Effects of *PNPLA3* on Liver Fat and Metabolic Profile in Hispanic Children and Adolescents

Michael I Goran, Ryan Walker, Kim-Anne Le, Swapna Mahurkar, Susanna Vikman, Jaimie N Davis, Donna Spruijt-Metz, Marc J Weigensberg & Hooman Allayee

Departments of Preventive Medicine & Pediatrics, Childhood Obesity Research Center, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California

Address for Correspondence:
Michael I Goran, PhD
Email: goran@usc.edu

Submitted 19 April 2010 and accepted 7 September 2010.

This is an uncopyedited electronic version of an article accepted for publication in *Diabetes*. The American Diabetes Association, publisher of *Diabetes*, is not responsible for any errors or omissions in this version of the manuscript or any version derived from it by third parties. The definitive publisher-authenticated version will be available in a future issue of *Diabetes* in print and online at http://diabetes.diabetesjournals.org.
Objective: A genome-wide study in adults identified a variant of PNPLA3 (rs738409) associated with ~2-fold higher liver fat. The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of PNPLA3 genotype on liver fat and other related metabolic outcomes in obese Hispanic children and adolescents.

Research Design & Methods: 327 Hispanics aged 8-18 years were genotyped for rs738409. 188 subjects had measures of visceral (VAT) and subcutaneous adipose tissue (SAT) volume and hepatic (HFF) and pancreatic fat fraction (PFF) by MRI. 139 subjects did not have HFF measures but had extensive measures of insulin sensitivity and fasting lipids.

Results: Liver fat in GG subjects was 1.7 and 2.4 times higher than GC and CC (11.1 ± 0.8% in GG vs 6.6 ± 0.7% in GC and 4.7 ± 0.9% in CC; p<0.0001), and this effect was observed even in the youngest children (8-10 years). The variant was not associated with VAT, SAT, PFF, or insulin sensitivity or other glucose/insulin indices. However, Hispanic children carrying the GG genotype had significantly lower HDL-cholesterol (40.9 ± 10.9 in CC vs 37.0 ± 8.3 in CG vs 35.7 ± 7.4 in GG; p=0.03) and a tendency towards lower free fatty acid levels (p=0.06).

Conclusions: These results provide new evidence that the effect of the PNPLA3 variant is apparent in Hispanic children and adolescents, is unique fat deposition in liver as compared to other ectopic depots examined, and is associated with lower HDL-cholesterol.

The prevalence of childhood obesity has risen dramatically over the past 20 years and is associated with increased risk of pre-diabetes, type 2 diabetes, metabolic syndrome, and fatty liver disease (1). Visceral fat (adipose tissue inside the abdominal cavity) has long been hypothesized to be one of the major factors linking obesity to increased disease risks (2), and is certainly an important factor in childhood. In addition, ectopic fat deposition through spillover of triglycerides into peripheral tissues and organs, such as muscle and liver, is also an important factor linking obesity to increased metabolic disease risk (3).

Previous studies have suggested that hepatic triglyceride accumulation varies between populations and may thus lead, in part, to different mechanisms by which metabolic abnormalities arise. For example, a large study of hepatic fat accumulation (measured by NMR spectroscopy) in 2,287 adult participants of the Dallas Heart Study (4) found that fatty liver disease was highest in Hispanics and lowest in African Americans. Interestingly, obesity, insulin resistance, or alcohol intake did not explain this striking ethnic difference. This disparity has also been reported in the pediatric population where a study of liver autopsy data from 742 children aged 2-19 years showed that 13% of all subjects had fatty liver disease (defined as ≥ 5% of hepatocytes with macrovesicular fat), with the prevalence increasing with age and obesity status (5). Moreover, the prevalence of fatty liver (after adjusting for age and obesity) was highest in Hispanics (11.8%) and lowest in African Americans (1.5%), reflecting the trend observed in adults. These observations are supported by another recent study in adolescents which did not find detectable levels of hepatic fat in obese African American compared to Whites and Hispanics (6). Thus, fatty liver disease appears to be most problematic in Hispanics compared to other ethnic groups, and this phenomenon is evident by childhood.

A recent genome-wide association study in adults identified a novel genetic factor that may provide a potential explanation for this striking ethnic difference in liver fat accumulation (7). A C>G single
nucleotide polymorphism (rs738409) in PNPLA3, which encodes an amino acid substitution (I148M), was associated with over 2-fold higher liver fat content in adults, with the strongest effect observed in Hispanics in whom the frequency of the G allele was much higher (48%) than in other populations (~20%). The aim of the present study was to examine whether the effect of this PNPLA3 variant is manifested in Hispanic children and adolescents, and whether its effect was limited to an elevation in liver fat as opposed to other ectopic fat depots, insulin resistance, and/or fasting lipid levels.

