Clinical Study

Serum Levels of Asymmetric Dimethylarginine and Apelin as Potential Markers of Vascular Endothelial Dysfunction in Early Rheumatoid Arthritis

Manuela Di Franco,1 Francesca Romana Spinelli,1 Alessio Metere,2 Maria Chiara Gerardi,1 Virginia Conti,1 Francesca Boccalini,3 Cristina Iannuccelli,1 Francesco Ciciarello,3 Luciano Agati,3 and Guido Valesini1

1Department of Internal Medicine and Medical Specialties, Sapienza University of Rome, Viale Del Policlinico 155, 00161 Rome, Italy
2Section of Biomarkers in Degenerative Diseases, Department of Cell Biology and Neurosciences, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Viale Regina Elena 299, 00161 Rome, Italy
3Department of Cardiovascular and Respiratory Sciences, Sapienza University of Rome, 00161 Rome, Italy

Correspondence should be addressed to Manuela Di Franco, manuela.difranco@uniroma1.it

Received 5 June 2012; Accepted 27 June 2012

Academic Editor: Miguel A. González-Gay

Copyright © 2012 Manuela Di Franco et al. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Objectives. Impaired endothelial function represents the early stage of atherosclerosis, which is typically associated with systemic inflammatory diseases like rheumatoid arthritis (RA). As modulators of endothelial nitric oxide synthase expression, asymmetric-dimethylarginine (ADMA) and apelin might be measured in the blood of RA patients to detect early atherosclerotic changes. We conducted a prospective, case-control study to investigate serum ADMA and apelin profiles of patients with early-stage RA (ERA) before and after disease-modifying antirheumatic drug (DMARD) therapy. Methods. We enrolled 20 consecutively diagnosed, treatment-naïve patients with ERA and 20 matched healthy controls. Serum ADMA and apelin levels and the 28-joint disease activity scores (DAS28) were assessed before and after 12 months of DMARDs treatment. All patients underwent ultrasonographic assessment for intima-media thickness (IMT) evaluation. Results. In the ERA group, ADMA serum levels were significantly higher than controls at baseline (P = 0.007) and significantly decreased after treatment (P = 0.012 versus controls). Baseline serum apelin levels were significantly decreased in this group (P = 0.0001 versus controls), but they were not significantly altered by treatment. IMT did not show significant changes. Conclusions. ERA is associated with alterations of serum ADMA and apelin levels, which might be used as biomarkers to detect early endothelial dysfunction in these patients.

1. Introduction

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a systemic inflammatory disease associated with increased cardiovascular morbidity and mortality [1–5]. The erosive joint damage occurs during the first 2 years of the disease [6, 7], and prompt intervention during this phase may slow the progression to chronic disability [8–10]. Mortality related to cardiovascular disease (CVD) is also increased during the early years of the disease, with a standardized mortality ratio SMR of 1.49 [11]. Therefore, comprehensive care of patients with RA implies prevention and treatment not only of joint damage but also of co-morbidities, particularly cardiovascular disease, which is the cause of 40%–50% of the deaths in this population [4, 5].

Evidence of subclinical CVD has been demonstrated in patients with early RA (ERA) [12]. These patients have also been found to have a higher prevalence of atherosclerotic plaques, increased intima-media thickness (IMT) of the carotid arteries [13, 14], and significantly impaired endothelial function compared with controls [15]. The high frequency in RA patients of risk factors like smoking, dyslipidemia, hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and increased body mass index accounts only partially for their high
cardiovascular morbidity and mortality [16, 17]. The accelerated atherosclerosis observed in these patients seems to be due to systemic inflammatory processes [18]. Rheumatoid synovia and atherosclerotic plaques have proinflammatory endothelial phenotypes represented by expression of the same adhesion molecules and cytokines [19].

