



Serum cholesterol and expression of ApoAI, LXR β and SREBP2 in vitamin D receptor knock-out mice[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Vitamin D insufficiency has been reported to be associated with increased blood cholesterol concentrations. Here we used two strains of VDR knock-out (VDR-KO) mice to study whether a lack of vitamin D action has any effect on cholesterol metabolism. In 129S1 mice, both in male and female VDR-KO mice serum total cholesterol levels were significantly higher than those in wild type (WT) mice (20.7% ($P=0.05$) and 22.2% ($P=0.03$), respectively). In addition, the serum high-density lipoprotein-bound cholesterol (HDL-C) level was 22% ($P=0.03$), respectively higher in male VDR-KO mice than in WT mice. The mRNA expression levels of five cholesterol metabolism related genes in livers of 129S1 mice were studied using quantitative real-time PCR (QRT-PCR): ATP-binding cassette transporter A1 (ABCA1), regulatory element binding protein (SREBP2), apolipoprotein A-I (ApoAI), low-density lipoprotein receptor (LDLR) and liver X receptor beta (LXR β). In the mutant male mice, the mRNA level of ApoAI and LXR β were 49.2% ($P=0.005$) and 38.8% ($P=0.034$) higher than in the WT mice. These changes were not observed in mutant female mice, but the female mutant mice showed 52.5% ($P=0.006$) decrease of SREBP2 mRNA expression compared to WT mice. Because the mutant mice were fed with a special rescue diet, we wanted to test whether the increased cholesterol levels in mutant mice were due to the diet. Both the WT and mutant NMRI mice were given the same diet for 3 weeks before the blood sampling. No difference in cholesterol or in HDL-C between WT and mutant mice was found. The results suggest that the food, gender and genetic background have an effect on the cholesterol metabolism. Although VDR seems to regulate some of the genes involved in cholesterol metabolism, its role in the regulation of serum cholesterol seems to be minimal.

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1. Introduction

Vitamin D is produced in the skin through a photolytic reaction of 7-dehydrocholesterol induced by ultraviolet B radiation at 290–315 nm. The vitamin D formed in the skin or absorbed from diet is hydroxylated in the liver to 25-hydroxyvitamin D and further hydroxylated in the kidney to 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D (calcitriol) [1]. Calcitriol is the most active ligand for vitamin D receptor (VDR) and after binding to VDR performs its biological functions

such as control of calcium homeostasis, cell proliferation and differentiation [2,3]. Lack of sunlight and vitamin D deficiency has been suggested to be associated with an increased blood cholesterol concentration [4]. In postmenopausal women with hormone replacement therapy, vitamin D seems to affect serum lipid levels [5]. Therefore we were interested to study the effect of VDR knock-out in mice on their serum cholesterol level.

SREBP2 is a transcription factor which down-regulates ABCA1 [6] but it increases LDLR expression [7] and is involved in cholesterol synthesis [8]. Many of the LXR target genes are also involved in cholesterol and fatty acid metabolism pathways [9–11]. Thus, LXRs form heterodimer with RXR and act as cholesterol sensors as well as regulators of genes for cholesterol efflux and lipid transport to maintain cholesterol homeostasis [12–15]. Major cholesterol-related targets of LXRs include the ATP-binding cassette transporter family members such as ABCA1 [16,17], which is mutated in Tangier disease. A characteristic feature of these patients is extremely low or absent HDL-C and reduced total cholesterol [18–20]. The main role

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of ABCA1 is the mediation of the efflux of excess cholesterol from macrophages and fibroblasts in the sub-endothelial space to acceptors such as HDL and ApoAI [21], which in the circulation interacts first with serum phospholipids and forms nascent discoidal HDL (ndHDL), which triggers cholesterol efflux [21]. The externalized cholesterol is incorporated into ndHDL and further modified. The final products, cholesteryl esters, are delivered back to the liver via LDLR, converted to bile salts, and eliminated through the gastrointestinal tract [21]. LDLR knock-out mice showed altered lipid profile [22]. Therefore, in the present study, we tested the mRNA expression of ABCA1, ApoAI, LDLR, LXR β and SREBP2 from both wild type and mutant mice.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Mouse breeding, housing and feeding