METHODS
We pooled subjects from a variety of studies that used a common protocol for assessment of body fat distribution and metabolic phenotype as described below. These subjects included 327 Hispanic children and adolescents aged 8 – 18 years, all of whom were genotyped, with 188 subjects having complete measures of liver and pancreatic fat fraction as well as abdominal fat distribution (visceral versus subcutaneous) as described below. The remaining 139 subjects who were genotyped did not have liver fat measures but had extensive measures of insulin and glucose from an oral and an intravenous glucose tolerance test as well as fasting lipids. Data from some of these subjects has been previously reported (10-14), but this paper is the first to examine the relationship between genotype and these outcomes. Participants and parents were provided with a full description of the study and all participants signed an informed assent document while consent was obtained from their parents. All studies were approved by the USC Institutional Review Board.

Weight and height were measured to the nearest 0.1kg and 0.1cm, respectively, using a beam medical scale and wall-mounted stadiometer; BMI and BMI percentiles were then calculated. Total body fat was measured by DEXA using a Hologic QDR 4500 W (Hologic Inc, Bedford, MA). Abdominal fat distribution was measured by magnetic resonance imaging, on a General Electric 1.5-Tesla magnet. Slices were acquired using a 420 mm field of view (FOV) and FOV phase of 75%. Three abdominal scans were performed consecutively and total acquisition time was 24 seconds per total abdominal scan. Each scan obtained 19 axial images of the abdomen with a thickness of 10 mm. After image acquisition, subcutaneous abdominal adipose tissue and visceral adipose tissue were segmented using image analysis software (SliceOmatic Tomovision, Montreal Canada) at Image Reading Center (New York City, New York). Hepatic and pancreatic fat fraction were assessed during the same MRI test using a modification of the Dixon 3-point technique. Abdominal scans were acquired contiguously using a breath-hold dual-echo gradient-recalled echo sequence with repetition time of 156 msec and echo time of 2.3 msec for out of phase (OP) images and 4.78 msec for in-phase (IP) images, acquired with flip angles of 70° and then 20° to provide T1-weighted and intermediate-weighted images, respectively. A third dual-echo gradient-echo breath-hold gradient-recalled echo sequence with two IP echoes (4.8 and 9.6 msec) was also performed to calculate T2* (15). The fat fraction in the liver was estimated from the signal intensity index obtained from in-phase and out-phase images. Quantitative corrections for the influence of T2* decay on the fat fraction estimates were taken into account by the third duel-echo sequence, where T2* for the liver was estimated on a pixel-by-pixel basis. Since the FF was estimated from low flip-angle images (20°), the effect of T1 relaxation on the quantification was minimized. Once the fat fraction images were calculated, three consecutive slices with maximum axial coverage of the liver were selected, avoiding any major blood vessels, to report the average liver fat fraction.

In all cases, subjects were genotyped for SNP rs738409 in PNPLA3 using the Applied Biosystems, Inc. (ABI) TaqMan system (16; 17) with an assay available through ABI's "Assays on Demand" database. Our overall genotype call rate was 97% and we obtained 100% genotype
concordance of four control CEPH DNA samples that were included on each DNA plate. Genotype frequencies did not deviate from that expected under Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium (p = 0.92).

Data were analyzed using General Linear Models in SPSS version 16.0 with genotype as the main factor, and age, gender and subcutaneous adipose tissue volume as co-variates (the overall results were similar when using no co-variates in the model). Logistic regression analysis was used to examine prevalence of fatty liver by genotype. In this analysis, likely fatty liver disease was defined as a liver fat fraction >5.5% which is based on previous studies in adults using NMR spectroscopy (18), a technique that we have previously validated against the MRI methodology used in the current study (19).

RESULTS

The overall frequency of the PNPLA3 variant was 51.5%, and the allele distribution was 28%GG/47%CG/24%CC. The clinical characteristics of the subjects with liver fat measures are shown in Table 1. As shown in Figure 1, there was a highly significant effect of genotype on liver fat fraction with GG carriers having almost double the amount of liver fat content (p<0.0001). In post hoc analysis, there was no significant difference in liver fat fraction in CC vs CG carriers. As also shown in Figure 1, this relationship remained significant even in a younger sub-group of Hispanic children (aged 8 – 10 years). Since liver fat data was skewed, we repeated these analyses after log transformation but the results were unchanged. The data also showed that overall, 38% of Hispanics had liver fat fraction >5.5%, indicating likely NAFLD. By comparison, 64% of GG carriers had liver fat fraction >5.5% (see Table 2), leading to an increased odds ratio of 4.7 for GG relative to GC/CC carriers having liver fat of >5.5% (95% CI = 2.4 – 9.3; p < 0.001). There was no significant effect of genotype on visceral adipose tissue volume, subcutaneous adipose tissue volume or pancreatic fat fraction, with or without adjustment for co-variates including age, gender, and overall adiposity.

