Heart Rate, Body Temperature and Physical Activity Are Variously Affected During Insulin Treatment in Alloxan-Induced Type 1 Diabetic Rat

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Summary
Diabetes mellitus is associated with a variety of cardiovascular complications including impaired cardiac muscle function. The effects of insulin treatment on heart rate, body temperature and physical activity in the alloxan (ALX)-induced diabetic rat were investigated using in vivo biotelemetry techniques. The electrocardiogram, physical activity and body temperature were recorded in vivo with a biotelemetry system for 10 days before ALX treatment, for 20 days following administration of ALX (120 mg/kg) and thereafter, for 15 days whilst rats received daily insulin. Heart rate declined rapidly after administration of ALX. Pre-ALX heart rate was 321±9 beats per minute, falling to 285±12 beats per minute 15-20 days after ALX and recovering to 331±10 beats per minute 5-10 days after commencement of insulin. Heart rate variability declined and PQ, QRS and QT intervals were prolonged after administration of ALX. Physical activity and body temperature declined after administration of ALX. Pre-ALX body temperature was 37.6±0.1 °C, falling to 37.3±0.1 °C 15-20 days after ALX and recovering to 37.8±0.1 °C 5-10 days after commencement of insulin. ALX-induced diabetes is associated with disturbances in heart rhythm, physical activity and body temperature that are variously affected during insulin treatment.

Key words
Heart rate • Physical activity • Body temperature • Diabetes mellitus • Alloxan • Insulin

Introduction
Cardiovascular disease is a major cause of morbidity and mortality in diabetic patients and hearts of diabetic patients are in a compromised condition (Julien 1997, Dhalla et al. 1985). Diabetic patients show a higher incidence of cardiac arrhythmias, including ventricular fibrillation and sudden death. The electrocardiogram of diabetic patients may show a number of abnormalities including alterations to the QT interval, which reflects the total duration of ventricular myocardial depolarisation and repolarisation, and T wave (Casis and Echevarria 2004, Veglio et al. 2004, Veglio et al. 2002, Veglio et al. 2000). Various abnormalities including autonomic dysfunction, defective glucose metabolism, vascular disease, myocardial ischemia, cardiac fibrosis, cardiac hypertrophy may play a role in the pathogenesis of electrical disturbances in diabetic heart. Treatment of young adult rats with alloxan (2,4,5,6-tetraoxypyrimidine; 5,6-dioxyuracil; ALX) produces a diabetic state that is characterized by poor weight gain,
polydipsia, polyuria, polyphagia, dyslipidemia, hypoinsulinaemia and hyperglycaemia (Wexler and Lutmer 1975, Altura et al. 1981). Experiments in ALX-induced diabetic rabbits have demonstrated that prolonged QT interval is partly attributed to alterations in various K⁺ and Ca²⁺ currents including the transient outward K(+) current, the rapid and slow delayed rectifier K(+) current and L-type Ca²⁺ current (Zhang et al. 2007, Lengyel et al. 2008). Previous in vivo biotelemetry studies have reported the effects of short- and long-term streptozotocin (STZ)-induced diabetes on heart rate, body temperature and physical activity. Following STZ treatment heart rate, body temperature and physical activity are reduced and there is a recovery of heart rate and body temperature during insulin treatment (Howarth et al. 2005a, Howarth et al. 2005b, Howarth et al. 2006). The aim of this study was to utilize in vivo biotelemetry techniques to investigate the effects of insulin treatment on heart rate, body temperature and physical activity in the ALX-induced diabetic rat in conscious, unrestrained animals and compare the effects with those reported in the STZ-induced diabetic rat.

Methods

Telemetry system

Previously described biotelemetry techniques were used to acquire heart biopotential, physical activity and body temperature (Howarth et al. 2006). The system comprised the transmitter devices (TA11CTA-F40, Data Sciences Int., USA), the receivers (RPC-1), a data exchange matrix (20CH) and a personal computer for system configuration, control, acquisition, and data storage. The transmitter devices were surgically implanted in 6 male Wistar rats (445.7±29.2 g) under general anaesthesia (sodium pentobarbitone, 45 mg/kg, intraperitoneal). The devices were inserted into the peritoneal cavity and electrodes from the transmitter were arranged in Einthoven bipolar – Lead II configuration with one electrode connected to the right foreleg and one to the left hind leg. In addition to ECG the implant transmits core temperature. Physical activity was assessed by measuring changes in the animal’s transmitter signal strength. Specifically, the transmitter signal strength was sampled at 64 Hz and calibrated to counts per minute. When the animal changes position, the corresponding transmitter signal strength is changed, which results in a change in counts per minute. Low counts indicate reduced physical activity in the animal (Howarth et al. 2006). After recovery from surgery, transmitters were then switched on by activation of a magnetic switch, located in the transmitter device, with a permanent magnet brought into close proximity to the animal. Data recording was started 5 days before the induction of diabetes and continued after injection of ALX and during insulin treatment. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences Ethics Committee for Animal Research.

