Skin Autofluorescence Measurement in Subclinical Atheromatous Disease: Results from the ILERVAS Project

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Aim: Advanced glycation end-products (AGEs) have been involved in the atherogenic process in the high-risk population. The goal of this study was to demonstrate that AGEs are related to subclinical atheromatous disease in subjects with low to moderate vascular risk.

Methods: A cross-sectional study in which 2,568 non-diabetic subjects of both sexes without cardiovascular disease were included. Subcutaneous content of AGEs was assessed by skin autofluorescence (SAF) and subclinical atheromatous disease was measured by assessing the atheromatous plaque burden in carotid and femoral regions using ultrasonography. In addition, serum pentosidine, carboxymethyl-lysine (CML) and AGE receptors (RAGE) were assessed in a nested case-control study with 41 subjects without plaque and 41 individuals subjects with generalized disease.

Results: Patients with atheromatous plaque had a higher SAF than those with no plaque (1.9 [1.7 to 2.3] vs. 1.8 [1.6 to 2.1] arbitrary units (AU), p<0.001). The SAF correlated with the total number of affected regions (r=0.171, p<0.001), increasing progressively from 1.8 [1.6 to 2.1] AU in those without atheromatous disease to 2.3 [1.9 to 2.7] AU in patients with ≥ 8 plaques (p<0.001). A correlation was also observed between SAF and the total plaque area (r=0.113, p<0.001). The area under the Receiver Operating Characteristic curve was 0.65 (0.61 to 0.68) for identifying male subjects with atheromatous disease. The multivariable logistic regression model showed a significant and independent association between SAF and the presence of atheromatous disease.
Introduction

The natural progression of atherosclerosis involves a long silent period, and the advanced stages of the disease are frequently not detected until cardiovascular ischemic events occur. For this reason, the assessment of classical determinants of atherosclerosis, such as high blood pressure, atherogenic dyslipidemia, smoking habit, and type 2 diabetes has well-recognized limitations, particularly in lower-risk groups such as young people and women. In addition, the identification of subclinical atherosclerosis may help physicians to identify vulnerable subjects at increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD) and develop strategies to arrest disease progress.

The advanced glycation end-products (AGEs) constitute a complex group of compounds formed by the slow non-enzymatic glycation of proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids, of which about 20 have been identified to date. The AGEs have been related to the appearance and progression of vascular changes such as increased permeability and thickening and stiffness of the arterial wall, resulting in the development of atheromatous plaques decreasing luminal space. However, whether or not the magnitude of AGEs deposition in vascular walls is related to the main characteristics of atheromatous disease, such as the number of affected regions, plaque location, and the total area of the atheromatous plaques remain to be elucidated. To shed light on this issue, we performed a cross-sectional study using the non-invasive assessment of tissue accumulation of AGEs through skin autofluorescence (SAF) in 2,568 subjects without a previous history of vascular disease who had undergone bilateral carotid and femoral ultrasound exploration in the setting of the ILERVAS project.

In addition, the association between circulating AGEs and vascular disease has been previously evaluated with opposing results. Therefore, we also designed a nested case-control study addressed to evaluate the serum concentration of pentosidine, carboxymethyl-lysine (CML), and AGEs receptors (RAGE) in 41 subjects without plaque and 41 patients with generalized disease.

Methods

Design of the Study and Description of the Study Population

Cross-Sectional Study

A total of 2,568 Caucasian subjects were enrolled between July 2015 and December 2017 from primary health centers in an ongoing prospective study aimed at evaluating the presence of asymptomatic CVD in the province of Lleida, Spain (ILERVAS Project; ClinicalTrials.gov Identifier: NCT03228459).

The following inclusion criteria were used: men and women aged between 45 and 70 years old, without any history of vascular disease (ischemic heart disease, stroke, or peripheral arteriopathy), and at least one traditional cardiovascular risk factor (hypertension, dyslipidemia, a body mass index (BMI) ≥ 30 kg/m², smoking, or a first-degree family member with premature cardiovascular disease). Clinical information was obtained from an electronic database (Information System for the Development of Research in Primary Care, SIDIAP) that contains anonymized, longitudinal data from the 31 primary care centers pertaining to the Catalan Health Institute in the province of Lleida, Spain. The exclusion criteria comprised of the presence of chronic kidney disease, active neoplasia, a life expectancy of fewer than 18 months, darker skin color (Fitzpatrick classes > 5), and pregnant women. Subjects with type 1 and type 2 diabetes were also excluded.