The availability of a marker of endothelial dysfunction would facilitate the stratification of patients with ERA according to their cardiovascular risk. Increased formation of nitric oxide (NO) has been shown to improve vascular function, attenuate leukocyte adhesion to endothelial cells, inhibit platelet aggregation, and modulate smooth muscle proliferation [20]. In the present study, we examined 2 endogenous regulators of NO production as candidate markers of endothelial function. The first, asymmetric-dimethylarginine (ADMA), is an L-arginine analogue that inhibits endothelial NO synthase (eNOS). Elevated ADMA levels are an independent risk factor for endothelial dysfunction, and they have been associated with hypertension, diabetes, hypercholesterolemia, renal failure, and atherosclerosis in both experimental models and humans [21]. Plasma levels of ADMA are increased in a variety of conditions linked with increased risk of CVD. Higher than normal levels have also been found in patients with established cardiovascular diseases [21] and more recently in RA patients as well [22, 23]. The second potential biomarker we assessed is apelin, a recently described peptide that is known to be produced by several cell types. It causes endothelium-dependent vasorelaxation by triggering the release of NO [24]. This effect is almost completely abolished by the eNOS inhibitor, NG-nitro-L-arginine methyl ester, which indicates that apelin may exert its vasorelaxant effects by activating the eNOS pathway [25].

The aim of this case-control study was to evaluate serum levels of these two molecules in ERA patients at the time of diagnosis and to determine whether and how these levels are changed by disease-modifying antirheumatic drug (DMARDs) therapy.

2. Patients and Methods

2.1. Patients and Controls. Twenty patients who were consecutively diagnosed with ERA [26] and had never received glucocorticoids or DMARDs (biological or nonbiological) were recruited from the hospital’s Early Arthritis Clinic over a 2-year period. At the time of enrolment, all the patients had an active disease. The control group included 20 age- and sex-matched blood donors recruited during the same period. Patients and controls were excluded if they had previously diagnosed cardiovascular disease, renal disease, dyslipidemia, and/or diabetes.

2.2. Treatment and Duration of Followup. Patients in the ERA group were started on conventional DMARD therapy plus glucocorticoids and followed in the Early Arthritis Clinic. Responses were evaluated after 3 months, and if there was no decrease in the 28-Joint disease activity score (DAS28), the patient was switched to biological TNFα inhibitor therapy. Followup ended after a total treatment period of 12 months.

2.3. Assessments. A 20 mL sample of peripheral venous blood were collected at baseline from each ERA patient and control. Erythrocyte sedimentation rates were determined with standard procedures. Serum was isolated by centrifugation (3000 × g for 10 min at room temperature), aliquoted, and stored at −80°C before analysis.

Serum levels of ADMA, apelin and anticyclic citrullinated peptide (aCCP) antibody titers were determined with commercial human enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) kits used according to the manufacturers’ instructions (ADMA ELISA kit, Vinci Biochem—Florence, Italy; Apelin ELISA kit, Phoenix Pharmaceuticals, Inc., CA, USA; anti-CCP2 ELISA kit, Axis-Shield—Dundee, UK). Each assay was performed in duplicate, and the mean result ± SE is reported. For each ERA patient, we also recorded the number of tender/swollen joints and patient’s global health assessment were recorded for the disease activity assessment performed using the DAS28 [27]. All of the above-listed assessments were repeated at the end of followup.

All patients underwent echo-color Doppler of the carotid arteries to evaluate IMT. The carotid arteries were evaluated at baseline and followup with high-resolution B-mode ultrasoundography (Esaote Biomedica, MyLab Vinco). One longitudinal image of the common carotid artery and 3 longitudinal images of the internal carotid artery were acquired. The maximal IMT of the common carotid artery and of the internal carotid artery was defined as the mean of the maximal IMT of the near and far walls on both the left and right sides. Carotid IMT was defined as a composite measure that combined the maximum common and internal carotid wall thickness of the left and right carotid arteries after standardization [28].

The study protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Policlinico Umberto I (Sapienza University of Rome), and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

2.4. Statistical Analysis. Data for matched pairs were analyzed with the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. Correlations were evaluated with the Spearman rank correlation test. A probability (P) value of 0.05 was considered significant.

