Ultrasonographic and Biochemical Evaluation of Visceral Obesity in Obese Women with Non-alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease

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Abstract

Objective: Identification of specific origin of lipid accumulation in the liver of patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is the most important step in preventing this condition. Because liver steatosis, in the obese patients without any systemic disease, can be graded easily by ultrasonography (US), we aimed to demonstrate the degree of liver steatosis and abdominal fat distribution by US, furthermore evaluate biochemical, anthropometrical measurements, and define the possible relationship between these parameters in obese women with different grades of liver steatosis.

Methods: In this controlled clinical study, according to US evaluation of liver steatosis, the patients were divided into four groups: control (no steatosis), mild, moderate and severe steatosis groups. Demographic, biochemical and anthropometric measurements were done. Insulin resistance was determined by using homeostasis model assessment (HOMA-IR). Liver steatosis and abdominal fat distributions were evaluated by US.

Results: The subcutaneous and preperitoneal fat layer measurements did not show any significant difference between the groups. The visceral fat layer thickness was significantly higher in severe liver steatosis group compared to the control and steatosis groups. The highest serum fasting insulin, uric acid levels and HOMA-IR index were observed in the severe liver steatosis group. Visceral fat thickness was positively correlated with serum UA levels and HOMA-IR.

Conclusions: This study suggests that visceral adipose tissue, HOMA-IR and serum uric acid levels are the main determinants of NAFLD in obese patients.

Key words: Ultrasonography, NAFLD, abdominal fat distribution, uric acid

Introduction

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) affects 16-23% of general population. Clinical manifestations of NAFLD may range from simple steatosis and/or non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH) to cirrhosis without history of alcohol abuse [1]. NAFLD is strongly associated with the metabolic syndrome or its components: obesity, insulin resistance, diabetes mellitus (DM), and hypertriglyceridemia [2]. Obesity might be seen in approximately 71 % of patients with NAFLD [3]. Obesity and insulin resistance are crucial for the pathogenesis of NAFLD [4].

Hepatic steatosis is regarded as a common feature of insulin resistance syndrome [5]. It has recently been demonstrated that the risk of hepatic steatosis increases exponentially by the addition of each component of metabolic syndrome: type 2 DM, hyperlipidemia, visceral obesity and hypertension (HT) [6]. Though the specific origin of lipid accumulation in the liver of patients with NAFLD remains unclear, the diffuse or focal changes in fat content of liver depend on the degree of fat infiltration [7]. Histological findings in the livers of subjects with NAFLD extend from fat accumulation alone to alcoholic hepatitis-like lesions including sinusoidal fibrosis and polymorphonuclear infiltrations with or without Mallory hyaline [8, 9]. In terms of free fatty acid (FFA) discharge and steatotic liver formation, visceral and central adipose tissues have more effective role in comparison with peripheral adipose tissue [10]. Abdominal fat layers comprise subcutaneous, preperitoneal and visceral fat compartments. The distribution of abdominal fat may be more important than total body fat. The specific origin of lipid accumulation in the livers of patients with NAFLD needs to be identified.

In this study evaluation of abdominal fat distribution and liver steatosis in obese patients were performed by US, which was considered a reasonable and easily applicable method. We also aimed to determine biochemical, anthropometrical measurements, and define whether there are any relationships between these parameters in obese women with different grades of liver steatosis.

Materials and Methods

Subjects

One hundred-five obese women who were admitted to our Obesity Clinic between April 2003 and December 2004 were consecutively enrolled into this prospective study. Before the study, all subjects were evaluated by an extensive physical examination. A standardized interview was conducted by trained personnel and de-
talled information for each subject was collected on medical history. Exclusion criteria included alcohol consumption, histories of liver disease, coronary artery and chronic kidney diseases, DM, cerebrovascular and peripheral vascular disease, hypertension, hypothyroidism, chronic and acute inflammatory diseases, asthma, chronic bronchial diseases, smoking and use of all medications known to alter lipid metabolism, liver function and insulin secretion or action. Hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg), and hepatitis C virus antibody (antiHCV) were negative in all patients as well. In terms of presence and severity of liver steatosis, all patients were evaluated by US examination. These evaluations were done for each subject by the same radiologist. Informed consent was obtained from each subject.

