Roles of the Metabolic Syndrome, HDL Cholesterol, and Coronary Atherosclerosis in Subclinical Inflammation

PHILIPP REIN, MD1,2,3*  
CHRISTOPH H. SAELY, MD1,2,3*  
ALEXANDER VONBANK, MD1,2,3  
HEINZ DREXEL, MD1,2,3,4  
STEFAN BEER, MD1,2,3

OBJECTIVE — The metabolic syndrome (MetS) and coronary artery disease (CAD) frequently coincide; their individual contribution to inflammation is unknown.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS — We enrolled 1,010 patients undergoing coronary angiography. Coronary stenoses ≥50% were considered significant. The MetS was defined according to American Heart Association–revised National Cholesterol Education Program Adult Treatment Panel III criteria.

RESULTS — C-reactive protein (CRP) did not differ between patients with significant CAD and subjects without significant CAD (P = 0.706) but was significantly higher in MetS patients than in those without MetS (P < 0.001). The MetS criteria low HDL cholesterol (P < 0.001), large waist (P < 0.001), high glucose (P < 0.001), and high blood pressure (P = 0.016), but not high triglycerides (P = 0.352), proved associated with CRP. When all MetS traits were considered simultaneously, only low HDL cholesterol proved independently associated with CRP (F = 44.19; P < 0.001).

CONCLUSIONS — CRP is strongly associated with the MetS but not with coronary atherosclerosis. The association of the MetS with subclinical inflammation is driven by the low HDL cholesterol feature.

Although serum C-reactive protein (CRP) is an important predictor of cardiovascular events (1), its cross-sectional association with the presence and extent of coronary atherosclerosis is unclear (2,3). It is therefore ambiguous whether subclinical inflammation in metabolic syndrome (MetS) patients is primarily due to the increased prevalence of (silent) coronary artery disease (CAD) in these patients or, conversely, whether elevated levels of inflammation in CAD patients are primarily due to a correlation with the MetS. Furthermore, it remains unclear which classical MetS traits are most strongly associated with CRP.

From the 1Vorarlberg Institute for Vascular Investigation and Treatment, Feldkirch, Austria; the 2Department of Medicine and Cardiology, Academic Teaching Hospital Feldkirch, Feldkirch, Austria; the 3Private University of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Triesen, Liechtenstein; and the 4Drexel University College of Medicine, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. 

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*P.R. and C.H.S. contributed equally to this article.

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Inflammation, MetS, and coronary atherosclerosis

Figures

Figure 1—A: Relationship of the number of MetS components and CRP adjusted for age, sex, LDL cholesterol, smoking, and major cardiovascular medications. B: Further adjustment for the low HDL criterion. P value is given for the association of CRP with the number of MetS components.

significantly between patients with significant CAD and subjects without significant CAD (0.40 ± 0.59 vs. 0.39 ± 0.52 mg/dl; P = 0.706). CRP was also similar in subjects with any atherosclerotic lesion at angiography compared with subjects with completely normal coronary arteries (0.41 ± 0.57 vs. 0.36 ± 0.50 mg/dl; P = 0.325). Furthermore, CRP was not associated with significant CAD in a multivariate model adjusting for age, sex, LDL cholesterol, smoking, cardiovascular medications, and presence of MetS (standardized adjusted OR 0.97 [95% CI 0.76–1.25]; P = 0.822).

Considering both MetS and significant CAD, CRP was significantly higher in patients with MetS, both among those without significant CAD (0.45 ± 0.50 vs. 0.36 ± 0.53 mg/dl; P < 0.001) and among those with significant CAD (0.47 ± 0.69 vs. 0.34 ± 0.45; P = 0.001). In contrast, CRP did not differ between patients with significant CAD and those without significant CAD among subjects without MetS (P = 0.869) or among subjects with MetS (P = 0.411).

ANCOVA, adjusting for age, sex, LDL cholesterol, smoking, and cardiovascular medications, confirmed that MetS (F = 11.74; P = 0.001) but not significant CAD (F = 0.01; P = 0.983) was significantly associated with CRP.

Associations of individual MetS components with CRP

Univariately, serum CRP was significantly higher in patients who fulfilled the large waist (P < 0.001), the low HDL cholesterol (P < 0.001), the high blood pressure (P = 0.016), and the high glucose (P < 0.001) criteria but not in patients who fulfilled the high triglyceride criterion (P = 0.352) compared with patients who did not fulfill the respective MetS criteria. When all MetS traits were entered simultaneously into one ANCOVA model, only low HDL cholesterol proved associated with CRP (F = 44.19; P < 0.001) independently of age, sex, LDL cholesterol, smoking, major cardiovascular medications, and of all other MetS criteria.

CRP increased significantly (P trend <0.001) with an increasing number of MetS traits (Fig. 1A) after adjustment for age, sex, smoking, LDL cholesterol, and major cardiovascular medications. Further adjustment for the high waist (F = 11.66; P = 0.001), the high glucose (F = 14.18; P < 0.001), the high blood pressure (F = 17.94; P < 0.001), and the high triglyceride (F = 32.81; P < 0.001) traits rendered this relationship virtually unchanged. In contrast, the positive association between the number of metabolic traits and CRP was no longer significant (Fig. 1B) after adjustment for the low HDL cholesterol criterion (F = 0.87; P = 0.352).

CONCLUSIONS—From our data, we conclude that among angiographed coronary patients CRP is strongly associated with the MetS but not with angiographically characterized coronary atherosclerosis. Specifically, the overall association of the MetS with CRP is driven by the low HDL cholesterol feature.

Data from the literature on the association of CRP with cross-sectionally determined CAD are controversial. Most studies have not found such an association (2.9–12). This observation likely reflects the fact that inflammation is not associated with plaque burden itself but rather with plaque vulnerability and rupture. Thus, our data do not contradict the numerous reports on an association between CRP and clinical atherothrombotic events.

Further, our data show that the low HDL cholesterol MetS feature drives the overall association between the MetS and CRP; CRP was no longer associated with the number of MetS traits when adjusted for HDL cholesterol. These data fit into the notion that HDL particles, besides their crucial role in reverse cholesterol transport, also protect the artery wall through anti-inflammatory mechanisms (13). Thus, CRP is strongly associated with the MetS but not with angiographically diagnosed coronary atherosclerosis. The overall association of the MetS with CRP is predominantly driven by the low HDL cholesterol feature, a paramount predictor of vascular events.

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