Impact of a FTO gene risk variant on variables of energy metabolism in adults with obesity class 2 and 3

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: The metabolic consequences of carrying a FTO obesity-promoting risk allele have not been fully elucidated and may be confounded by obesity per se. Against this background, we investigated the impact of FTO allele (SNP rs9939609) on fasting and postprandial energy expenditure and fasting substrate expenditure in a study population of uniformly and similarly obese individuals.

Procedures: We studied a similar number of participants with BMI classes 2–3 (median BMI 42.8 kg/m²) who were either homozygote for the non-risk allele TT (n = 33, numbers increased by enrichment), heterozygote (AT) (n = 32), or homozygote for the risk allele AA (n = 35).

Major findings: Basal metabolic rate and postprandial energy expenditure did not differ between FTO groups. However, fasting respiratory quotient (RQ) was increased in those carrying the risk allele (p = 0.008), whereas postprandial RQ was not.

Conclusion: In this study population, the FTO-risk allele associates with fasting reduced fat and increased carbohydrate oxidation.

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1. Introduction

The obesity-promoting effects of the fat mass and obesity-associated gene (FTO), risk allele is well studied, but the mechanisms behind effects are not fully elucidated [1]. One reason for remaining uncertainties might be the confounding influence of overweight per se on metabolic and behavioral parameters. To minimize such confounding we assessed energy expenditure (EE) and substrate utilization in FTO tested individuals with body mass index (BMI) obesity class 2–3. Inter-individual differences in food intake could potentially influence measurements [2,3]; therefore, we estimated each participants’ energy and macronutrient intake during the 24 h that preceded the overnight fast before measurements.

2. Subjects and methods

Patients newly referred to the hospital’s obesity clinic were recruited to participate in an ongoing metabolic and genetic study. The first 50 participants who volunteered for genetic testing were selected randomly. The following 50 patients were included through a selection procedure blinded to investigators and participants. The selection procedure aimed to ensure three equal-sized groups of risk alleles (AA, AT, and TT). The Regional Ethics Committee (Trondheim, Norway) approved the study. Participants gave written informed consent and we conducted the study according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

One hundred patients aged ≥20y who met inclusion-criteria of BMI≥40 kg/m² or ≥35 kg/m² with comorbidities except type-2 diabetes-mellitus and not being pregnant/lactating participated.

We extracted deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) from peripheral blood leukocytes from ethylenediaminetra-acetic acid (EDTA) whole blood using the Gentra Purgene Blood Kit (QIAGEN Science, Germantown, USA), and performed genotyping of rs9939609 FTO using 7900HT Fast Real-Time polymerase chain reaction (PCR).
System and predesigned TaqMan single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) genotyping assays (Life Technologies/Thermo Fisher Scientific, Waltham, USA) specified for the SNP. A positive and a negative control were included on each sample tray [4].

Participants arrived in the morning after fasting for 10 h. Height was measured to the nearest 0.1 cm and weight (in underwear) to the nearest 0.1 kg. We collected blood samples preprandially, and analyzed serum glucose using BIOSEN C_line, sport (EKF-diagnostic GmbH, Barleben, Germany). Participants then consumed, in <15 min, a breakfast of whole-grain bread, butter, cheese, jam, orange juice, and milk or sweetened drinking yoghurt [2512 kJ (600 kcal)], 17%, 35%, and 48% of energy from protein, fat, and carbohydrate, respectively [5].

Energy expenditure, oxygen consumption (VO₂), carbon dioxide production (VCO₂), and respiratory quotient (RQ) were measured pre- and postprandially by indirect calorimetry using a ventilated hood system (Vmax Encore 29, CareFusion, Hoechberg, Germany), with recordings every 30 sec for 15 min per session. One session pertained to the fasting, and five sessions to the 2.5 h postprandial stage. There was a 30 min interval between the start of each session. Steady state in indirect calorimetry is reportedly obtained when the coefficient of variance of VO₂ and VCO₂ is <10% [3]. Accordingly, we chose study data points between 6.5 min and 14 min for analysis for each session.

We calculated fasting carbohydrate and fat oxidation using each participant’s basal metabolic rate (BMR) (kcal), RQ value, and a revised table of non-protein RQ [6].