3. Results

3.1. Clinical Characteristics of ERA Patients. The clinical characteristics of the 20 ERA patients at baseline are shown in Table 1. All 20 were started on glucocorticoids and DMARDs therapy, and 14 continued these drugs for the duration of the 12-month observation period: methotrexate (MTX, 15 mg/week) alone (n = 7) or MTX with either hydroxychloroquine (400 mg/day) (n = 3) or sulfasalazine (1.5 g/day) (n = 1). The other 6 were treated for the first 3 months with one of the regimens listed above, but no response was observed, so they were switched to the biological TNFα inhibitor, adalimumab. All 20 ERA patients received glucocorticoids (mean daily dose: 7.5 mg) for the entire 12-month period.

As shown in Table 1, the 12-month follow-up visit revealed a significant decrease (versus baseline values) in
the mean DAS28 (P = 0.0006). A reduction in RF- and/or aCCP-positivity was also observed.

3.2. Serum Levels of ADMA and Apelin. At baseline, the mean serum ADMA level for the ERA group was significantly higher than that of controls (0.55 ± 0.03 versus 0.41 ± 0.02 ± μmol/L, P = 0.0070), but after 12 months of treatment, the mean level for these patients was significantly lower (0.38 ± 0.03 μmol/L; P = 0.012 versus baseline) and was no longer different from the control value (P > 0.05) (Figure 1). As for serum apelin, the ERA group had significantly lower mean levels than controls at baseline (1.06 ± 0.56 versus 4.67 ± 3.0 ng/mL, P = 0.0001) and at the 12-month follow-up visit (0.81 ± 0.27 versus 4.67 ± 3.0 ng/mL, P = 0.0001). In this case, the decrease observed after 12 months of treatment was appreciable but not statistically significant. Figure 2 shows apelin levels in RA patients and control group.

Neither of the potential markers of endothelial function displayed significant correlation with DAS28, swollen/tender joint counts, ESR, CRP, RF, or aCCP antibody titers.

3.3. Echo-Color Doppler of the Carotid Arteries. Mean IMT values at baseline was 0.73 ± 0.15. After 12 months of treatment, mean IMT was 0.73 ± 0.14 (Table 1). No significant difference from baseline to followup was observed.

4. Discussion

The increased risk of cardiovascular disease observed in RA can be attributed to accelerated, early atherosclerosis. Using Doppler ultrasound techniques, several groups have documented impaired flow-mediated dilatation (FMD) and IMT in patients with longstanding RA despite chronic DMARDs treatment [29–32]. Moreover, an association with the shared epitope has been detected, suggesting that HLA-DRB1 allele status may predict cardiovascular risk in these patients [32].

In a recent study by Södergren et al. on 79 patients with newly diagnosed RA, no signs of early atherosclerosis were detected since FMD and IMT values did not differ between ERA and control group [33]. Endothelial function in ERA patients was investigated only in other two previous, smaller studies. Bergholm et al. [15] found impaired FMD in 10 ERA patients, which improved after 6 months of therapy, and more recently, similar results were reported by Hannawi et al. in patients who had been treated for 1 year [34]. In contrast with the Swedish registry, other authors detected evidence of subclinical CVD in ERA patients who showed a higher prevalence of increased IMT of the carotid arteries and atherosclerotic plaques compared with controls [13, 14].

Doppler ultrasonography is the method most widely used to evaluate early atherosclerotic modification of arterial wall (i.e., impaired endothelial function and intima-media thickening) and it has several advantages, including noninvasiveness, widespread availability, and relatively low cost. However, while IMT expresses a morphological change of the arterial wall which increases with disease progression becoming more evident in longstanding RA, brachial FMD represents an impaired endothelial responsiveness which indicates a distinct and independent stage of atherosclerotic process. These surrogate markers of atherosclerosis seems to poorly correlate, particularly in the early stage of the disease. This statement has been confirmed in a recent study on 118 RA patients in which no correlation between FMD and carotid IMT has been detected in patient with less than 7 years of disease, but an inverse correlation become apparent in patients with longer disease duration [35].