Key words: Advanced glycation end-products, Atheromatous plaque burden, Cardiovascular risk, Skin autofluorescence
tes, major risk factors for cardiovascular disease were also excluded.

For all subjects, data were available regarding both SAF and vascular carotid and femoral ultrasound examinations. Anthropometric data were obtained by standardized protocols. Smoking status (never/current/ex-smoker) was recorded. Smokers who stopped smoking ≥ 1 year prior to recruitment were considered ex-smokers.

The prescribed antihypertensive and lipid-lowering treatments were extracted from prescription- and pharmacy-invoicing databases provided by the CatSalut (Catalan Health Service), which are incorporated yearly into the SIDIAP database. Antihypertensive medication agents included angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, diuretics, aldosterone receptor antagonist type II, beta-blockers, calcium antagonists, and other antihypertensives. Lipid-lowering drugs included statins, fibrates, ezetimibe, and omega-3 fatty acids. In addition, the use of anticoagulant or antiplatelet agents was also recorded.

**Nested Case-Control Study**

Serum concentrations of pentosidine, CML, and RAGE were assessed in a subgroup of 41 subjects with generalized atheromatous subclinical disease (≥ 4 affected territories with plaque) matched (1:1) to 41 controls without plaque carefully matched by gender, age (± 4 years), the BMI (± 3 kg/m²) and total cholesterol (± 30 mg/dL). The inclusion and exclusion criteria were the same as in the cross-sectional study.

**Assessment of Atheromatous Plaque Burden**

Bilateral carotid (common artery, bifurcation, internal, and external) and femoral (common and superficial) areas were explored. The images were obtained by trained sonographers using an ultrasonic Doppler Ultrasound Vivid-I (General Electrics Healthcare, Waukesha, WI) equipped with a linear transducer broadband linear 12L-RS that operates at frequencies between 5–13 MHz. Standardized and validated scanning and reading protocols were used to decrease inter-operator variability and type 2 errors.

To evaluate intraobserver reliability, a total of 20 individuals were measured three to five times on diverse days. A k-coefficient of one was obtained for plaque assessment, demonstrating excellent intraobserver reliability. The readers were unaware of the patients’ clinical histories.

Subclinical atheromatosis was defined as the presence of at least one plaque in any of the 12 assessed areas. A plaque was defined as a focal intima-media thickness ≥ 1.5 mm protruding in the lumen. Participants were classified as having focal (1 region), intermediate (2 to 3 regions), or generalized (4 to 12 regions) atheromatous disease. The carotid plaque area was measured, and the total plaque area (cm²) was defined as the sum of the area of each plaque within the same subject.

**Measurement of Skin Autofluorescence**

SAF was measured using the AGE Reader™ device (DiagOptics Technologies, Groningen, The Netherlands); a fully automated non-invasive tool that measures AGEs deposition in the forearm using an Ultraviolet-A spectrum. The mean value of three readings (arbitrary units: AU) was recorded. Skin areas that were tattooed or colored with cosmetics, were heavily freckled, or had vessels near to the surface of the skin were avoided. A single device, maintained and calibrated by the manufacturer following their recommendations, was used for all measurements. Repeated SAF measurements with the AGE Reader™ device taken over a single day showed an overall Altman error percentage of 5.03%, and intra-individual seasonal variance showed an Altman error percentage of 5.87%.

**Evaluation of Lipid Profile and Glycated Hemoglobin**

Total cholesterol (mg/dl) concentrations were obtained in the entire population included in the study from a non-fasting dried capillary blood testing (fingertip puncture) using the Reflotrons® Plus system (Roche). Determination of the complete lipid profile [high density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol, and triglycerides] was determined only in subjects in which total cholesterol was ≥ 200 mg/dL and fasted for 6 hours or total cholesterol ≥ 250 mg/dL regardless of fasting hours. As the presence of type 2 diabetes was an exclusion criterion in the ILERVAS project, data of fasting blood glucose is not available in our study. However, the glycated hemoglobin (HbA1c) test was performed to all participants using a point-of-care device [Cobas B 101® (Roche Diagnostics) system].

