CASE REPORT

Graves’ Disease with Thymic Hyperplasia: The Response of the Thyroid Function, Thyrotropin Receptor Autoantibody, and Thymic Size to Thiamazole Treatment

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Abstract:
We treated a 22-year-old woman suffering from Graves’ disease and thymic hyperplasia. She was referred to our institution for a close investigation of thyrotoxicosis and thymic mass. Thyroid tests and magnetic resonance imaging resulted in a diagnosis of Graves’ disease and thymic hyperplasia. The thyroid function and thymic function, thyrotropin receptor antibody (TRAb) were normalized one and five months after thiamazole initiation, respectively. The thymic size began to decrease after 1 month and was further decreased after 5 months; it was normalized after 12 months. The correlation between TRAb titers and the thymic size (R²=0.99) suggested that the patient’s autoimmunity might have contributed to the thymic hyperplasia.

Key words: Graves’ disease, thymic hyperplasia, soluble interleukin-2 receptor, sIL-2R

(Intern Med 61: 2753-2757, 2022)
(DOI: 10.2169/internalmedicine.8710-21)

Introduction

Thymic hyperplasia is frequently found in patients with Graves’ disease (1, 2). However, the complete mechanism underlying the development of thymic hyperplasia in patients with Graves’ disease remains unclear, partly because chest computed tomography (CT) is not regularly performed in such patients. Normalization of the thyroid function in Graves’ disease reportedly reduces the thymic size (3), suggesting that thymic resection may be unnecessary in Graves’ disease with thymic hyperplasia (4). Although there are some reports documenting changes in the thymic size and thyroid function (5, 6), differences following thiamazole treatment compared with pre-treatment are mainly described.

In the etiology of anterior mediastinal mass, the differential diagnosis between malignant lymphoma and thymic hyperplasia is important. Plasma levels of soluble interleukin-2 receptor (sIL-2R), a tumor marker for malignant lymphoma, are also increased in thyrotoxicosis and normalized by treatment for hyperthyroidism (7, 8). Therefore, we postulated that if anterior mediastinal masses were thymic hyperplasia, the plasma sIL-2R levels and thymic size would be normalized in response to the treatment of Graves’ disease.

We recently treated a case of Graves’ disease with thymic hyperplasia in which we quantified changes in the thyroid function, thyrotropin receptor autoantibody (TRAb) levels and thymic size estimated based on CT findings as well as sIL-2R levels.

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Received: September 23, 2021; Accepted: January 4, 2022; Advance Publication by J-STAGE: February 26, 2022
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**Table.** Urinalysis, Blood Count, Biochemistry and Thyroid-related Items in the Patient.

| Urinalysis | Biochemistry | LDL-C (mg/dL) |
|------------|--------------|---------------|
| Specific gravity 1.016 | TP (g/dL) 7.2 (6.6-8.1) | Triglycerides (mg/dL) 179 (30-150) |
| Protein - | Albumin (g/dL) 4.4 (4.1-5.1) | HDL-C (mg/dL) 44 (30-150) |
| Glucose - | AST (U/L) 22 (13-30) | Glucose (mg/dL) 113 (73-109) |
| Hemoglobin - | ALT (U/L) 29 (7-23) | HBAlc (%) 5.6 (4.9-6.0) |
| Ketone - | LDH (U/L) 172 (124-222) | Thyroid-related items |

Blood counts
- ALP (U/L) 596 (106-322)
- TSH (μIU/mL) <0.02 (0.54-4.26)
- γ-GTP (U/L) 26 (9-32)
- Free T4 (ng/dL) 7.37 (0.76-1.65)
- TRAb (%) 41.3 (<15)
- Tg Ab (IU/mL) 78 (<28)

**Case Report**

A 22-year-old woman was admitted to a neighboring hospital due to headache, palpitations and chest pain over the previous six months. She was suspected of having thyrotoxicosis based on her symptoms and was referred to our institution for a further investigation along with an examination of a solid anterior mediastinal thymic mass without infiltration of surrounding structures that was detected by chest CT.