One of the major limitations of ultrasonographic investigation of IMT and FMD is substantial operator-dependency. For this reason, it is important to identify other markers of endothelial function in ERA patients, which are less susceptible to this type of variability. As candidate markers, we evaluated serum levels of ADMA and apelin, which modulate NO homeostasis by inhibiting (ADMA) or activating (apelin) eNOS [24, 36].

Elevated serum ADMA levels have been associated with several inflammatory states and several mechanisms have been proposed to explain this link, including downregulation of dimethylarginine dimethylaminohydrolase activity as a result of oxidative stress induced by proinflammatory cytokines [37], increased expression of protein arginine type I N-methyltransferase, which is responsible for ADMA synthesis [38], and increased endothelial cell turnover with potential liberation of ADMA during cell catabolism [36]. In our cohort of treatment-naive ERA patients, baseline ADMA levels were significantly higher than control values, and they returned to the normal range after 12 months of conventional or biological DMARD therapy. These findings suggest that early intervention in RA might help to restore endothelial function. With respect to this, different anti-TNF agents have proved to improve endothelial function in RA patients refractory to conventional therapy [39, 40]. In their recent study of endothelial function in ERA patients,
Turiel et al. [41] found that DMARD therapy had no effect on ADMA levels although it did improve 2D-echo-derived coronary flow reserve (CFR), which is indicative of at least partial restoration of vascular function. To explain the discrepancy between ADMA and CFR modification, the authors hypothesized that RA treatment could affect vascular function throughout pathways different from NO cycle. The absence of effects on ADMA levels contrasts with our findings in the ERA group, but it is also inconsistent with recent findings reported by Kuwahata et al. [42], who found that acetylcholine-induced increases in coronary blood flow are inversely correlated with ADMA levels, at least in women. The discrepancies between the results of these studies may be largely due to differences in the patient enrolment criteria, observation times, and above all the small size of the cohort studies.

As for apelin, this recently characterized adipokine [43] has been shown to induce vasodilatation by activating eNOS [25] and its effect is reduced by eNOS inhibition [44]; apelin has been demonstrate to act as a coronary vasodilator and, when administered at systemic doses, reduces peripheral vascular resistance [44]. High serum levels would be expected to have an antiatherogenic role improving endothelium-dependent vasorelaxation; in murine models, apelin has been shown to increase vascular nitric oxide generation and reverses endothelial dysfunction [45] and to reduce
macrophage infiltration into the arterial wall by direct anti-inflammatory effect within the vessel wall [46]. Low apelin levels have been detected in patients with high LDL levels [47] and those with type 2 diabetes mellitus [48], both of which are associated with an increased risk for atherosclerosis. Apelin levels have also been shown to correlate with levels of the adhesion molecules VCAM-1 and E-selectin [49]. The ERA patients we investigated presented low baseline levels of apelin along with elevated ADMA levels, which adds support to the hypothesis that endothelial dysfunction in these patients is related to altered NO homeostasis. Unlike ADMA levels, however, serum apelin levels were not significantly affected by treatment in our ERA group. This discrepancy suggests that apelin and ADMA may be independent indices of endothelial function with different degrees of sensitivity. It is important to recall that apelin is thought to exert a wide range of effects on different organs, and although its role in cardiovascular diseases is well established, its exact effect on endothelial cells has not been clearly defined. In addition, apelin is an adipokine, and its expression can be modulated by steroids. It may also be involved in immune and neurohormonal signaling [50]. It follows that apelin metabolism in RA patients is probably influenced by multiple factors.

As previously described by others [33, 41], our patients did not show any increase in carotid IMT; nevertheless, carotid IMT is a marker of structural damage of arterial wall reflecting the chronic atherosclerotic process. It is still debated if inflammation could have a rapid impact on vessel structure as assessed by IMT or the detection of earlier, preclinical and reversible atherosclerotic change such as endothelial dysfunction could be more affected by inflammatory state and its treatment in RA patients [51].

