The association of axillary lymph node-positive breast cancer with metabolic parameters of 18F-fluorodeoxyglucose PET/CT

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Abstract

Objective: This study aims to examine the association between 18F-Fluorodeoxyglucose PET/CT (18F-FDG PET/CT) metabolic parameters of lymph node-positive and lymph node-negative breast carcinomas.

Material and method: We included breast carcinomas patients who underwent 18F-FDG PET/CT imaging at our department between May 2018 and December 2019. A total of 108 female breast cancer patients were included (aged 48.8 ± 13.6years; range, 28-84 years). PET scanning was performed in 3D mode from the skull ceiling to the half of the thigh. According to pathology reports, we divided the patients into two groups: a lymph node-positive group of patients and a lymph node-negative group of patients. We calculated the sensitivity and specificity for determining the PET/CT pathological lymph node. Metabolic parameters like TLG (Total lesion glycolysis), MTV (Metabolic tumor volume), SUVmean, and SUVmax values were calculated.

Result: The lymph node-positive group’s body weight and body mass index (BMI) were statistically higher than the lymph node-negative group (p=0.027, p=0.022 respectively). SUV max and SUV mean of the lymph node-positive group were statistically higher than the lymph node-negative group (p=0.008, p=0.009, respectively). Both TLG and MTV of the lymph node-positive group were statistically higher than the lymph node-negative group (p=0.01, P= 0.01, respectively). Ki-67(%) of the lymph node-positive group was not statistically different from the lymph node-negative group. We calculated the PET/CT’s sensitivity and specificity as 78.57% and 59.09%, respectively. For the positive predictive value of PET/CT, we found 55%, and for the negative predictive value, it was 81.25%.

Conclusions: PET/CT metabolic parameters of patients with lymph node-positive breast cancer were higher than patients with lymph node-negative. High body weight and BMI appears to increase the possibility of metastases of lymph node. The sensitivity of PET/CT can be considered to be useful in determining the pathological lymph node, but the specificity of PET/CT is not very good.

Keywords: Breast cancer, 18F-FDG PET/CT, Lymph node
Not only does it show the morphological features of the lesion, but it may also report metabolic information of the lesion, bringing new opportunities for breast cancer’s diagnosis, staging, re-staging, and treatment response assessment [8, 9].

The maximum standardized uptake value (SUVmax) and the mean standardized uptake value (SUVmean) measured with FDG PET in breast cancer are sensitive indicators for metabolic activity [10,11], which are usually used for examining the aggressiveness of tumor and is related with prognostic factors, such as the histological grade, histological type, proliferation index, and immunohistochemical factors [10,12-18]. Some parameters mixing volume and FDG intensity can also be used as metabolic parameters such as Total Lesion Glycolysis (TLG) and Metabolic Tumor Volume (MTV). In this study, we seek to find the relationship between 18F-fluorodeoxyglucose PET/CT (18F-FDG PET/CT) metabolic parameters of axillary lymph node-negative and axillary lymph node-positive of breast carcinomas and to determine PET/CT’s sensitivity and specificity to evaluate the status of axillary lymph nodes.

**Methods and Materials**

**The population of the study:** In this study, we included patients who underwent 18F-FDG PET/CT imaging at our department having breast carcinomas between May 2018 and December 2019. A total of 108 female breast cancer patients were included (aged 48.8 ± 13.6 years; range, 28-84 years). Before imaging, breast carcinoma was diagnosed by biopsy of all patients. Height and body weight of the patients were measured. BMI of patients was calculated by biopsy of all patients. He

**Imaging procedure:** After eight hours of fasting, patients were given 18F-FDG intravenously (blood glucose <200 mg / dL) and images of whole-body were taken from PET/CT scanner (Siemens 3D-TOF Siemens Medical Systems) 55 to 75 minutes after injection (19) low-dose CT scan (80mA, 120 kV) was conducted.

An intravenous injection 3.7MBq/Kg 18F-FDG was performed on the arm of the patient opposite to the primary breast tumor location. PET scanning was performed in 3D mode from the skull ceiling to the half of the thigh. Using an SUV of 2.5 as the threshold, MTV (ml) was assigned to the volume of the tumor with SUV ≥ 2.5.

In the delineated tumor volume, SUVmean was also defined as a mean SUV. TLG (SUVml) was defined as the product of the MTV multiplied by SUVmean. Metabolic parameters such as Metabolic Tumor Volume (MTV), Total Lesion Glycolysis (TLG), SUVmean, and SUVmax values were calculated.

**Statistical Analysis:** Via the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, we tested the data normality. We summarized data for categorical variables as percentages and frequencies, and for continuous variables, we summarized them as mean and standard deviation (SD). For continuous variables, the Student t-test, and for categorical variables, the chi-square test was used to compare two groups. The positive and negative predictive values, sensitivity, and specificity of PET/CT for determination of lymph node positivity were calculated. An alpha level below 0.05 was considered for statistical significance. We conducted analyses by SPSS version 18 (Windows, Chicago, IL, USA).

**Results**

The body weight and BMI of the lymph node-positive group was statistically higher than the lymph none negative group(p=0.027, p=0.022 respectively). SUV max and SUVmean of the lymph node-positive group were statistically higher than the lymph node-negative group (p=0.008, p=0.009, respectively). Both TLG and MTV of the lymph node-positive group were statistically higher than the lymph node-negative group (p=0.01, P= 0.01, respectively).