VDR-KO mice 129S1 were produced from the line initially generated in the University of Tokyo [23], which have been studied in our laboratory [24–26]. NMRI mice were purchased from Harlan, Nederland. They originate from Swiss mice in the US brought from Lausanne, Switzerland, in 1926 by Clara Lynch. In 1937 the mice came from Lynch to Poiley and were inbred by Poiley known as NIH/Pl. At F51 they went to US Naval Medical Research Institute and thus known as NMRI. In 1955, the mice went to Bundes-Forschungsanstalt für Viruskrankheiten and in 1958, to Central Institute for Laboratory Breeding, Hannover. In 1981, they came from Central Institute for Laboratory Breeding, Hannover to Winkelmann (now Harlan Winkelmann). In 1998, they came from Harlan Winkelmann to Harlan Nederland (www.harlan-europe.com), known as HsdWin:NMRI mice, which are abbreviated as “NMRI mice” in the text. Studies using this strain of mice have been reported [27,28]. All the mice were housed in the University of Tampere Laboratory Animal facility with a 12:12-light:dark cycle. The management and experimental procedures in this study were approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Tampere and performed according to EU legislation. Age-matched wild type and VDR-KO mice were genotyped and used in this study. Mice were 6.5–16 months old. The numbers of 129S1 mice used in the study were, male KO 8 and male WT 9; female KO 6 and female WT 5. The numbers of NMRI mice were, male KO 2 and WT 10, female KO 7 and WT 11. The VDR-KO mice were fed with a special diet containing 2% Ca, 1.25% P and 20% lactose (Lactamin AB, Sweden), to normalize their mineral metabolism. In the studies with NMRI mice, WT mice were switched from normal foods (0.9% Ca, 0.7% P and 20% lactose) to special foods 3 weeks before sample collection.

2.2. Serum sample preparation and tissue sample collection

Mice were sacrificed by carbon dioxide and blood was immediately taken by heart puncture. Blood was allowed to clot, followed by centrifugation at 3000 rpm for 10 min. The serum was stored at -70°C for further analysis. Small pieces of liver and kidney tissues were taken and dropped into RNAlater (Ambion), and stored at -20°C for later RNA isolation.

2.3. Measurement of total cholesterol and HDL-C

Total cholesterol and HDL-C concentrations were measured using a photometric CHOD-PAP (Ecoline® S+ Cholesterol, DiaSys Diagnostic Systems GmbH, Germany). HDL-C was determined from the clear supernatant after precipitation of serum apoB-containing lipoproteins with 10% polyethylene glycol (final concentration).

2.4. RNA extraction and real-time quantitative PCR

Liver tissue slices were dropped into ice-cooled trizol (Invitrogen, Carlshad, USA) and homogenized on ice. Total cellular RNA was isolated with TRIzol reagent following the instructions from the manufacturer. The RNA concentration was calculated from absorbance at 260 nm in a GeneQuant II (Pharmacia Biotech, USA) and A280/A260 was measured to verify the purity of the RNA. The ratio of all the RNA samples fell in 1.9–2.5. Randomly selected RNA samples were subjected to denaturing gel electrophoresis. The ratio of the intensity of the 28S band and that of the 18S band was 1.5–2.0. cDNA was synthesised by using High Capacity Archive Kit (Applied Biosystems, USA). Real-time PCR were performed in ABI PRISM 7000 Detection System (Applied Biosystems, USA) using SYBR Green PCR Master Mix (Applied Biosystems). The programs for the amplification were as following: activation of polymerase at 95°C for 10 min, followed by 45 cycles of denaturation at 95°C for 15 s and annealing/extension at 60°C for 1 min. The analysis of dissociation curves was always performed after 45 cycles. Primers were designed by using Primer Express v2.0 software (Perkin-Elmer Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA). BLASTn searches were performed to ensure that the primers were gene specific. The primers are mABCA1 (NM.013454) forward 5'-CAACCCCTGCTTCCGTTATC-3', reverse 5'-GACCTTGTGCATGTCCTT-AATGC-3'; mApoAI (NM.009692) forward 5'-CTCCTCCTTGGGCCA-ACA-3', reverse 5'-TGACTAACGGTTGAACCCAGAGT-3'; mLDLR (NM.010700) forward 5'-TGTGAAAATGACTCAGACGAACAA-3', reverse 5'-GGAGATGCACTTGCCATCCT-3'; mLXR β (Nr1h2) (NM.009473) forward 5'-GATCCTCCTCCAGCTCTGAA-3', reverse 5'-TGCGCTCAGGCTCATCCT-3'; mSREBP2 (NM.033218) forward 5'-GTGCGCTCTCGTTTACTGAAGT-3', reverse 5'-GTATAGAAGACGG-CCTTACCAA-3'. Mouse gene β -actin (NM.007393) was used as endogenous control. Primers for m β -actin were as follows: forward: 5'-GCTTCTTTGCACTCTTCCT-3' reverse: 5'-CCAGC-GCAGCGATATCG-3'.