To determine whether rs738409 was associated with other metabolic phenotypes, we analyzed data from a different group of 139 Hispanic subjects (mean age = 10.9 ± 1.7 years; 38.1 ± 6.2% body fat) who had extensive measures of insulin and glucose outcomes from both an oral and intravenous glucose tolerance tests, as well as fasting lipids, but liver fat measures were not available. There were no significant effects of genotype on any outcome related to insulin and glucose parameters or lipids, before or after adjusting for total fat, as measured by DEXA, with the exception of HDL-cholesterol which was significantly lower in GG subjects by 12.7% compared to the CC and CG groups (40.9 ± 10.9 in CC vs 37.0 ± 8.3 in CG vs 35.7 ± 7.4 in GG; p=0.03); in addition there was also a tendency towards lower free fatty acid levels in GG individuals (0.53 ± 0.21 in CC vs 0.55 ± 0.11 in CG vs 0.48 ± 0.1 in GG; p=0.06).

DISCUSSION

Since first reported in a genome wide association study (7), PNPLA3 has been under investigation to determine its function and mechanism of action. Importantly, association of rs738409 has been replicated in several follow up studies with multiple liver-related phenotypes, including fat content, plasma enzyme levels, and fibrosis (8; 9; 20; 21). For the most part, these studies have all been carried out in adult populations. However, our present study now demonstrates that the effect of this PNPLA3 variant: a) manifests early in life in obese Hispanic children; b) is specific to the deposition of triglycerides in liver as opposed to other ectopic fat depots, such as the pancreas and visceral or subcutaneous adipose tissue; and c) is also associated with significantly lower HDL-cholesterol levels in obese Hispanics.

Recent studies have shown that PNPLA3 is up-regulated during adipocyte differentiation (22) and in response to positive energy balance, an atherogenic diet, insulin infusion, and nutritional status (23; 24). This
suggests that PNPLA3 could have pleiotropic metabolic effects beyond its role in hepatic triglyceride accumulation. However, prior studies have shown that the PNPLA3 variant is not associated with major alterations in glucose homeostasis or lipoprotein metabolism (7). Based on fasting levels of insulin and glucose in adults, the G allele was not associated with insulin resistance in lean individuals but interestingly was associated with increased insulin sensitivity in obese adults. In the current study we provide evidence from both an oral and intravenous glucose tolerance test to show that there is no significantly detectable association between any fasting or post challenge (oral and intravenous) glucose or insulin parameter in Hispanic children. These data support the idea, as previously proposed (25), that increased liver fat accumulation as a result of the G allele may be “metabolically benign”, at least in terms of insulin resistance. Alternatively, the effect of rs738409 on glucose/insulin homeostasis may not manifest in children (unlike its effect on hepatic fat content) and thus take longer for it to develop. Lastly, the relatively small sample size of our study may have also precluded detecting association of rs738409 with such metabolic phenotypes.

Another interesting finding from our study is the observation that GG carriers have significantly lower HDL-cholesterol levels, which is consistent with a recent study reporting the same effect in Italian subjects (21). However, PNPLA3 has not been uniformly associated with lipid levels in all studies. For example, associations between PNPLA3 variation and serum lipids have either not been observed (7; 25) or only with apolipoprotein B-containing lipoproteins (22). Given these ambiguities, as well as those surrounding glucose/insulin measures, additional studies will be required to more fully understand the biological role of PNPLA3 in various processes related to metabolic homeostasis.

In conclusion, this brief report demonstrates that the rs738409 variant of PNPLA3 influences liver fat deposition early in life in Hispanic children and adolescents. These results suggest that more effective therapeutic strategies for preventing and treating fatty liver need to be developed, especially for genetically predisposed pediatric populations.

**Author Contributions.** MIG & HA designed and supervised the study, analyzed data and wrote the manuscript; RW, K-AL, SM, SV, JND, DS-M & MJW collected data and contributed intellectual content to reviewed and edited the manuscript.