Trained dietitians conducted 24 h dietary recalls on the day preceding the metabolic testing. We estimated portion sizes using Norkost-3 picture booklet,1 and calculated nutrient intake with KBS version 7.3, 2017 preceding the metabolic testing. We estimated portion sizes using KBS and designed to match the degree of obesity in subjects with or

1 Norkost 3: Bildehefte med pavisorunnervelvel developed at the Department of Nutrition, University of Oslo in cooperation with the Norwegian Food Safety Authority and the Norwegian Directorate of Health.
2 KBS version 7.3, 2017 is an in-house data program based on the official Norwegian food composition table, developed at the University of Oslo.
3 Using the standard student t-test gave similar results.

and lean body mass (LBMI) (Table 2). There were no significant differences in energy or macronutrient intake, or smoking habits between the risk- and no-risk groups (Table 2).

3.2. Fasting stage

Participants in the risk-group displayed slightly higher fasting serum glucose than no-risk participants (Table 2). BMR was similar for the risk- and the no-risk groups. As expected, men’s BMR was higher than women’s (median 1910 kcal vs 1523 kcal).

Fasting RQ was higher in the risk-than in the no-risk group (median 0.860 vs 0.840, p = 0.008). This difference remained significant also after excluding two subjects with glucose >6.99 mmol/l (p = 0.008) and after controlling for gender (p = 0.002, Coef.0.035) (Table 2).

3.3. Postprandial stage

Postprandial EE (total, and meal induced EE above BMR) did not differ between risk- and no-risk groups. In the whole study population, postprandial EE was lower in women (median 2090 kcal in men vs 1690 kcal in women, p < 0.001). Postprandial RQ did not differ between risk- and no-risk groups, and not between genders for the sample as a whole.

4. Discussion

Numerous studies have reported on the FTO risk allele’s impact on obesity. Even so, our study brings out novel findings. Our study population is rather unique as it compares the impact of the FTO gene on metabolic parameters in subjects who are uniformly obese, thus obviating a confounding influence of obesity per se. Our main and novel finding is a higher fasting RQ in subjects carrying the FTO risk allele, particularly in women. The finding appears robust to the influence of potential dietary confounders because the dietary intake between the two groups was similar. Dietary intake on the day prior to testing is unlikely to have influenced our results on fasting RQ [2,8]. Risk-allele individuals displayed somewhat higher fasting blood glucose levels than no-risk-allele individuals. The difference (mean and median) was, however, minor, and glucose levels were within normal range. Fasting RQ, thus, should not have been affected by a glucose factor. The impact of FTO-risk on fasting RQ is not just statistically significant, but its substantive effect is also quite large. Carrying ≥1 risk-allele on average increases fasting RQ by 58% of a standard deviation of fasting RQ (Coef. 0.035/SD fasting RQ).

Further, the differences in RQ translate into a meaningful difference between groups with lower fat- and higher carbohydrate oxidation among risk-allele individuals. Specifically, in the fasted state risk individuals appear on average, to burn roughly 6.7 kcal/h less fat than no-risk individuals. A higher RQ and lower fat oxidation could be in line with a reported lower frequency of browning adipocytes associated with the risk allele [9]. Hence, browning adipocytes would likely be more metabolically active than white adipocytes and consequently oxidize more fat [10]. Browning adipocytes would likely be more metabolically active postprandial situation; this, we speculate, could explain the absence of an allele association with postprandial RQ. Further research is needed to elucidate a possible link between body weight and the herein reported differences in RQ.

A large Dutch study failed to detect differences in RQ based on FTO alleles [10]. The discrepancy with our findings could relate to designs: The Dutch study was an epidemiologic one, encompassing all levels of BMI. Our study was restricted to markedly obese people and designed to match the degree of obesity in subjects with or
without the FTO risk allele. Furthermore, we anticipate that the enrichment of homozygotes in our study population would increase the possibilities of detecting differences in metabolic parameters between groups. However, we acknowledge that one cannot extrapolate the differences in RQ that we find here to lesser degrees of adiposity without further research. In other respects, our

Table 1
Study population (n = 100, 70% women): Characteristics, energy and substrate oxidation.