Induction of diabetes and insulin treatment

After 5 days of data acquisition, diabetes was induced in the 6 Wistar rats by a single intraperitoneal injection of ALX (120 mg/kg body weight; Sigma, St Louis, MO, USA) (Wexler and Lutmer 1975, Zhang et al. 2007, Altura et al. 1981). The ALX was dissolved in a citrate buffer solution (0.1 mol/l citric acid, 0.1 mol/l sodium citrate; pH 4.5). Insulin (Lantus, Sanofi-Aventis, France) treatment (2-5 Units per day, subcutaneous) was started on Day 21 after ALX and continued for a period of 15 days. Non-fasting blood glucose was measured 6 and 24 hours after insulin treatment. Blood was obtained from a small knick in the tail and blood glucose was measured with a glucometer (One Touch Ultra, Lifescan Inc., USA).

Data collection and analysis

Electrocardiogram, physical activity and body temperature data were collected 5 minutes per hour per animal, 24 hours per day, and 7 days per week for the duration of the study. Data recording commenced 5 days before the administration of ALX and continued thereafter for the remainder of the experimental period. From the collected electrocardiographic data, secondary physiological measurements were determined including the average 5-minute heart rate, heart rate variability and PQ, QRS and QT-intervals. Statistical comparisons were made between group day values using paired t-test and p-values less than 0.05 were considered significant.

Results

General characteristics of the ALX-induced diabetic rat

Mean bodyweight and blood glucose values at the start of the experiment before ALX treatment were 445.7±29.2 g and 105.0±3.2 mg/dl (n=6), respectively. Mean bodyweight and blood glucose immediately before commencement of insulin treatment were 396.2±28.4 g and 425.8±74.4 mg/dl (n=6), respectively. During the
15 days of insulin treatment the mean blood glucose recorded 6 hours after insulin treatment was 61.3±14.1 mg/dl.

Heart rate

Heart rate was determined from the 5-minute average of all normal R-wave to R-wave intervals in the electrocardiogram. The effects of ALX treatment on heart rate are shown in Fig. 1a and 1b. Heart rate fell rapidly and dramatically after administration of ALX (Fig. 1a). Before ALX treatment the heart rate was 321±9 beats per minute, falling significantly (p<0.01) to 285±12 beats per minute 15-20 days after ALX. Heart rate recovered and exceeded pre-ALX levels 5-10 days after commencement of insulin (331±10 beats per minute) (Fig. 1b).

Heart rate variability

Heart rate variability was computed as the standard deviation (STD) of the average of normal-to-normal beats (SDANN). Specifically, the SDANN was computed by first determining the 5-minute, average heart rate for each animal every hour. Then, the STD of 12 previous heart rate averages and 12 subsequent heart rate averages was computed in order to determine the 24-hour heart rate variability. The effects of ALX treatment on SDANN defined heart rate variability are shown in Figures 2a and 2b. Heart rate variability before ALX treatment was 28±2 beats per minute, falling modestly to 23±3 beats per minute 15-20 days after ALX. Insulin treatment for 5-10 days did not significantly (p>0.05) improve heart rate variability (24±4 beats per minute) (Fig. 2b).