**Laboratory Assessment of Serum AGEs**

In addition to previous determinations, a venous blood sample was collected from the antecubital vein, separated by centrifugation (2,000 g at 4°C for 20 min) and frozen at −80°C for batched storage and analysis. Samples were obtained with support by IRBLleida Biobank (B.0000682) from Plataforma Biobancos (PT13/0010/0014). Serum concentrations of pentosidine, CML, and the soluble form of RAGE were determined in duplicate by an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) kit provided by MyBioSource (catalog number MBS036744,
Intra-assay and inter-assay precision of SAF was determined using an ELISA plate reader (Source Bioscience, Nottingham, UK). Intra-assay and inter-assay precision coefficient of variation <15% for all analytes.

Statistical Analysis

The normal distribution of the variables was evaluated using the Shapiro–Wilk test. Given its skewed distribution, quantitative data are expressed as the median (interquartile range). Comparisons between groups were made using the Mann–Whitney U test for quantitative variables, and the Pearson’s chi-squared for categorical variables. The relationship between continuous variables was assessed by the Spearman correlation test.

The accuracy of SAF as a measurement of interest in discriminating diseased subjects (patients with ≥1 plaque) from cases without atheromatous disease was evaluated using a Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve analysis with a complete sensitivity/specificity report and calculating Youden J statistic.

A multivariable logistic regression model with the enter method was used to explore the variables that were independently associated with the presence of atheromatous plaque. The independent variables included in the analysis were SAF and well-established cardiovascular risk factors such as gender, age, smoking status, systolic blood pressure, lipid profile (total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, HDL cholesterol, and triglycerides), together with HbA1c and antihypertensive or lipid-lowering treatment. The calibration and discrimination of the logistic model were evaluated using the test of fit Hosmer–Lemeshow and the area under the curve, respectively. All “p” values were based on a two-sided test of statistical significance. Significance was accepted at the level of p value <0.05. The analyses were performed using SPSS statistical package (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 20.0. Armonk, NY, USA).

Ethics Statement

All participants signed an informed consent, and the study was approved by the Arnau de Vilanova University Hospital ethics committee (CEIC-1410) and was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments.

Results

The prevalence of subclinical atheromatous disease in the study population was 70.4%: 21.8% restricted to carotid regions, 33.2% restricted to femoral regions, and 45.0% with plaques in both regions. The main clinical characteristics and metabolic data according to the presence of plaque are shown in Table 1. Asymptomatic atherosclerosis was higher in active smokers and in men, and increased with age, blood pressure levels, and LDL cholesterol concentration. In addition, patients with subclinical atheromatous disease showed a higher SAF than subjects without disease (1.9 [1.7 to 2.3] vs. 1.8 [1.6 to 2.1] AU, p < 0.001). SAF was also higher when both carotid and femoral regions were affected (2.0 [1.7 to 2.3] AU) than when the disease was restricted to carotid (1.9 [1.7 to 2.2] AU, p = 0.008) or femoral (1.9 [1.7 to 2.2] AU, p = 0.004) regions. Finally, SAF increased progressively from patients without plaque (1.8 [1.6 to 2.1] AU) to those with generalized (2.0 [1.8 to 2.4] AU) subclinical atherosclerosis (p < 0.001) (Fig. 1A). Subjects with ≥8 affected regions showed the higher SAF (2.3 [1.9 to 2.7] AU). In the univariate analysis, a positive correlation between SAF and the number of affected regions was observed (r = 0.171, p < 0.001).

The total plaque area was 0.51 [0.21 to 1.07] cm², ranging from 0.13 [0.09 to 0.23] in patients with only one plaque to 1.41 [0.90 to 2.12] cm² when the disease was generalized (Fig. 1B). A positive significant correlation was also observed between SAF and the total plaque area (r = 0.113, p < 0.001).