| Variable                  | Median | 5th percentile | 95th percentile | Mean | SD | p-value |
|---------------------------|--------|----------------|----------------|------|----|---------|
| Age (year)                | 42     | 25             | 62             | 41.9 | 11.5 | 0.644 |
| Height (cm)               | 170    | 158            | 186.5          | 171.1 | 8.7 | <0.001 |
| Weight (kg)               | 122.4  | 95.5           | 162.8          | 126.6 | 21.3 | <0.001 |
| Body Mass Index (kg/m²)   | 42.8   | 35.7           | 50.4           | 43.1 | 5.2 | 0.152  |
| Lean body massa (kg)      | 80.1   | 46.7           | 88.1           | 64.2 | 12.7 | <0.001 |
| Fat massa (kg)            | 44.6   | 29.0           | 63.8           | 5.6  | 0.7 | 0.191  |
| Fasting serum glucose (mmol/L) | 5.5  | 4.75           | 6.66           | 2132 | 816 | 0.037  |
| Energyc (kcal)            | 2098   | 1094           | 3835           | 91.85 | 33.35 | 0.004 |
| Protein (g)               | 87.5   | 46.2           | 152.3          | 217.1 | 106.4 | 0.314  |
| Carbohydrate (g)          | 199    | 73             | 94             | 44.02 | 4.054 |
| Fat (g)                   | 87.4   | 32.7           | 186.2          | 1.3  | 6.59 | 0.841  |
| Alcohol (g)               | 0      | 0              | 4.4            | 1.9  | 4.41 | 0.921  |
| Cigarettes per day        | 0      | 0              | 12.5           | 41.9 | 11.5 | 0.644  |
| BMIc (kg/m²)              | 1690   | 1231           | 2243           | 1651 | 91 | <0.001 |
| Body massd (kg)           | 1808   | 1434           | 2342           | 1827 | 284 | <0.001 |
| Meald induced EE above BMRc (kcal) | 184  | 49             | 355            | 177 | 109 | 0.093  |
| RQ fastingd              | 0.850  | 0.76           | 0.97           | 0.856 | 0.061 | 0.346 |
| RQ postprandiald         | 0.878  | 0.803          | 0.946          | 0.878 | 0.038 | 0.738  |
| CHO oxidation fastingd (mg/min) | 144.9 | 54.3           | 304.2          | 159.2 | 69.8 | 0.001  |
| Fat oxidation fastingd (mg/min) | 54.0 | 11.1           | 50.1           | 54.5 | 23.9 | 0.071  |

* a SD: standard deviation.
* b Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney’s test, men vs women. Significant if p < 0.002 (Bonferroni correction).
* c Lean body mass is defined as lean mass of trunk + left and right lower extremities.
* d Fat mass is defined as fat mass of trunk + left and right lower extremities.
* e Calculated from 24 h dietary recall preceding meal test.
* f n = 98.
* g n = 99.

Table 2
FTO non-risk allele vs risk allele: Characteristics, energy and substrate oxidation.

| Variable                  | No-risk allelea n = 33 (82% women) | Risk allelesb n = 67 (64% women) | p-valuec |
|---------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------|
| Age (year)                | 39.4                                | 10.9                             | 44.4     | 25     | 63     | 43.1     | 11.7 |
| Height (cm)               | 170                                 | 188                              | 170.8    | 9      | 170    | 175     | 8.6 |
| Weight (kg)               | 119.2                               | 171.1                            | 125.4    | 23.7   | 126.6  | 95.7    | 15.9 |
| Body Mass Index (kg/m²)   | 41.7                                | 53.9                             | 42.8     | 5.6    | 42.9   | 36      | 4.9 |
| Lean body massa (kg)      | 59.5                                | 88.4                             | 62.76    | 13     | 61.8   | 47.8    | 8.59 |
| Fat massa (kg)            | 46.3                                | 62.5                             | 46.7     | 10.38  | 44.2   | 31.1    | 6.38 |
| Fasting serum glucose (mmol/L) | 5.4  | 6.6             | 5.4     | 0.5    | 5.6    | 4.9     | 6.7 |
| Energyc (kcal)            | 1973                                | 3246                             | 1994     | 683    | 2099   | 1099    | 4211 |
| Protein (g)               | 78.3                                | 146                              | 85.3     | 29.4   | 90.6   | 47.1    | 152.6 |
| Carbohydrate (g)          | 191.8                               | 351.1                            | 202.7    | 92.4   | 203.9  | 83.8    | 471.3 |
| Fat (g)                   | 89.8                                | 160.1                            | 88.8     | 43.77  | 87.1   | 27.7    | 187.8 |
| Alcohol (g)               | 0                                  | 0                                | 0        | 0      | 7.4    | 1.6     | 7.62 |
| Cigarettes per day        | 0                                  | 0                                | 2.12     | 2.42   | 0      | 12.5    | 1.9 |
| BMIc (kg/m²)              | 1600                                | 2295                             | 1628     | 283    | 1627   | 1231    | 2152 |
| Postprandial EEc (kcal)   | 1808                                | 2350                             | 1818     | 293    | 1800   | 1441    | 2309 |
| Meal induced EE above BMRc (kcal) | 186  | 355             | 191      | 106    | 182    | 52      | 345 |
| CHO oxidation fastingd (mg/min) | 136.2 | 130.1           | 135.1    | 57.2   | 150.4  | 83.2    | 315.1 |
| Fat oxidation fastingd (mg/min) | 61.1 | 37.3            | 62.4     | 16.6   | 50.5   | 9.8     | 90.1 |