Upon admission, her thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) levels were suppressed (<0.02 μIU/mL) [normal range, 0.54-4.26 μIU/mL; Eclusys TSH (S300); Roche, Tokyo, Japan], and the levels of free T3 and free T4 were 25.89 pg/mL [normal range, 2.39-4.06 pg/mL; Eclusys FT3 III (S300); Roche, Tokyo, Japan] and 7.37 ng/dL [normal range, 0.76-1.65 ng/dL; Eclusys FT4 (S300); Roche, Tokyo, Japan], respectively (Table). The evaluation of thyroid-related symptoms showed histologic changes of the thymus mass without infiltration of surrounding structures. Upon admission, her TSH, free T3 and free T4 were normalized (Fig. 1). Two months after thiamazole initiation, her TRAb titer and TSH levels were normalized (Fig. 1). We also compared the average area (mm²) and density (HU) among the three continuous slices of the lower end of the tracheal bifurcation. A low CT density indicates a shift from thyrotoxicosis to adipose tissues. The thymus areas and density on CT started to decrease from one month after treatment initiation and were further decreased by five months after thiamazole initiation; they had almost normalized after 12 months (Fig. 1, 2). During the observation period, no myasthenia gravis-related symptoms were seen, nor was any acetylcholine receptor (AChR) autoantibody detected (AChR ≤0.20 nmol/L).

**Discussion**

We treated a case of Graves’ disease with thymic hyperplasia that was diminished in response to thiamazole treatment. Interestingly, the thymic size started to decrease as early as one month after the treatment of Graves’ disease had started.

Gunn et al. reported that approximately 38% of patients with thyrotoxicosis show histologic changes of the thymus gland (1). However, the mechanisms causing thyrotoxicosis in Graves’ disease remain largely unknown. Thyroid hyperplasia in Graves’ disease includes two sub-types: true hyperplasia and thymic lymphoid hyperplasia (9-15). It was reported that 77% (10 in 13 cases) had lymphoid follicles, and the remaining 23% (3 in 13 cases) were diagnosed with true thyroid hyperplasia in thymic tissues of Graves’ dis-
true thymic hyperplasia occurs due to an increase in the number of thymic epithelial cells. This form of thymic hyperplasia is particularly prevalent among children and young patients and is not associated with autoimmune diseases (9).

It has been reported that TSH receptors are expressed in the human thymus and that their activation may induce proliferation of thymic epithelial cells (16). However, some investigators have reported that thyroid hormones directly stimulate thymic cell proliferation, and the effects of T3 on thymic cells proliferation are much stronger than those of TRAb (15, 17, 18). In contrast, thymic lymphoid hyperplasia is due to hyperplastic lymph follicles within the thymus and is associated with autoimmune diseases (15). A histological analysis is the only method that can differentiate true and lymphoid hyperplasia, so we were unable to distinguish lymphoid hyperplasia from true hyperplasia based on CT findings (19). In the present patient, the thyroid hormone levels had nearly normalized as early as one month after the initiation of thiamazole, although the thymic size gradually decreased with the decline in TRAb titers. Titers of TRAb reflect the severity of autoimmunity, and TRAb itself might also promote thymic cell hyperplasia weakly (15, 17). The significant correlation between TRAb titers and thymic size ($R^2=0.99$) suggested that our patient’s autoimmunity might have caused lymphoid hyperplasia, rather than true hyperplasia (Fig. 1), although it is difficult to rule out the possibility of true thymic hyperplasia without performing a histological analysis.

Another noteworthy clinical characteristic of our patient...
was her high sIL-2R levels, which were attenuated after the initiation of thiamazole treatment (Fig. 1). IL-2 and its receptor have critical roles in essential functions of the immune system, primarily via their direct effects on T lymphocytes (7). While the physiological role of sIL-2R remains unclear, it has been reported that sIL-2R levels are enhanced by thyroid hormones (8, 20, 21). These findings may support the differential diagnosis of thymic hyperplasia and malignant lymphoma or thymoma in patients with Graves’ disease, allowing unnecessary surgery to be avoided. These findings, along with the response of thymic hyperplasia to thiamazole, suggest that careful follow-up of changes in the thymic size and sIL-2R levels may contribute to the differential diagnosis of malignant lymphoma and thymic hyperplasia.

In conclusion, we treated a case of Graves’ disease with thymic hyperplasia in which the responses of the thyroid hormones, TRAb and thymic size in response to thiamazole treatment suggested a close relationship between thymic hyperplasia and Graves’ disease.

All procedures performed in studies involving human partici-
pants followed the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from the patient.

**The authors state that they have no Conflict of Interest (COI).**

**Acknowledgement**

The authors are grateful to the patient for her contribution to this study. The authors also thank J. Kawada, H. Tsuchida and M. Kato for their technical assistance and M. Yato, Y. Ogiso and M. Nozu for their secretarial assistance.

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