of aspirin on the stomach.

Medications were administered for 4 wk. Then following a 4-wk washout period, the treatments were reversed for the two groups, and the medications were administered for a second 4-wk period. The washout period was designed according to a previous study by Niwa\[13\]. VCEs of the small bowel were performed five times: prior to the intervention, at 1 and 4 wk during the first period, and at 1 and 4 wk during the second treatment period.

Allocation and randomization were conducted by an independent pharmacologist of Yamanami Pharmacy who had no connection to our institution or the results of this study. The placebo was prepared by Yamanami Pharmacy.

**Evaluation of small intestinal injuries**

In this study, erosion and ulcer were defined according to Graham’s report\[14\]. Red spots were defined as red areas without clear mucosal break. Erosions were defined as circumscribed areas of mucosal disruption denuded of villi with or without exudates or red color that involved a diameter equivalent to the valvulae conniventes. Ulcers were defined as erosions with a central area with exudates typically having a surrounding border of elevated mucosa, producing a target lesion or coral polyp appearance\[9\]. Typical cases of red spots and erosion are shown in Figures 2A and B, and an example of an ulcer is shown in Figure 2C.

Mucosal break was defined as two or more erosions and/or an ulcer. Red spots were scored, but were not considered as a significant injury, since they can be observed normally. The location of the injury was also scored in terms of the locations as proximal (jejunal) or distal (ileal) based on the transit time. The transit time from the pylorus to cecum was divided in half, and the first portion was arbitrarily defined as the jejunal section. Cases with erosion, multiple erosions, and ulcers were calculated. Multiple erosions were defined as more than 2 erosions in a subject. Subjects were only analyzed if the entire small bowel was observable by VCE.

**Endpoints**

The primary endpoint was to evaluate healthy subjects before and after 4 wk of low-dose aspirin-induced small bowel damage. The secondary endpoint was to evaluate the preventive effect of rebamipide.

**Capsule endoscopy**

We used the Olympus video capsule system (EndoCapsule, Olympus Ltd.; Tokyo, Japan) for this study. The capsule endoscopy procedure and the methodology for reviewing the images were conducted as previously described. All video images were analyzed twice by each skilled reviewer (KM, TA, and KI). These three investigators were instructed to mark any significant lesions under blinded conditions, and to evaluate lesions according to criteria for determination of the endpoints. If the results differed between the reviewers, then they consulted one
another to achieve a consensus. All images were saved for a final comprehensive analysis upon completion of all of the post-treatment capsule endoscopies.

Safety assessment
The subjects’ symptoms were observed daily throughout the study periods, and the information was evaluated using a patient diary.

Statistical analysis
The primary endpoint was to evaluate the proportion of healthy subjects with small intestinal injury after 4 wk of low-dose aspirin therapy. The number of healthy subjects with small bowel mucosal breaks, ulcers, erosions, multiple erosions, and red spots were calculated and treated as parametric parameters. The small bowel area was divided into the jejunum and the ileum. The number of small bowel ulcers, erosions, and red spots were described as the mean ± SD. These values were analyzed at each measured point of the VCE in each group using Mann-Whitney’s $U$ test and compared with the evaluation prior to the aspirin administration.

The secondary endpoint was to compare the number of small intestinal injuries between the placebo and the rebamipide groups. The injuries were described as means ± SD and treated as nonparametric parameters. These injuries were analyzed at each measured point of the VCE in each group using Mann-Whitney’s $U$ test. In addition, the small intestinal injuries were compared between the placebo and rebamipide groups.

This study was a pilot study. Therefore, there were no reference data to calculate the sample size. A $P$-value $<$ 0.05 was considered significant. All statistical analyses were performed using SAS version 8.2 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, United States).

RESULTS
Eleven healthy subjects were enrolled in this study. The mean age of the subjects was $30 ± 6$ years. The median age was 27 years, and the range was 24 to 43 years.

Influence of low-dose aspirin on small bowel mucosa in the placebo group
The number of subjects with multiple erosions, ulcers, and mucosal breaks of the small bowel are shown in Table 1. There were 8 subjects with red spots on the jejunum before the administration of aspirin, 10 subjects at 1 wk, and 10 at 4 wk. There were 8 subjects with red spots on the ileum before administration of aspirin, 11 subjects at 1 wk, and 11 at 4 wk. There were 2 subjects with small bowel erosion on the jejunum at 1 wk and 4 wk ($P = 0.0379$). There were 7 subjects with small bowel erosion on the ileum at 1 wk ($P = 0.0019$) and 9 at 4 wk ($P < 0.0001$).