Finally, RA treatment reduces the inflammatory state as demonstrated by the reduction of disease activity. In our ERA patients, the DAS28 was significantly lower after 12 months of traditional and/or biological DMARD therapy, but this parameter showed no correlation with serum ADMA nor apelin levels. This correlation has also failed to emerge from previous case-control studies, probably because of the small number of patients included [22, 23, 37]. Even if in our study patients with hypercholesterolemia were excluded, a limit could be the lack of complete lipid profile at baseline and followup; however, other studies failed to demonstrate any correlation between ADMA and HDL cholesterol [23]. In this way, it would be interesting to investigate on larger groups of patients the correlation of endothelial function with inflammation-related cardiovascular markers.

This small, prospective study has been designed to assess the effect of RA treatment on two endothelial biomarkers ADMA and, for the first time apelin, the e and neurohormonal signaling [50]. It follows that apelin metabolism in RA patients is probably influenced by multiple factors.

As previously described by others [33, 41], our patients did not show any increase in carotid IMT; nevertheless, carotid IMT is a marker of structural damage of arterial wall reflecting the chronic atherosclerotic process. It is still debated if inflammation could have a rapid impact on vessel structure as assessed by IMT or the detection of earlier, preclinical and reversible atherosclerotic change such as endothelial dysfunction could be more affected by inflammatory state and its treatment in RA patients [51].

Finally, RA treatment reduces the inflammatory state as demonstrated by the reduction of disease activity. In our ERA patients, the DAS28 was significantly lower after 12 months of traditional and/or biological DMARD therapy, but this parameter showed no correlation with serum ADMA nor apelin levels. This correlation has also failed to emerge from previous case-control studies, probably because of the small number of patients included [22, 23, 37]. Even if in our study patients with hypercholesterolemia were excluded, a limit could be the lack of complete lipid profile at baseline and followup; however, other studies failed to demonstrate any correlation between ADMA and HDL cholesterol [23]. In this way, it would be interesting to investigate on larger groups of patients the correlation of endothelial function with inflammation-related cardiovascular markers.

This small, prospective study has been designed to assess the effect of RA treatment on two endothelial biomarkers ADMA and, for the first time apelin, the major shortcoming of our study is the size of the cohort we examined. Future attempts to address this issue should involve much larger populations for a longer followup.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to speculate that early, aggressive treatment of RA aimed at suppressing the inflammatory response and inducing disease remission might reduce the progression of endothelial damage. Serological markers and Doppler ultrasonography could both be used to assess endothelial function in patients with early-stage RA, not only for the purpose of detecting existing impairment but also for estimating the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Authors’ Contribution