Electrocardiogram

The effects of ALX on PQ interval are shown in Figures 3a and 3b. Before ALX treatment the PQ interval was (51±1 msec). The PQ interval was modestly prolonged following ALX (52±2 msec) and recovered during insulin treatment (49±2 msec) (Fig. 3b). The effects of ALX on QRS interval are shown in Figures 3c and 3d. Before ALX treatment the QRS interval was 14.4±0.4 msec. ALX modestly prolonged...
Fig. 3. Effects of ALX-induced diabetes on the electrocardiogram. (a, c, e, g) Gray line displays the hourly group mean PQ, QRS, QT and corrected QT intervals, respectively, and black line displays the 24 hr group mean. (b, d, f, h) Group mean of PQ, QRS, QT and corrected QT intervals, respectively, with associated standard error bars for pre-ALX, 15-20 days after ALX, and 5-10 days (Day 25-30) following insulin treatment. Data are mean ± SEM, n=6 rats. Statistical significance * p<0.05 and ** p<0.01.
(14.7±0.4 msec) and insulin normalized (14.4±0.3 msec) the QRS interval (Fig. 3d). The effects of ALX on QT interval are shown in Fig. 3e and 3f. Before ALX treatment the QT interval was 59±2 msec. ALX significantly (p<0.01) prolonged (64±2 msec) and QT was further prolonged during insulin treatment (66±2 msec) (Fig. 3f). The effects of ALX on corrected QT interval (Bazett) are shown in Figures 3g and 3h. Before ALX treatment the corrected QT was 133±6 msec. ALX modestly prolonged (137±4 msec) and insulin further prolonged (154±6 msec) corrected QT interval (Fig. 3h).

Physical activity

Physical activity was assessed by measuring changes in the animal’s transmitter signal strength. Specifically, the transmitter signal strength was sampled at 64 Hz and calibrated to counts per minute. When the animal changes its position, the corresponding transmitter signal strength is changed, which results in a change in counts per minute. Low counts indicate reduced physical activity in the animal. The effects of ALX on physical activity are shown in Figures 4a and 4b. Before ALX treatment physical activity was 1.87±0.23 counts per minute, falling modestly to 1.42±0.27 counts per minute 15-20 days after ALX. Physical activity was not improved by insulin (1.39±0.21 counts per minute) (Fig. 4b).

Body temperature

In addition to the electrocardiogram the implant transmits core temperature. Similar to the heart rate, the temperature was measured and recorded each hour. The effects of ALX treatment on body temperature are shown in Figures 5a and 5b. The 24-hour computed average body temperature declined after administration of ALX. Before ALX treatment the body temperature was 37.6±0.1 °C, falling significantly (p=0.01) to 37.3±0.1 °C 15-20 days after ALX. Body temperature recovered and exceeded pre-ALX levels 5-10 days after commencement of insulin (37.8±0.1 °C) (Fig. 5b). The combined effects of ALX on heart rate, body temperature and physical activity data are shown in Figure 6. Following ALX treatment there was a decline in heart rate, body temperature and physical activity. The decline of physical
activity occurred at the highest rate and this was followed by a decline in heart rate and body temperature which took place more-or-less in parallel. Heart rate and body temperature recovered and physical activity remained depressed during insulin treatment.

**Discussion**

This study employed in vivo biotelemetry techniques to investigate the effects of ALX-induced diabetes and insulin treatment on heart rate, body temperature and physical activity in unrestrained, conscious animals.

Diabetes was confirmed by a 4-fold increase in blood glucose following ALX treatment. Administration of insulin began 21 days after ALX and was continued for the remainder of the study. The dose of insulin was varied between 2-5 Units per day depending on blood glucose levels which were measured on a daily basis, 6 and 24 hours after insulin treatment. The choice of insulin (Lantus, Sanofi-Aventis, France) and the treatment protocol were effective in reducing blood glucose levels to approx. 60 mg/dl at 6 hours after insulin compared to pre-insulin blood glucose levels of 430 mg/dl.

Heart rate, measured in vivo with a biotelemetry system, was reduced rapidly and dramatically following ALX treatment. Insulin treatment not only reversed the effects of ALX but also increased heart rate compared to pre-ALX levels. A previous in vivo biotelemetry study also demonstrated a rapid reduction in heart rate following administration of the diabetogenic agent streptozotocin (STZ) and a biphasic recovery of heart rate during insulin treatment (Howarth et al. 2006).

Reductions in rate have also been demonstrated in vitro for example in isolated heart and in spontaneously-beating atria following ALX treatment (Garber et al. 1983, Ozcelikay et al. 1993, Kulkarni et al. 2002, Karasu et al. 1990). These data suggest that a mechanism that is intrinsic to the heart may partly underlie the bradycardia observed in ALX-induced diabetic heart. It should be noted however, that some studies have reported no effects of ALX on resting heart rate (Lee et al. 1989, Zola et al. 1988). A recent study demonstrated that perfusion of the isolated heart with ALX caused a reduction in heart rate suggesting that ALX may have direct actions on heart function that are not attributable to diabetes mellitus (Salem et al. 2009).