2.5. Statistical analysis

Data of cholesterol and HDL-C level as well as real-time PCR are expressed as the mean value \pm standard error. Significance was assessed using the Mann-Whitney *U* test. * $p \leq 0.05$ was considered as significant, ** $p < 0.001$ as highly significant and $p > 0.05$ as not significant (NS).

3. Results

3.1. Total cholesterol and HDL-C serum concentration

The mean total cholesterol concentration was significantly higher in 5 female mutant mice in comparison with that of 5 female wild type mice (Table 1). In female mice, there was no statistically significant difference in the serum HDL-C. In male mice, both total cholesterol and HDL-C concentrations were significantly lower in WT mice than in KO mice (Table 1).

3.2. ABCA1, ApoAI, LDLR, LXR β and SREBP2 mRNA expression in the liver

QRT-PCR data show a significant difference in ApoAI, LXR β and SREBP2 expressions between WT and mutants (Fig. 1A and B). The relative mRNA levels were 1.0 ± 0.2 and 0.7 ± 0.1 ($P = 0.005$) for ApoAI, 1.1 ± 0.3 and 0.8 ± 0.2 ($P = 0.034$) for LXR β in mutant and wild type male mice, respectively; 0.9 ± 0.1 vs 1.4 ± 0.3 ($P = 0.006$) for SREBP2 in mutant and wild type female mice, respectively. The female wild type and mutant mice do not show difference in the

Table 1
Serum cholesterol and HDL-C level in wild type and VDR knock-out 129S1 mice.

	WT	VDR-KO	P value
Female			
Total cholesterol	2.14 ± 0.09	2.62 ± 0.15	0.028
HDL-C	1.23 ± 0.06	1.35 ± 0.04	0.209
Nr of observations	5	5	
Male			
Total cholesterol	2.54 ± 0.07	3.1 ± 0.27	0.054
HDL-C	1.69 ± 0.05	2.04 ± 0.16	0.034
Nr of observations	9	8	

Serum cholesterol and HDL-C levels of wild type and VDR knock-out mice were determined. Data were analyzed by Mann–Whitney *U* test and presented as mean value ± standard error. The unit used in the table is mmol/L (SI unit). To convert values from SI units to conventional units, divide by the conversion factor. For cholesterol and HDL-C, the convert factor is 0.0259.

Table 2
Serum cholesterol and HDL-C level in wild type and VDR knock-out NMRI mice.

	Female	Male	P value
WT			
Total cholesterol	3.71 ± 0.08	5.15 ± 0.09	0.00108
HDL-C	2.76 ± 0.06	4.14 ± 0.07	0.00011
Nr of observations	11	10	
VDR-KO			
Total cholesterol	3.85 ± 0.07	5.19 ± 0.03	0.0421
HDL-C	2.77 ± 0.05	4.1 ± 0.07	0.01371
Nr of observations	7	2	

3 weeks before sample collection, both wild type and VDR-KO NMRI mice were fed with special foods containing high calcium. Serum cholesterol and HDL-C levels of both types of mice were determined. Data were analyzed by Mann–Whitney *U* test and presented as mean value ± standard error. The unit used in the table is mmol/L (SI unit). To convert values from SI units to conventional units, divide by the conversion factor. For cholesterol and HDL-C, the convert factor is 0.0259.