**ACKNOWLEDMENTS**

This work was funded by NIDDK (RO1 DK 59211), NCI (U54 CA 116848), NCMHD (P60 MD 2254), NICHD (RO1 HD 32668), NHLBI (RO1 HL 079353), and the Dr Robert C and Veronica Atkins Foundation. A portion of this work was conducted in a facility constructed with support from the National Institute of Health Research Facilities Improvement Program [RR10600-01, CA62528-01, RR14514-01] from the National Center for Research Resources.

**REFERENCES**

1. Weigensberg MJ, Goran MI: Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents. Lancet 373:1743-1744, 2009
2. Vague J, Vague P, Jubelin J, Barre A: Fat distribution, obesities and health: Evolution of concepts. In Fat distribution during growth and later health outcome Bouchard C, Johnston FE, Eds. New York, Alan R. Liss, Inc, 1988, p. 9-41
3. Ravussin E, Smith SR: Increased fat intake, impaired fat oxidation, and failure of fat cell proliferation result in ectopic fat storage, insulin resistance, and type 2 diabetes mellitus. Ann N.Y.Acad.Sci 967:363-378, 2002
4. Browning JD, Szczepaniak LS, Dobbins R, Nuremberg P, Horton JD, Cohen JC, Grundy SM, Hobbs HH: Prevalence of hepatic steatosis in an urban population in the United States: impact of ethnicity. *Hepatology* 40:1387-1395, 2004

5. Schwimmer JB, Deutsch R, Kahen T, Lavine JE, Stanley C, Behling C: Prevalence of fatty liver in children and adolescents. *Pediatrics* 118:1388-1393, 2006

6. Taksali SE, Caprio S, Dziura J, Dufour S, Cali AM, Goodman TR, Papademetris X, Burgert TS, Pierpont BM, Savoye M, Shaw M, Seyerl AA, Weiss R: High visceral and low abdominal subcutaneous fat stores in the obese adolescent: a determinant of an adverse metabolic phenotype. *Diabetes* 57:367-371, 2008

7. Romeo S, Kozlitina J, Xing C, Pertsemlidis A, Cox D, Pennacchio LA, Boerwinkle E, Cohen JC, Hobbs HH: Genetic variation in PNPLA3 confers susceptibility to nonalcoholic fatty liver disease. *Nat Genet* 40:1461-1465, 2008

8. Sookoian S, Castano GO, Burgueno AL, Fernandez Gianotti T, Rosselli MS, Pirola CJ: A nonsynonymous gene variant in adiponutrin gene is associated with nonalcoholic fatty liver disease severity. *J Lipid Res*, 2009

9. Kotronen A, Johansson LE, Johansson LM, Roos C, Westerbacka J, Hamsten A, Bergholm R, Arktila P, Arola J, Kiviluoto T, Fisher RM, Ehrenborg E, Orho-Melander M, Ridderstrale M, Groop L, Yki-Jarvinen H: A common variant in PNPLA3, which encodes adiponutrin, is associated with liver fat content in humans. *Diabetologia* 52:1056-1060, 2009

10. Davis JN, Kelly LA, Lane CJ, Ventura EE, Byrd-Williams CE, Alexandar KA, Azen SP, Chou CP, Spruijt-Metz D, Weigensberg MJ, Berhane K, Goran MI: Randomized control trial to improve adiposity and insulin resistance in overweight Latino adolescents. *Obesity (Silver Spring)* 17:1542-1548, 2009

11. Hasson RE TA, JN Davis, MJ Weigensberg, EE Ventura, CJ Lane, CK Roberts, MI Goran: Ethnic Differences in Insulin Action in Obese African American and Latino Adolescents *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism* (in review), 2010

12. Cruz ML, Weigensberg MJ, Huang TT, Ball G, Shaibi GQ, Goran MI: The metabolic syndrome in overweight Hispanic youth and the role of insulin sensitivity. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab* 89:108-113, 2004

13. Cruz ML, Bergman RN, Goran MI: Unique effect of visceral fat on insulin sensitivity in obese Hispanic children with a family history of type 2 diabetes. *Diabetes Care* 25:1631-1636, 2002

14. Cruz ML, Weigensberg MJ, Huang T, T-K, Ball GDC, Shaibi GQ, Goran MI: The Metabolic Syndrome in Overweight Hispanic Youth and the Role of Insulin Sensitivity. *JCEM* 89:108-113, 2004