The PQ interval was not significantly altered by ALX treatment a finding that is consistent with a previous study performed in ALX-induced diabetic dogs (Lengyel et al. 2007). Interestingly, a study in type 1 diabetic patients with cardiovascular autonomic neuropathy, demonstrated a shorter PQ interval suggesting an impairment of atrio-ventricular conduction velocity (Krahulec et al. 2002). Consistent with the reduction in heart rate ALX treatment caused a prolongation of the QT interval which is a reflection of the total duration of ventricular myocardial depolarisation and repolarisation. Some previous studies have demonstrated prolongation of action potential duration in papillary muscle preparations from ALX-induced diabetic heart which would be consistent with prolonged QT (Chen et al. 2004, Sauviat and Feuvray 1986). The prolonged QT may be partly attributed to alterations in various K+ and Ca2+ currents including the transient outward K(+) current, the rapid and slow delayed rectifier K(+) current and L-type Ca2+ current (Zhang et al. 2007, Lengyel et al. 2008).

Heart rate variability, an indicator of sympathovagal modulation of heart function (Ferrari et al. 1987, Bootsma et al. 1994), was modestly reduced in ALX treated rats. Studies in diabetic rat following short- and long-term STZ treatment have also demonstrated reductions in heart rate variability and other related indices (Howarth et al. 2005a, Howarth et al. 2005b, Fazan et al. 1999, Lo et al. 2002) suggesting that disturbances in autonomic drive to the heart may also partly underlie the reduction in heart rate observed in the ALX-induced diabetic rat.

Following ALX treatment there was a rapid
decline in physical activity and this was followed by a
decline in heart rate and body temperature which took
place more-or-less in parallel. Heart rate and body
temperature recovered and physical activity remained
depressed during insulin treatment. Hypothyroidism is a
widely reported feature of ALX-induced diabetes
(Kulkarni et al. 2002, Karasu et al. 1990, Vadlamudi and
McNeill 1984, Garber and Neely 1983). Experimentally
induced hypothyroidism in rats causes impairments in
diastolic and systolic function and a reduced heart rate
(Galinanes et al. 1994, Seppet et al. 1993, Yin et al.
1992, Balkman et al. 1992, McDonough et al. 1987). On
the other hand hyperthyroidism is associated with cardiac
hypertrophy, tachycardia and elevated myocardial
contractility (Wheatley et al. 1990, Lortet et al. 1989).
Baseline isolated atrial rate is lower in hypothyroid and
higher in hyperthyroid compared to euthyroid rats
(Turner and Shenfield 1980). Hyperthyroid state
produced by administration of triiodothyronine is
characterized by an increase in heart rate and cardiac
output (Zierhut and Zimmer 1989). The duration of action
potential recorded from single papillary muscle cells from
60 day old rats, thyroidectomised at weaning, is longer
than in preparations from euthyroid rats. Treatment of
thyroidectomised rats with triiodothyronine restores the
values of action potential duration present in euthyroid
animals (Di Meo et al. 1991). Taken together these
findings may suggest, subject to measurement of thyroid
hormone, that alterations in thyroid hormone, and its
calorigenic heat promoting actions, may partly underlie
the reduction in body temperature and heart rate
following ALX treatment.

Physical activity was reduced following ALX
treatment. Reduced physical activity may partly underlie
reduced heart rate. Insulin treatment had no significant
effect on physical activity but it did normalize heart rate.
The mechanism(s) underlying ALX-induced hypoactivity
will require further investigation. However, it is possible
that ALX may have caused irreparable damage to some
aspect of glucose uptake and utilization that subsequently
prevent the generation of full energy balance required for
optimal physical activity. Since calcium is crucial to
muscle contraction and physical activity, the disturbance
in calcium homeostasis caused by ALX (Salem et al.
2009) may take a longer time to be corrected even after
initial insulin treatment and thus a possible contributing
factor in the development of reduced physical activity in
ALX-treated rats.

In conclusion ALX-induced diabetes is
associated with disturbances in heart rhythm, physical
activity and body temperature that are variously affected
during insulin treatment. Alterations in autonomic drive
and electrical conduction may partly underlie heart
rhythm disturbances in ALX-induced diabetic rat heart.
Effects attributed to ALX-induced diabetes may be
complicated by associated hypothyroidism.

Conflict of Interest
There is no conflict of interest.

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Abbreviations
ALX, Alloxan, STD, Standard deviation, SDANN,
Standard deviation of the average of normal-to-normal
beats.

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