The ROC analysis revealed that the best cut-off point for SAF (combining sensitivity plus specificity) for identifying patients with a subclinical atheromatous disease was 2.05 AU in the entire population. At this point, the area under the ROC was 0.59 (0.57 to 0.61). This value increased to 0.65 (0.61 to 0.68) with a sensitivity of 55.6% and a specificity of 66.9% when the ROC analysis was restricted to men, and the cut-off point was reduced to 1.85 AU (Fig. 2). At this point, the percentage of subjects with any plaque increased from 70.6% among those with a SAF < 1.85 AU to 85.9% among those with a SAF ≥ 1.85 AU (p < 0.001). This data indicates more than a 2-fold increased risk of the presence of an atheromatous plaque (mean difference 2.5 [95% confidence interval (CI) 1.9 to 3.4]; p < 0.001) in comparison with subjects with lower SAF values. In addition, the total plaque area was higher among men with a SAF ≥ 1.85 AU in comparison with a lower SAF amount (0.81 [0.39 to 1.50] vs. 0.58 [0.24 to 1.15] cm², p < 0.001).

The multivariable logistic regression model...
Table 1. Main clinical characteristics and metabolic data of the study population according to the presence of at least one atheromatous plaque

|                                | Subjects without plaque | Subjects with ≥ 1 plaque | p value |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| n                              | 760                     | 1808                     | -       |
| Women, n (%)                   | 488 (64.2)              | 825 (45.6)               | <0.001  |
| Age (years)                    | 56 [52 to 61]           | 58 [53 to 63]            | <0.001  |
| Dyslipidemia, n (%)            | 347 (45.7)              | 965 (53.5)               | <0.001  |
| Total Cholesterol (mg/dL)      | 198 [178 to 224]        | 203 [180 to 229]         | 0.015   |
| LDL Cholesterol1 (mg/dL)       | 141 [125 to 154]        | 144 [129 to 163]         | 0.017   |
| HDL Cholesterol1 (mg/dL)       | 58 [48 to 68]           | 54 [45 to 66]            | 0.015   |
| Triglycerides1 (mg/dL)         | 124 [92 to 170]         | 135 [129 to 163]         | 0.001   |
| Lipid-lowering agents, n (%)   | 98 (12.9)               | 349 (19.3)               | <0.001  |
| Blood hypertension, n (%)      | 257 (33.9)              | 782 (43.3)               | <0.001  |
| Systolic BP (mm Hg)            | 127 [116 to 138]        | 131 [121 to 143]         | <0.001  |
| Diastolic BP (mm Hg)           | 80 [74 to 87]           | 82 [76 to 89]            | <0.001  |
| Antihypertensives, n (%)       | 215 (28.3)              | 625 (34.6)               | 0.002   |
| Obesity (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m²), n (%)| 229 (30.2)              | 517 (28.6)               | 0.437   |
| BMI (kg/m²)                    | 28.7 [25.6 to 31.6]     | 28.6 [25.9 to 31.8]      | 0.563   |
| Former smoker, n (%)           | 591 (27.7)              | 1455 (31.1)              | <0.001  |
| Current smoker, n (%)          | 407 (19.1)              | 1545 (33.0)              | <0.001  |
| First-degree family member with premature CVD, n (%) | 81 (10.7) | 202 (11.2) | 0.702 |
| Anticoagulants/Antiplatelets, n (%) | 15 (2.0) | 57 (3.2) | 0.098 |
| HbA1c (%)                      | 5.5 [5.3 to 5.7]        | 5.5 [5.3 to 5.8]         | 0.006   |
| eGFR (mL/min per 1.73 m²)      | 96.6 [85.5 to 102.7]    | 95.2 [84.9 to 101.9]     | 0.063   |
| SAF (AU)                       | 1.8 [1.6 to 2.1]        | 1.9 [1.7 to 2.3]         | <0.001  |

Data are median [interquartile range] n (percentage); BMI: body mass index; LDL: low density lipoprotein; 1: determination was done in cases in which total cholesterol was ≥ 200 mg/dL and fast for 6 hours or total cholesterol ≥ 250 mg/dL regardless of fasting hours; eGFR: estimated glomerular filtration rate estimated according the CKD-EPI (Chronic Kidney Disease Epidemiology Collaboration) equation; BP: blood pressure; BMI: body mass index; CVD: cardiovascular disease; HbA1c: glycated hemoglobin; SAF: skin autofluorescence.