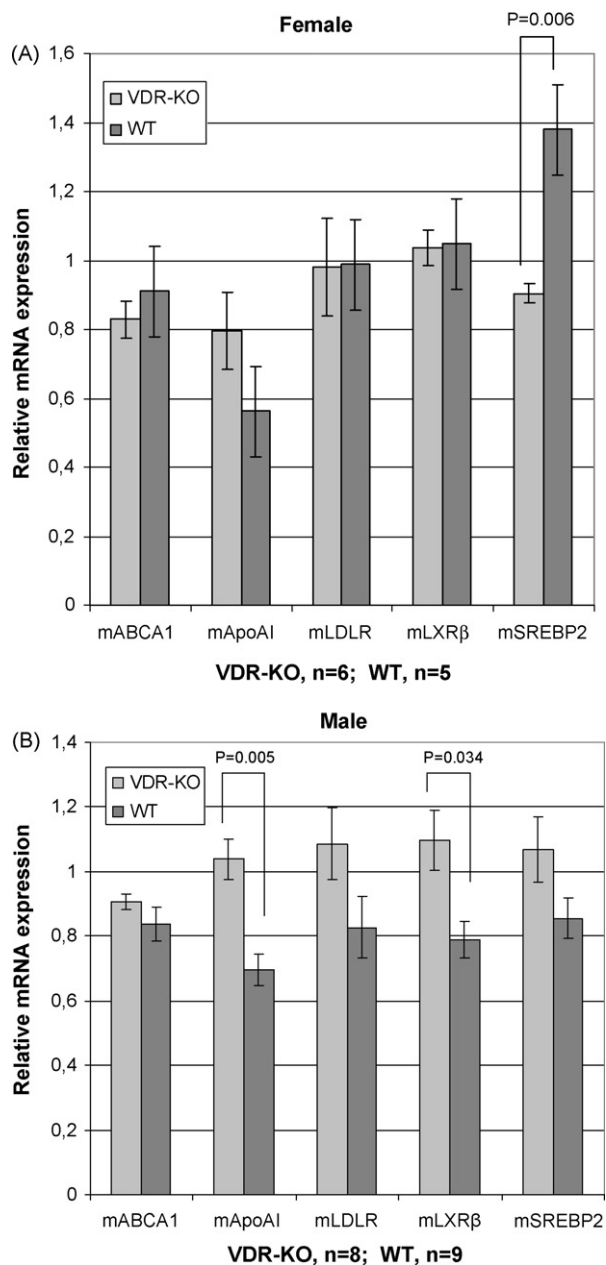


Fig. 1. ABCA1, ApoAI, LDLR, LXRβ and SREBP2 expression in the liver of wild type and VDR knock-out mice. (A) Female and (B) male. Data represented mean value ± standard error from quantitative real-time PCR results and statistically analyzed by Mann–Whitney *U* test. Mouse β-actin was used as housekeeping gene for the calculation of relative corresponding gene expression.

expression of ApoAI nor LXRβ. There is no significant difference of the expression of ABCA1 and LDLR in mutant and wild type mice.

3.3. The effect of food

We used NMRI strain of VDR-KO mice. Both the WT and mutant mice were given the same foods containing 2% Ca, 1.25% P and 20% lactose for 3 weeks before blood sampling. No difference in cholesterol or in HDL-C between WT and mutant mice was found, but a clear sex difference was observed (Table 2).

4. Discussion

This is the first direct evidence that a nonfunctional VDR can increase serum total cholesterol concentration in both female and male mice. Also HDL-C was increased but only in the male VDR-KO mice. In male animals, the higher total cholesterol level in KO mice was due to increase in both HDL-C and apoB-containing lipoprotein cholesterol. It seems that the mutation of VDR in male and female mice have different effects on lipids, which is consistent with relative gene expression changes. In male lacking of functional VDR, ApoAI and LXRβ expression levels were increased, but not in females. In VDR-KO females, expression of SREBP2 was decreased. It has been reported that calcitriol inhibits ApoAI mRNA and protein in the human hepatoma cell line HepG2 VDR- and VDRE-dependently [29]. In our study, male mutant mice had a higher liver ApoAI mRNA expression. Thus, it is possible that VDR knock-out results in a higher ApoAI level, which in turn, increased cholesterol efflux and hence HDL-C.