The numbers of small bowel injuries before and after aspirin treatment are shown in Figure 3. There were $6.3 ± 6.9$ small intestinal red spots at 1 wk and $9.6 ± 6.6$ at 4 wk on the jejunum, and $68.0 ± 133.6$ at 1 wk ($P = 0.0010$) and $48.4 ± 67.7$ at 4 wk ($P = 0.0010$) on the ileum. There were $0.2 ± 0.6$ small bowel erosions at 1 wk and $0.4 ± 0.6$ at 4 wk on the jejunum, and $2.1 ± 2.6$ at 1 wk ($P = 0.0156$) on the ileum.
Multiple erosion (a): No. of subjects with multiple erosions in jejunum or ileum; Ulcer (b): No. of subjects with ulcer in jejunum or ileum; Mucosal break (c): No. of subjects with multiple erosion and/or ulcer in jejunum or ileum. Statistical analysis was performed by Mann Whitney’s U test, compared to before administration as 1 wk and 4 wk. *P < 0.05; †P < 0.01; ‡P < 0.05 compared with placebo and rebamipide group.

Table 1  No. of healthy subjects presenting small bowel injuries following a 4 wk regimen of low dose aspirin in the placebo group and evaluation of preventive efficacy (n = 11)

|                | Jejunum | Ileum |
|----------------|---------|-------|
|                | Pre-test| 1 wk  | 4 wk  | Pre-test| 1 wk  | 4 wk  |
| Placebo group  |         |       |       |         |       |       |
| Multiple erosion (a) | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 4 |
| Ulcer (b)   | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Mucosal break (c) | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 7 |
| Rebamipide group |       |       |       |         |       |       |
| Mucosal break (c) | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 |

Evaluation of the preventive effect of rebamipide

The preventive effect of rebamipide is shown in Table 1. There were no subjects with small bowel mucosal breaks on the jejunum at 1 wk and 1 subject at 4 wk, and there was 1 small bowel mucosal break on the ileum at 1 wk and 2 at 4 wk. Rebamipide significantly prevented small bowel mucosal breaks on the ileum compared with the placebo group (P = 0.0173 at 1 wk and P = 0.0266 at 4 wk). There were 15.7 ± 8.5 red spots on the ileum at 4 wk in the rebamipide group, which was significantly fewer than in the placebo group (P = 0.0354). There were 0.6 ± 1.2 erosions on the ileum at 4 wk, which was significantly fewer than in the placebo group (P = 0.0362).

Safety assessment

We examined symptoms daily for all subjects throughout the study period. Three subjects with ulcers were observed in the placebo group. Two of these subjects were symptomatic, but not anemic. The symptoms of these two subjects diminished 1 month after the study ended. One subject with an ulcer was observed in the rebamipide group, but the subject was neither symptomatic nor anemic.

DISCUSSION

In our study, we observed that the administration of low-dose aspirin induced small bowel red spots and erosions in healthy subjects in the early phase (1 wk). Red spots were observed in all subjects with a mean of 68.0 ± 133.6 at 1 wk and 48.4 ± 67.7 at 4 wk. There were 7 subjects with erosions on the ileum at 1 wk and 9 at 4 wk in the placebo group. These small bowel injuries were induced in the early phase and maintained while taking low-dose aspirin. On the other hand, small intestinal ulcers were observed in 3 subjects in the late phase (4 wk), although no ulcers were observed at 1 wk. These results indicate that serious small bowel injury, such as ulcers, may be induced by longer-term administration of low-dose aspirin. In addition, a very large ulcer was observed in one case at 4 wk (Figure 4), although no ulcer was observed in this subject at 1 wk. This may demonstrate a risk of longer-term low-dose aspirin ingestion. Patients taking low-dose aspirin should be given periodic management. In this study, small bowel bleeding was not observed; however, some patients may present small bowel bleeding due to the use of low-dose aspirin during treatment periods longer than 4 wk. The clinical implications of small bowel mucosal injuries are not yet clear. However, bleeding from mucosal injury can be fatal because aspirin is an anti-platelet agent. In this study, multiple erosions were also evaluated. They resulted in a more serious condition than a single erosion.

Our results indicate that most small bowel injuries occurred in the ileum rather than the jejunum area. There were 7 cases with a mucosal break in the ileum and 1 in the jejunum at 4 wk in the placebo group. Bjarnason et al. demonstrated that small bowel damage depended on various factors, such as microvascular aspects, neutrophil recruitment, mucosal prostaglandins,
bowl is a long organ, it will be necessary to further investigate the appropriate dosage for this candidate drug.

In conclusion, the use of long-term low-dose aspirin induced small bowel damage. Rebamipide prevented this damage, and this candidate drug may be suitable for preventing aspirin-induced small bowel complications.

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