M. Di Franco and F. R. Spinelli contributed equally to the work.

References

[1] H. Maradit-Kremers, P. J. Nicola, C. S. Crowson, K. V. Ballman, and S. E. Gabriel, ”Cardiovascular death in rheumatoid arthritis: a population-based study,” Arthritis and Rheumatism, vol. 52, no. 3, pp. 722–732, 2005.
[2] I. D. Del Rincon, K. Williams, M. P. Stern, G. L. Freeman, and A. Escalante, ”High incidence of cardiovascular events in a rheumatoid arthritis cohort not explained by traditional cardiac risk factors,” Arthritis and Rheumatism, vol. 44, pp. 2737–2745, 2001.
[3] M. Boers, B. Dijkmans, S. Gabriel, H. Maradit-Kremers, J. O’Dell, and T. Pincus, “Making an impact on mortality in rheumatoid arthritis: targeting cardiovascular comorbidity,” Arthritis and Rheumatism, vol. 50, no. 6, pp. 1734–1739, 2004.
[4] J. A. Aviña-Zubieta, H. K. Choi, M. Sadatsafavi, M. Etminan, J. M. Esdaile, and D. Lacaille, ”Risk of cardiovascular mortality in patients with rheumatoid arthritis: a meta-analysis of observational studies,” Arthritis and Rheumatism, vol. 59, no. 12, pp. 1690–1697, 2008.
[5] M. A. Gonzalez-Gay, C. Gonzalez-Juanatey, J. A. Miranda-Filloy, C. Garcia-Porrua, J. Llorca, and J. Martin, ”Cardiovascular disease in rheumatoid arthritis,” Biomedicine and Pharmacotherapy, vol. 60, no. 10, pp. 673–677, 2006.
[6] T. T. Mottonen, ”Prediction of erosiveness and rate of development of new erosions in early rheumatoid arthritis,” Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases, vol. 47, no. 8, pp. 648–653, 1988.
[7] D. M. Van der Heide, ”Joint erosions and patients with early rheumatoid arthritis,” British Journal of Rheumatology, vol. 34, supplement 2, pp. 74–78, 1995.
[8] A. van der Heide, J. W. Jacobs, J. W. Bijlsma et al., ”The effectiveness of early treatment with “second-line” antirheumatic drugs: a randomized, controlled trial,” Annals of Internal Medicine, vol. 124, no. 8, pp. 699–707, 1996.
[9] C. Esgmose, B. Lund, G. Borg et al., ”Patients with rheumatoid arthritis benefit from early 2nd line therapy: 5 year followup of a prospective double blind placebo controlled study,” Journal of Rheumatology, vol. 22, no. 12, pp. 2208–2213, 1995.
[10] L. R. Lard, H. Visser, I. Speyer et al., ”Early versus delayed treatment in patients with recent-onset rheumatoid arthritis: comparison of two cohorts who received different treatment strategies,” American Journal of Medicine, vol. 111, no. 6, pp. 446–451, 2001.
[11] A. Young, G. Koduri, M. Batley et al., ”Mortality in rheumatoid arthritis. Increased in the early course of disease, in ischaemic heart disease and in pulmonary fibrosis,” Rheumatology, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 350–357, 2007.
[12] H. John, G. Kitas, T. Toms, and N. Goodson, ”Cardiovascular co-morbidity in early rheumatoid arthritis,” Best Practice & Research: Clinical Rheumatology, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 71–82, 2009.
[13] S. Hannawi, B. Haluska, T. H. Marwick, and R. Thomas, ”Atherosclerotic disease is increased in recent-onset rheumatoid arthritis: a critical role for inflammation,” Arthritis Research and Therapy, vol. 9, no. 6, article R116, 2007.
[14] A. N. Georgiadis, P. V. Voulgari, M. I. Argyropoulou et al., “Early treatment reduces the cardiovascular risk factors in newly diagnosed rheumatoid arthritis patients,” *Seminars in Arthritis and Rheumatism*, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 13–19, 2008.

[15] R. Bergholm, M. Leirisalo-Repo, S. Vehkavaara, S. Makimattila, M. R. Taskinen, and H. Yki-Jarvinen, “Impaired responsiveness to NO in newly diagnosed patients with rheumatoid arthritis,” *Arteriosclerosis, Thrombosis, and Vascular Biology*, vol. 22, no. 10, pp. 1637–1641, 2002.

[16] D. H. Solomon, G. C. Curhan, E. B. Rimm, C. C. Canuscelio, and E. W. Karlson, “Cardiovascular risk factors in women with and without rheumatoid arthritis,” *Arthritis and Rheumatism*, vol. 50, no. 11, pp. 3444–3449, 2004.

[17] C. Turesson, L. T. Jacobsson, and E. L. Matteson, “Cardiovascular co-morbidity in rheumatic diseases,” *Vascular Health and Risk Management*, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 605–614, 2008.

[18] P. Libby, “Inflammation in atherosclerosis,” *Nature*, vol. 429, no. 6917, pp. 868–874, 2002.

[19] L. E. Full, C. Ruisanchez, and C. Monaco, “The inextricable link between atherosclerosis and prototypical inflammatory diseases rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus,” *Arthritis Research & Therapy*, vol. 11, no. 2, p. 217, 2009.

[20] U. Förstermann, “Nitric oxide and oxidative stress in vascular disease,” *Pflügers Archiv*, vol. 459, no. 6, pp. 923–939, 2010.

[21] R. H. Bög er, R. Maas, F. Schulze, and E. Schwedhelm, “Asymmetric dimethylarginine (ADMA) as a prospective marker of cardiovascular disease and mortality: An update on patient populations with a wide range of cardiovascular risk,” *Pharmacological Research*, vol. 60, no. 6, pp. 481–487, 2009.