Fig. 1. Skin autofluorescence according to the affected territories with atheromatous disease (A) and the quartiles of total plaque area (B)

Participants in A) were defined as having focal (1 territory), intermediate (2 to 3 territories), or generalized (4 to 12 territories) atheromatous disease. SAF: skin autofluorescence; AU: arbitrary units; *p < 0.001. Patients with focal, intermediate and generalize atheromatous disease showed a significantly higher SAF than subjects without plaque (p < 0.001, for all). Participants in B) were defined by quartiles of total plaque area. Patients in the second, third and fourth quartile showed a significantly higher SAF than subjects in the first quartile (p < 0.001, for all).
showed that older age, male gender, and current smoker followed by SAF were independent risk factors (all \( p < 0.001 \)) for atheromatous disease in the entire population (Table 2). In fact, the risk of having atheroma plaque increases 1.8 times for each SAF unit. Systolic blood pressure and LDL cholesterol also appeared to be independently associated with atheromatous disease, but with a lower odds ratio than the previous factors. When males were evaluated alone, the risk of having any atheroma plaque increases 4.11 times for each SAF unit (Table 3).

Finally, no differences in serum concentrations of pentosidine, CML, or RAGE were observed among the 82 patients with and without generalized atheromatous disease (Table 4). In addition, SAF failed to show a significant correlation with CML (\( r = 0.036, p = 0.791 \)), pentosidine (\( r = 0.140, p = 0.284 \)) or RAGE (\( r = -0.072, p = 0.769 \)) in this small subgroup of participants.

**Table 2.** The multivariable logistic regression model for presence of atheromatous disease and its variables associated including the entire population of the study

| Atheromatous disease                | OR (95% CI)          | \( p \) value |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| Gender                             |                      |               |
| Women                              | Ref.                 |               |
| Men                                | 3.27 (2.15 to 4.97)  | <0.001        |
| Age (years)                        | 1.11 (1.07 to 1.15)  | <0.001        |
| Smoking status                     |                      |               |
| Never                              | Ref.                 |               |
| Former                             | 2.03 (1.37 to 3.02)  | <0.001        |
| Current                            | 4.32 (2.67 to 6.98)  | <0.001        |
| Skin autofluorescence (AU)         | 1.87 (1.23 to 2.86)  | 0.004         |
| HbA1c (%)                          | 1.39 (0.84 to 2.33)  | 0.202         |
| Systolic blood pressure (mm Hg)    | 1.02 (1.01 to 1.03)  | 0.003         |
| Antihypertensive treatment         |                      |               |
| No                                 | Ref.                 |               |
| Yes                                | 1.01 (0.69 to 1.49)  | 0.961         |
| Total Cholesterol (mg/dL)          |                      |               |
| < 200                              | Ref.                 |               |
| \( \geq 200 \)                      | 1.53 (0.33 to 7.07)  | 0.588         |
| LDL Cholesterol (mg/dL)            | 1.01 (1.00 to 1.01)  | 0.042         |
| HDL Cholesterol (mg/dL)            | 1.01 (0.99 to 1.02)  | 0.239         |
| Triglycerides (mg/dL)              | 1.00 (0.99 to 1.05)  | 0.138         |
| Lipid-lowering agents              |                      |               |
| No                                 | Ref.                 |               |
| Yes                                | 0.70 (0.41 to 1.18)  | 0.175         |
| Test of fit Hosmer–Lemeshow        |                      | 0.118         |
| Area under de ROC curve            | 0.76 (0.70 to 0.81)  | <0.001        |
our cohort of middle-aged asymptomatic subjects, a close relationship between SAF and the atheromatous plaque burden (the presence of plaque, the number of affected territories, and the total area of atheromatous plaque) has been observed.

The prevalence of subclinical atheromatous dis-

**Table 3.** Independent variables significantly associated with the presence of atheromatous disease in the multivariable logistic regression model according to gender

|                          | OR (95% CI)          | p value |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| **Atheromatous disease in male** |                      |         |
| Age (years)              | 1.07 (1.01 to 1.14)  | 0.025   |
| Smoking status           |                      |         |
| Never                    | Ref.                 |         |
| Former                   | 1.95 (1.01 to 3.79)  | 0.050   |
| Current                  | 3.48 (1.63 to 7.42)  | 0.001   |
| Skin autofluorescence (AU)| 4.11 (1.71 to 9.87)  | 0.002   |
| Test of fit Hosmer–Lemeshow| -                    | 0.522   |
| Area under de ROC curve  | 0.77 (0.71 to 0.82)  | <0.001  |