In mammals there are two forms of LXRs, LXRα/NR1H3 and LXRβ/NR1H2. The expression of LXRα is restricted to kidney, intestine, spleen, and adrenals, with the highest expression levels in the liver [30,31] whereas the LXRβ is ubiquitously expressed [32,33]. Inhibition of LXRα signaling by vitamin D receptor has been reported [34]. Because of the high expression of LXRα in the liver, its role in lipid metabolism has been extensively studied. A search in PUBMED with “LXRβ + lipid” and “LXRα + lipid” revealed 125 and 792 articles, respectively. Thus, in the present study we investigated the LXRβ expression. Interestingly, male mutant mice have higher levels of LXRβ mRNA expression. As one of the target genes for LXRβ, it has been shown that an over-expression of ABCA1 in liver is associated with increased HDL-C levels in transgenic mice and ABCA1 knock-out leads to HDL-C deficiency [35]. Our quantitative real-time PCR results show that the liver ABCA1 mRNA expression levels are unchanged. This suggests factors other than ABCA1 are involved in the serum lipid changes of the mutant mice. Given the role of LXRβ for activating not only ABCA1, but also ABCG1 [36], ABCG5 [37] and ABCG8 [38] it is possible that the

LXR β exerts its effects on HDL-C levels by activating other cholesterol exporters. In addition, vitamin D inhibits LXR α signaling [34], which thus in VDR-KO mice might be enhanced and consequently contributes to increase ABCG1, ABCG5 and ABCG8 expression as well.

SREBPs are synthesized as precursors complexed with SCAP in the membranes of the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) [39]. When cells are depleted of sterols, SCAP escorts SREBPs from ER to Golgi where the SREBPs are cleaved [40,41] to release the bHLH-Zip domain which travels to the nucleus where it activates genes whose products play roles in the lipid synthesis and uptake [42], including cholesterol [43]. Our results showed that VDR mutant female mice have lower levels of SREBP2 but higher level of cholesterol. Cholesterol has been shown directly bind to sterol-sensing domain of SCAP *in vitro* [44]. The binding of cholesterol to SCAP elicits a conformational change in SCAP causing SCAP to bind to Insigs, endoplasmic reticulum retention proteins that abrogate movement of the SCAP–SREBP complexes to the Golgi apparatus for SREBP processing and activation [44–47]. It has been reported murine Insig-2 promoter harbors a positive vitamin D response element [48]. SREBP2 is a transcription factor which inhibits ABCA1 [6] but stimulate LDLR [7] expression. In the present study, mutant female mice showed lower SREBP2 expression but no changes in ABCA1 nor LDLR were observed.

It seems that the special rescue diet of the mutant mice has a strong effect on the serum lipid levels. In our experiments using NMRI mice, both wild type and mutant mice were fed with special food containing 2% Ca, 1.25% P and 20% lactose 3 weeks before the sampling. No significant difference in cholesterol and/or HDL-C level between wild type and mutant mice was found. Because there were only 2 NMRI male VDR-KO mice available for the studies, it remains unclear whether this is because of the effects of food or the strain of the mice. On the other hand, this might imply that the effect of VDR knock-out on cholesterol metabolism can be rescued by diet. Investigations of all the four VDR-KO mice models to date demonstrated that the lack of functional VDR develops hypocalcemia, rickets, osteomalacia, hyperparathyroidism and alopecia [23,49–51]. Normalization of ionized calcium levels by the special diet normalized these phenotypes, except for alopecia [52,53].

A sex difference of cholesterol and HDL-C was found in both 129S1 and NMRI strains in wild type and mutant mice. Cholesterol changes in postmenopausal women [54] and in rodents after ovariectomy [55,56] are due to a lack of estrogen. Kamei et al. [57] identified changes of gene expression in lipid metabolism including a decrease of SREBP1 in ovariectomized mice. Similarly, here we found that SREBP2 expression was lower in VDR-KO female mice. Previously it was reported that VDR-KO female mice developed uterine hypoplasia in the post-weaning stage due to a lack of estrogen synthesis in the mutant ovaries [23]. Our present study show that the VDR background has different effects in female and male mice, where nonfunctional VDR can increase serum total cholesterol concentration in both female and male mice but HDL-C was increased only in the male VDR-KO mice. This difference might be due to impaired estrogen production in KO female mice.

In conclusion, our study suggests that lack of the functional VDR may lead to an increased serum cholesterol and HDL-C. In addition, this can be partially explained by changes in the expression of cholesterol metabolism related genes such as ApoA1, LXR and SREBP2. Vitamin D deficiency may therefore contribute to cardiovascular diseases such as atherosclerosis [58]. However, gender and diet also have a clear effect on serum lipid concentrations, independent from the VDR knock-out. As such, the role of VDR in the direct regulation of serum cholesterol seems to be minimal.

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