[22] A. Surdacki, J. Martens-Lobenhoffer, A. Wloch et al., “Elevated plasma asymmetric dimethyl-L-arginine levels are linked to endothelial progenitor cell depletion and carotid atherosclerosis in rheumatoid arthritis,” *Arthritis and Rheumatism*, vol. 56, no. 3, pp. 809–819, 2007.

[23] M. Turiel, F. Atzeni, L. Tomasoni et al., “Non-invasive assessment of coronary flow reserve and ADMA levels: a case—control study of early rheumatoid arthritis patients,” *Rheumatology*, vol. 48, no. 7, pp. 834–839, 2009.

[24] R. Ladeiras-Lopes, J. Ferreira-Martins, and A. F. Leite-Moreira, “The apelinergic system: the role played in human physiology and pathology and potential therapeutic applications,” *Arquivos Brasileiros de Cardiologia*, vol. 90, no. 5, pp. 343–349, 2008.

[25] K. Tatemoto, K. Takayama, M. X. Zou et al., “The novel peptide apelin lowers blood pressure via a nitric oxide-dependent mechanism,” *Regulatory Peptides*, vol. 99, no. 2-3, pp. 87–92, 2001.

[26] F. C. Arnett, S. M. Edworthy, D. A. Bloch et al., “The American Rheumatism Association 1987 revised criteria for the classification of rheumatoid arthritis,” *Arthritis and Rheumatism*, vol. 31, no. 3, pp. 315–324, 1988.

[27] D. M. Van der Heijde, M. Van’t Hof, P. L. van Riel, and L. B. van de Putte, “Development of a disease activity score based on judgement in clinical practice by rheumatologists,” *Journal of Rheumatology*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 579–581, 1993.

[28] J. H. Stein, C. E. Korcarz, R. T. Hurst et al., “Use of carotid ultrasound to identify subclinical vascular disease and evaluate cardiovascular disease risk: a consensus statement from the American Society of Echocardiography Carotid Intima–Media Thickness Task Force. Endorsed by the Society for Vascular Medicine,” *Journal of the American Society of Echocardiography*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 93–111, 2008.

[29] S. Van Doornum, G. McColl, and I. P. Wicks, “Accelerated atherosclerosis: an extraarticular feature of rheumatoid arthritis?” *Arthritis and Rheumatism*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 862–873, 2002.

[30] G. Vaudo, S. Marchesi, R. Gerli et al., “Endothelial dysfunction in young patients with rheumatoid arthritis and low disease activity,” *Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases*, vol. 63, no. 1, pp. 31–35, 2004.

[31] K. S. Stamatelopoulos, G. D. Kitas, C. M. Papamichael et al., “Subclinical peripheral arterial disease in rheumatoid arthritis,” *Atherosclerosis*, vol. 212, no. 1, pp. 305–309, 2010.

[32] C. Gonzalez-Juanatey, A. Testa, A. Garcia-Castelo et al., “HLA-DRB1 status affects endothelial function in treated patients with rheumatoid arthritis,” *American Journal of Medicine*, vol. 114, no. 8, pp. 647–652, 2003.

[33] A. Södergren, K. Karp, K. Boman et al., “Atherosclerosis in early rheumatoid arthritis: very early endothelial activation and rapid progression of intima media thickness,” *Arthritis Research and Therapy*, vol. 12, no. 4, article R158, 2010.

[34] S. Hannawi, T. H. Marwick, and R. Thomas, “Inflammation predicts accelerated brachial arterial wall changes in patients with recent-onset rheumatoid arthritis,” *Arthritis Research and Therapy*, vol. 11, no. 2, article R51, 2009.

[35] C. González-Juanatey, J. Llorca, and M. A. González-Gay, “Correlation between endothelial function and carotid atherosclerosis in rheumatoid arthritis patients with long-standing disease,” *Arthritis Research and Therapy*, vol. 13, no. 3, article R101, 2011.

[36] A. Surdacki, “L-arginine analogs—inactive markers or active agents in atherosclerosis?” *Cardiovascular and Hematological Agents in Medicinal Chemistry*, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 302–311, 2008.