**Atheromatous disease in female**

|                          | OR (95% CI)          | p value |
|--------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| Age (years)              | 1.12 (1.08 to 1.17)  | <0.001  |
| Smoking status           |                      |         |
| Never                    | Ref.                 |         |
| Former                   | 2.13 (1.27 to 3.57)  | 0.004   |
| Current                  | 5.02 (2.64 to 9.53)  | <0.001  |
| Systolic blood pressure (mm Hg) | 1.02 (1.00 to 1.03) | 0.012   |
| LDL Cholesterol (mg/dL)  | 1.01 (1.00 to 1.01)  | 0.029   |
| Test of fit Hosmer–Lemeshow| -                    | 0.392   |
| Area under de ROC curve  | 0.73 (0.68 to 0.77)  | <0.001  |

The independent variables included in the analysis were SAF and well-established cardiovascular risk factors such as gender, age, smoking status, systolic blood pressure, lipid profile (total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, HDL cholesterol, and triglycerides), together with HbA1c and antihypertensive or lipid-lowering treatment.

**Table 4.** Main clinical characteristics and serum concentration of advanced glycation end-products and its receptor of the nested case-control study according to the presence of generalized atheromatous disease

|                          | Subjects without plaque | Subjects with plaque and generalized atheromatous disease | p value |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------|
| n                        | 41                      | 41                                                        |         |
| Women, n (%)             | 14 (34.1)               | 15 (36.6)                                                | 1.000   |
| Age (years)              | 59 [55 to 63]           | 60 [55 to 65]                                            | 0.656   |
| BMI (kg/m²)              | 28.0 [25.9 to 29.9]     | 28.0 [26.5 to 30.5]                                       | 0.597   |
| Total cholesterol (mg/dL)| 210 [189 to 228]        | 202 [183 to 222]                                         | 0.358   |
| Pentosidine (ng/mL)      | 25.8 [8.7 to 54.2]      | 21.9 [8.9 to 42.8]                                       | 0.842   |
| CML (ng/mL)              | 105.0 [64.4 to 121.6]   | 109.8 [85.6 to 143.1]                                     | 0.070   |
| AGEs receptor (ng/mL)    | 0.044 [0.018 to 0.142]  | 0.039 [0.023 to 0.066]                                    | 0.531   |
| SAF (AU)                 | 1.8 [1.6 to 2.1]        | 2.1 [1.9 to 2.4]                                         | <0.001  |

BMI: body mass index; CML: carboxymethyl-lysine; AGEs: advanced end glycation products; SAF: skin autofluorescence; AU: arbitrary units.

**Discussion**

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in which SAF has been evaluated as a marker of subclinical atheromatous disease in a large cohort of subjects without a history of cardiovascular disease.
ease in our study was 70.4% compared with the 63% described in the middle-aged asymptomatic sample without cardiovascular disease from the Progression of Early Subclinical Atherosclerosis study. These studies reveal that the presence of atheromatous plaque in asymptomatic subjects is a common condition that deserves particular attention in the prevention of cardiovascular outcomes. Moreover, when nearly one-third of participants from the PESA study classified at low risk by traditional scales (i.e., Framingham Heart Study and the European Systematic Coronary Risk Evaluation) had intermediate or generalized atheromatous disease.

The present study also shows that when the screening of atheromatous disease was limited to carotid arteries, we failed to detect at least 12% of patients with disease in femoral regions. This finding is in concordance with data from the Carotid-Femoral Ultrasound Morphology and Cardiovascular Events study, which showed that scanning only carotid or only femoral regions predicted 15% and 13% fewer events than examining both territories in a 10-year follow-up.

Previous population studies, such as the Multi-ethnic Study of Atherosclerosis, the US High Risk Plaque Study, and the Northern Manhattan Study established robust associations between cardiovascular events, subclinical carotid and coronary disease. Similarly, in middle-aged Spanish men from the Aragon Workers’ Health Study, subclinical carotid and femoral plaques were associated with coronary artery calcium score, a well-recognized risk factor of coronary outcomes. In this setting, our data shows that SAF is a useful tool for helping clinicians to identify individuals at risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

Some characteristic effects of AGEs on plaque formation have been previously described, such as increased oxidative stress, modifications of collagen and other proteins that constitute the extracellular matrix of the arterial wall and the basement membrane, the promotion of LDL trapping in the subendothelial compartment, and the increment of vascular stiffness. Moreover, the binding of AGEs to their receptors activates nuclear factor kappa B, among other pro-oxidant and pro-inflammatory pathways. Therefore, the role of AGES favors the formation of atheromatous plaques causing widespread damage to arteries through the upregulation of inflammation, oxidative stress, and the cross-linking of collagen and other proteins of the arterial wall. In addition, AGES also could act as triggers from stable to rupture-prone atheromatous plaques.