* a TT (homozygote non-risk allele).
* b AA + AT (homozygote + heterozygote risk alleles).
* c SD: standard deviation.
* d Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney’s test, no-risk allele (TT) vs. risk alleles (AA and AT). Significant if p < 0.002 (Bonferroni correction).
* e Lean body mass is defined as lean mass of trunk + left and right lower extremities.
* f Fat mass is defined as fat mass of trunk + left and right lower extremities.
* g Calculated from 24 h dietary recall preceding meal test.
* h n = 98.
* i n = 99.
* j The risk effect is positive and significant even after controlling for gender (p = 0.020, Coef. 0.294).
* k The risk effect is positive and significant even after controlling for gender (p = 0.002, Coef. 0.035).
* l The risk effect is positive and significant even after controlling for gender (p = 0.029, Coef. 0.26407).
* m The risk effect is negative and significant even after controlling for gender (p = 0.001, Coef. −13.998).
data agree with those of others that do not find effects of the FTO risk haplotypes on BMR or postprandial EE [1]. We also find expected metabolic differences between men and women. In our view, these concurring data adds evidence to the validity of our novel findings.

There are limitations to our study. Given that our subjects were all patients who volunteered, our sample might suffer some selection bias. Further studies in population-based individuals with BMI ≥35 are thus needed to confirm our results.

In conclusion, in a study population of uniformly and similarly obese individuals we find that a FTO risk allele associates with reduced fat and increased carbohydrate oxidation.

Author contributions

ILM and VG conceived the study. ILM recruited participants. AKDS and MK analyzed EE data. AKDS, ILM and VG wrote the manuscript. All authors reviewed and edited the manuscript and have nothing to disclose. There is no conflict of interest.

Declaration of interest

None.

Acknowledgements

We thank volunteers, research-nurses at the Clinical Research Ward St. Olavs Hospital, Jessica Røkenes, Department of Clinical and Molecular Medicine, NTNU, and dietitian Guro Waage, for contributions to the data collection. The study was supported by the Joint Research Committee of St. Olavs Hospital and the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at NTNU, Trondheim, Norway (Fellesforskningsutvalg).

List of abbreviations

| Abbreviation | Description |
|--------------|-------------|
| BMI          | body mass index |
| BMR          | basal metabolic rate |
| CHO          | carbohydrate |
| cm           | centimeter |
| DNA          | deoxyribonucleic acid |
| EDTA         | ethylenediaminetetra-acetic acid |
| EE           | energy expenditure |
| FTO          | fat mass and obesity-associated gene; alpha-ketoglutarate dependent dioxygenase |
| h            | hour, hours |
| kg           | kilogram |
| kcal         | kilocalorie |
| kJ           | kilojoule |
| LBM          | lean body mass |
| min          | minute, minutes |
| PCR          | polymerase chain reaction |
| RQ           | respiratory quotient |
| SNP          | single nucleotide polymorphism |
| VCO₂         | rate of carbon dioxide production |
| VO₂          | rate of oxygen consumption |

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