The Ki-67(%) of the lymph node-positive group was not statistically different from the lymph node-negative group (figure-1 and table-1). The Sensitivity and specificity of PET/CT were 78.57% and 59.09%, respectively. The negative predictive value of PET/CT and Positive predictive value of PET/CT was 55% and 81.25%, respectively.

![Figure 1: Left axillary lymph node metastasis of forty-five years older women with invasive ductal carcinoma in PET/CT. A= CT, B= PET/CT fusion, C=PET.](http://dx.doi.org/10.36472/msd.v7i3.363)
PET/CT has provided many benefits in developing a treatment plan for breast cancer. It can play an important role for breast cancer patients and identifying distant and occult nodal metastases provide benefits such as surveillance during and after neoadjuvant chemotherapy, preventing non-essential biopsies from a lymph node, and supporting patient treatment planning [20]. Fouster D et al stated that PET/CT have sensitivity (80% -94%) and specificity (86% -90%) in determining axillary lymph node metastases [21]. In a review article, PET/CT sensitivity was reported as 64% (59%-69%) and specificity as 93% (90%-95%) [22]. In contrast, some studies found that it has a 24-82% sensitivity for identifying metastasis of axillary node, and it was also stated that PET/CT has low sensitivity in determining axillary lymph nodes in the early stages of primary breast cancer.

In addition, studies have shown very low effectiveness of PET/CT for detecting micrometastases in breast cancer patients [23, 24]. The differences in results between these studies can be attributed to the population studied, the PET protocol, and the histopathological procedure applied. In our study, the sensitivity and specificity of PET/CT to show axillary lymph nodes in breast cancer cases were 78.57% and 59.09%, respectively. While the sensitivity values of PET/CT in determining the lymph node are compatible, the specificity value of our study is lower than the previous studies. The reason that the specificity values were lower than previous studies may be due to the micrometastases present in our patients. As stated in our study, the PET/CT sensitivity around 80% facilitates the detection of cases with lymph node metastasis.

Despite the fact that in determining ALN staging, the surgical approach reference standard has performed better than all other approaches, the volume-based metabolic PET/CT breast tumor parameters can be used to diagnose patients who do not require invasive procedures. This suggestion can have some clinical benefits for patients.

Volume-based parameters on 18F-FDG PET/CT, such as Total Lesion Glycolysis (TLG) or Metabolic Tumor Volume (MTV), represent total tumor burden as well as tumor metabolic activity. In our study, the SUVmax SUVmean, TLG, and MTV values of the axillary lymph node-positive group were significantly higher than the axillary lymph node-negative group. It was shown that SUVmax of breast tumors on 18F-FDG PET/CT had been associated with ALNM [25]. Young-Sil et al. [26] measured SUVmax SUVmean, MTV, and TLG. On univariate analysis, the authors showed that both SUVmax and SUVmean were associated with ALNM. Because MTV represents the total tumor burden, not merely the metabolic activity, MTV has been suggested as a prognostic factor for breast cancer [27, 28]. Ulaner et al. suggested that MTV may be related to lymph node and liver metastases and TLG associated with bone and lymph node metastases. Another study found TLG of the primary breast tumor as an independent predictor of ALN metastasis in invasive ductal cancer of breast [29]. In conclusion, in light of all findings, it can be said that parameters such as SUVmean, MTV, SUVmax, and TLG were associated with axillary lymph node metastases at specific rates. Especially in cases with very high metabolic parameters, clinicians are more likely to see lymph node metastases.

Considering that Ki-67(%) is one of the indicators of the bad prognosis, our expectation was that the ki-67(%) level was high in cases with positive axillary lymph node. In contrast, in our study, Ki-67 index of axillary lymph node-positive group and axillary lymph node-negative group was not different [30]. According to the results of our study, it can be said that the level of Ki-67(%) is not related to metastases of the axillary lymph node.

Obesity and low physical activity are related to a higher risk of breast cancer, and weight gain after diagnosis of breast cancer is related to a higher risk of recurrence. The mechanism between "energy excess" states and breast
cancer is likely multifactorial, including inflammatory cytokines and immune cells, adipocytokines, and excess hormones. Obese postmenopausal women have a higher risk of breast cancer with a relative risk of about 1.3 compared with the normal weight ones [31]. The Women’s Intervention Nutrition Study (WINS) found that a dietary intervention associated with weight loss could decrease the risk of breast cancer recurrence by 24% at five years [32]. In the present study, the bodyweight and BMI of the patients with an axillary lymph node metastasis was higher than those without a lymph node metastasis. In many studies, it seems that this issue has not been clarified since the body weights of breast cancer cases are not specified. Bodyweight gain may indeed cause recurrences and lymph node metastases in breast cancers.

Conclusions

PET/CT metabolic parameters of axillary lymph node-positive breast cancer patients were higher than axillary lymph node-negative patients. High body weight and increased BMI levels appears to increase the possibility of axillary lymph node metastases. The sensitivity of PET/CT can be considered to be useful in determining the pathological axillary lymph node, but the specificity of PET/CT is not very good.

Acknowledgments: None

Author Contributions: SAT, AG, BT, ĪK, HB, FAÇ: Design of project, Patient examination, image analyzes and statistic

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

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