Previous studies have shown that SAF levels increase proportionally with the number of components of the metabolic syndrome, as well as with lower HDL cholesterol. In addition, SAF assessment has been associated with coronary and peripheral artery disease. Moreover, the added clinical value of SAF is supported by data that reflects its measurement as a strong predictor of carotid atherosclerosis, long-term cardiovascular complications, and mortality in populations with increased cardiovascular risk, such as patients with type 1 diabetes and renal disease.

As atheromatous disease is a diffuse process, the measurement of the total plaque area seems to be a more reliable approach to the patient at risk. It is worth mentioning that our study demonstrates a significant and independent association between SAF and total area plaque.

The association between circulating AGES and both all-cause mortality and cardiovascular mortality has been previously assessed in moderate-sized epidemiological studies focused on healthy aging population, disabled older women, and patients with type 1 diabetes. In this regard, in an adult population of men and women aged 65 and older, serum CML was associated with an increased incidence of coronary heart disease and stroke, independent of traditional atherosclerosis risk factors. However, Hanssen et al. showed that plasma AGE measurements were not different when comparing individuals with and without cardiovascular disease in participants from two Dutch cohort studies comprising 1,291 subjects with various degrees of impaired glucose metabolism. Similarly, in a modest-sized cohort with chronic kidney disease subjects, no association between CML and incident CVD was detected. Our data also failed to find any difference between circulating AGES as well as its receptors with the presence of subclinical atheromatous disease, together with a lack of correlation between those serum markers and SAF. This result could be owing to the fact that circulating AGES are rapidly broken down to AGE peptides or free AGES, which are excreted through the kidney, thus having a fast turnover. By contrast, AGES linked to proteins from subcutaneous tissue have a slow turnover, thus reflecting a decades-long accumulation.

There are some potential limitations that must be highlighted in our study. First, as an observational and cross-sectional study, a causal relationship between SAF or circulating AGES could not be established. Second, SAF could be unreliable in subjects with dark skin due to excessive light absorption. We overcame this limitation by selecting only Caucasian subjects and excluding those with medium brown skin. Third, the lack of statistical power of our nested study because of the small sample size assessed (82 subjects from the 2,568 in whom skin autofluorescence and
bilateral carotid and femoral areas were explored). Therefore, the data are not definitive but rather hypothesis-generating in nature, and larger studies will be needed to confirm our findings. In addition, as we enrolled subjects with generalized atheromatous disease, the generalizability to the overall population with at least one atheromatous plaque is limited.

Conclusion

There is a clear need to identify subjects at increased risk of CVD. Generally, clinicians have used global risk scores that combine multiple traditional cardiovascular risk factors to classify patients. Our study shows that SAF is associated with an increased atherosclerotic burden especially in men, and may provide clinically relevant information to the standard cardiovascular risk assessment strategies.

Acknowledgments

The authors would also like to thank Fundación Renal Jaume Arnó, Eva Castro, Virtudes María, Marta Eliás, Teresa Vidal, Mª del Valle Peña, Cristina Dominguez, Noemi Nova, Alba Prunera, Núria Sans, Meritxell Soria, and the Primary Care teams from Lleida for recruiting subjects and their efforts in the accurate development of the ILERVAS project.

Funding Source

This work was supported by grants from the Diputación de Lleida, Instituto de Salud Carlos III (Action Plan II14/00008), Fundación de la Sociedad Española de Endocrinología y Nutrición (FSEEN), Esteve Laboratory, Generalitat de Catalunya (2017SGR696 and SLT0021600250), IRBLleida Biobank (B.0000682) and Plataforma Biobancos PT13/0010/0014. CIBER of Diabetes and Enfermedades Metabólicas Asociadas and CIBER de Enfermedades Respiratorias are initiatives of the Instituto de Salud Carlos III. These organizations had no role in study design, the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, report writing, or the decision to submit the article for publication. The authors declare that there are no relationships with industry relevant to this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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