[37] A. Ito, P. S. Tsao, S. Adimoolam, M. Kimoto, T. Ogawa, and J. P. Cooke, “Novel mechanism for endothelial dysfunction: dysregulation of dimethylarginine dimethylaminohydrolase,” *Circulation*, vol. 99, no. 24, pp. 3092–3095, 1999.

[38] R. H. Bög er, K. Sydow, J. Borlak et al., “LDL cholesterol upregulates synthesis of asymmetrical dimethylarginine in human endothelial cells: involvement of S-adenosylmethionine-dependent methyltransferases,” *Circulation Research*, vol. 87, no. 2, pp. 99–105, 2000.

[39] D. Hürlimann, A. Forster, G. Noll et al., “Anti-tumor necrosis factor-α treatment improves endothelial function in patients with rheumatoid arthritis,” *Circulation*, vol. 106, no. 17, pp. 2184–2187, 2002.

[40] C. Gonzalez-Juanatey, J. Llorca, A. Sanchez Andrade, C. Garcia-Porrúa, I. Martin, and M. A. Gonzalez-Gay, “Short-term adalimumab therapy improves endothelial function in patients with rheumatoid arthritis refractory to infliximab,” *Clinical and Experimental Rheumatology*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 309–312, 2006.

[41] M. Turiel, L. Tomasoni, S. Sitia et al., “Effects of long-term disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs on endothelial function in patients with early rheumatoid arthritis,” *Cardiovascular Therapeutics*, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. e53–e64, 2010.

[42] S. Kuwahata, S. Hamasaki, S. Ishida et al., “Effect of uric acid on coronary microvascular endothelial function in women: association with eGFR and ADMA,” *Journal of Atherosclerosis and Thrombosis*, vol. 17, no. 3, pp. 259–269, 2010.

[43] M. J. Kleinz and A. P. Davenport, “Emerging roles of apelin in biology and medicine,” *Pharmacology and Therapeutics*, vol. 107, no. 2, pp. 198–211, 2005.

[44] G. Barnes, A. G. Japp, and D. E. Newby, “Translational promise of the apelin—APJ system,” *Heart*, vol. 96, no. 13, pp. 1011–1016, 2010.

[45] J. C. Zhong, Y. Huang, L. M. Yung et al., “The novel peptide apelin regulates intra renal artery tone in diabetic mice,” *Regulatory Peptides*, vol. 144, no. 1–3, pp. 109–114, 2007.
[46] N. J. Leeper, M. M. Tedesco, Y. Kojima et al., “Apelin prevents aortic aneurysm formation by inhibiting macrophage inflammation,” American Journal of Physiology, vol. 296, no. 5, pp. H1329–H1335, 2009.

[47] I. Tasci, T. Dogru, I. Naharci et al., “Plasma apelin is lower in patients with elevated LDL-cholesterol,” Experimental and Clinical Endocrinology and Diabetes, vol. 115, no. 7, pp. 428–432, 2007.

[48] G. Erdem, T. Dogru, I. Tasci, A. Sonmez, and S. Tapan, “Low plasma apelin levels in newly diagnosed type 2 diabetes mellitus,” Experimental and Clinical Endocrinology and Diabetes, vol. 116, no. 5, pp. 289–292, 2008.

[49] J. Malyszko, J. Ś. Malyszko, K. Pawlak, and M. Mysliwiec, “Visfatin and apelin, new adipocytokines, and their relation to endothelial function in patients with chronic renal failure,” Advances in Medical Sciences, vol. 53, pp. 32–36, 2008.

[50] B. Chandrasekaran, O. Dar, and T. McDonagh, “The role of apelin in cardiovascular function and heart failure,” European Journal of Heart Failure, vol. 10, no. 8, pp. 725–732, 2008.

[51] J. J. Veldhuijzen van Zanten and G. D. Kitas, “Inflammation, carotid intima-media thickness and atherosclerosis in rheumatoid arthritis,” Arthritis Research and Therapy, vol. 10, no. 1, article 102, 2008.