15. Hussain HK, Chenevert TL, Londy FJ, Gulani V, Swanson SD, McKenna BJ, Appelman HD, Adusumilli S, Greenzon JK, Conjeevaram HS: Hepatic fat fraction: MR imaging for quantitative measurement and display--early experience. *Radiology* 237:1048-1055, 2005

16. Livak KJ: SNP genotyping by the 5'-nuclease reaction. *Methods Mol Biol* 212:129-147, 2003

17. Livak KJ: Allelic discrimination using fluorogenic probes and the 5' nuclease assay. *Genet Anal* 14:143-149, 1999

18. Szczepaniak LS, Nuremberg P, Leonard D, Browning JD, Reingold JS, Grundy S, Hobbs HH, Dobbins RL: Magnetic resonance spectroscopy to measure hepatic triglyceride content: prevalence of hepatic steatosis in the general population. *Am J Physiol Endocrinol Metab* 288:E462-468, 2005

19. Hu HH, Kim HW, Nayak KS, Goran MI: Comparison of fat-water MRI and single-voxel MRS in the assessment of hepatic and pancreatic fat fractions in humans. *Obesity (Silver Spring)* 18:841-847, 2010

20. Tian C, Stokowski RP, Kershenobich D, Ballinger DG, Hinds DA: Variant in PNPLA3 is associated with alcoholic liver disease. *Nat Genet* 42:21-23

21. Valenti L, Al-Serri A, Daly AK, Galmozzie E, Rametta R, Dongiovanni P, Nobili V, Mozzi E, Roviaro G, Vanni E, Bugianesi E, Maggioni M, Fracanzani AL, Fargion S, Day CP:
Homozygosity for the patatin-like phospholipase-3/adiponutrin I148M polymorphism influences liver fibrosis in patients with nonalcoholic fatty liver disease. *Hepatology* 51:1209-1217

22. Kollerits B, Coassin S, Beckmann ND, Teumer A, Kiechl S, Doring A, Kavousi M, Hunt SC, Lamina C, Paulweber B, Kataliz Z, Nauck M, van Duijn CM, Heid IM, Willeit J, Brandstatter A, Adams TD, Mooser V, Aulchenko YS, Volzke H, Kronenberg F: Genetic evidence for a role of adiponutrin in the metabolism of apolipoprotein B-containing lipoproteins. *Hum Mol Genet* 18:4669-4676, 2009

23. Huang Y, He S, Li JZ, Seo YK, Osborne TF, Cohen JC, Hobbs HH: A feed-forward loop amplifies nutritional regulation of PNPLA3. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*

24. Hoekstra M, Li Z, Kruijt JK, Van Eck M, Van Berkel TJ, Kuiper J: The expression level of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease-related gene PNPLA3 in hepatocytes is highly influenced by hepatic lipid status. *J Hepatol* 52:244-251, 2009

25. Kantartzis K, Peter A, Machicao F, Machann J, Wagner S, Konigsrainer I, Konigsrainer A, Schick F, Fritsche A, Haring HU, Stefan N: Dissociation between fatty liver and insulin resistance in humans carrying a variant of the patatin-like phospholipase 3 gene. *Diabetes* 58:2616-2623, 2009

**Table 1: Clinical Characteristics of Subjects with Liver Fat Measurements.**

| Clinical Parameter                                    | Mean ± SD or Median (Interquartile range) |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Age (years)                                          | 13.6 ± 3.0                               |
| Body Mass Index                                      | 30.3 ± 8.9                                |
| Subcutaneous Abdominal Adipose Tissue Volume (L)      | 9.2 ± 5.9                                 |
| Visceral Adipose Tissue Volume (L)                    | 1.7 ± 1.1                                 |
| Liver Fat Fraction (%)                               | 7.1 ± 7.2; Median = 4.5; Interquartile range = 5.8 |
| Pancreatic Fat Fraction (%)                           | 5.6 ± 3.4                                 |

Values are mean ± standard deviation except where noted

**Table 2: Distribution of Subjects by Genotype and by Liver Fat Fraction > 5.5%**

| Genotype | Liver fat <5.5 | Liver fat > 5.5 |
|----------|----------------|-----------------|
| GG (n=53)| 36%            | 64%             |
| CG (n=90)| 67%            | 33%             |
| CC (n=45)| 84%            | 16%             |
| Overall (n=188) | 62% | 38% |
Figure 1: Liver fat fraction as a function of PNLP3 genotype in Hispanic Children and Teenagers Aged 8 – 18 years and in a Sub-set aged 8 – 10 years.

Note: Data are least square means ± standard error of the mean, after adjusting for gender, age and SAT; overall effect of genotype < 0.001.