SAMPLING AND ANALYTICAL METHODS

Venous blood samples were drawn from the participants after a fasting of 12 hours. Samples were collected in serum separator tubes, allowed to clot for 30 min, centrifuged for 15 min at 2000 x g at room temperature. All biochemical measurements were performed on the same day. Biochemical measurements were done by using commercial kits. The serum uric acid (UA), glucose, triglyceride (TG), total cholesterol (TC), aspartat amino transferase (AST), alanine amino transferase (ALT) and gamma glutamyl transferase (GGT) measurements were performed by enzymatic methods and high-density lipoprotein-cholesterol (HDL-C) without precipitation by using liquid selective detergent homogeneous technique (Synchrone LX-20) (Beckman Coulter, Fullerton, CA, USA). Low-density lipoprotein-cholesterol (LDL-C) levels were calculated by using Friedewald's formula. Insulin measurements were done by solid phase chemiluminescence's immunoassay “IMMULITE ONE” (DPC Biosystems, CA, USA). Insulin resistance was calculated by using homeostasis model assessment score that employs the formula: fasting insulin concentration (mU/l) x glucose (mmol/l) / 22.5 as described by Matthews et al [111]. Individuals with HOMA-IR > 2.7 were accepted as insulin resistant.

ANTHROPOMETRIC MEASUREMENTS

All anthropometric measurements were done by the same physician on the day blood specimen taken. Height, weight, and waist and hip circumferences of the subjects were obtained in light clothing without shoes. Height was measured as the distance from the top of the head to the bottom of the feet (no shoes) using a fixed stadiometer. Waist circumference (cm) was taken with a tape measure as the point midway between the costal margin and iliac crest in the mid-axillary line with the subject standing and breathing normally. Hip circumference (cm) was measured at the widest point around greater trochanter. The waist-to-hip ratio (WHR) was calculated as the waist measurement divided by hip measurement. Body mass index (BMI) was calculated as the weight (kg) divided by square of the height (m). The total fat mass (FM) was evaluated by bioimpedance analysis with an electronic scale (Tanitascale, WA). Systolic (SBP) and diastolic blood pressure (DBP) were determined after 15 min resting in sitting position and the mean value of the two measurements were recorded.

ULTRASONOGRAPHIC MEASUREMENTS

Ultrasonography was carried out by using GE logic α 200-ultrasound machine. The linear array probe (7.5 MHz) was used to measure the subcutaneous (SC) and preperitoneal (PP) abdominal fat layers. The subcutaneous minimum (SCmin) and preperitoneal maximum (PPmax) measurements were taken from the region just below the xyphoid process, whereas the subcutaneous maximum (SCmax) and preperitoneal minimum (PPmin) fat layers were measured from the region just above the umbilicus [8]. The convex-array probe (3.5 MHz) was used for measuring visceral abdominal fat and anterior wall of the aorta [9]. The patients were asked to suspend respiration during examination and special care was taken to keep the probe just touching the skin to prevent compression of fat layers. A convex-array probe (3.5 MHz) was used to demonstrate liver fatty infiltration. This was defined as increased echogenicity of the liver parenchyma without obvious mass effect and slightly impaired or poor visualization of the intrahepatic vessels and diaphragm. The patients were evaluated by the same radiologist in four groups according to the presence and severity of liver steatosis determined by ultrasonography. The changes of the echogenicity due to the fatty infiltration of liver parenchyma were evaluated according to the adjacent renal parenchyma. Liver fatty infiltration varied depending on the amount of fat and considered accordingly as control (no steatosis), mild (group 1), moderate (group 2) and severe (group 3) hepatosteatosis. Mild hepatosteatosis was revealed as minimal diffuse increase in the hepatic echogenicity with slightly impaired visualization of the intrahepatic vessels and diaphragm. Moderate hepatosteatosis was shown as moderate increase in echogenicity with slightly impaired visualization of intrahepatic vessels and diaphragm. Severe hepatosteatosis was displayed as marked increase in the echogenicity with poor penetration of the posterior segment of the right lobe of the liver and poor or non-visualization of the hepatic vessels and diaphragm [12].

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Since many variables had a non-gaussian distribution with positive skewness, statistical analysis was performed with non-parametric tests: Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests. The data were expressed as means ± SD (Standard Deviation). Correlations between variables were calculated with Spearman’s correlation coefficient. Statistical significance was set at p < 0.05. Data were analyzed with the SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Science, version 11.0).

RESULTS

According to the ultrasonographic evaluation of liver steatosis, the patients were divided into four groups:
control group (n = 10) consisted of obese patients with no sign of liver steatosis, group 1 with mild liver steatosis (n = 43), group 2 with moderate liver steatosis (n = 33), and group 3 with severe liver steatosis (n = 19).

There were no significant differences in the mean age and the % fat mass (FM) between the groups. The moderate and severe steatosis groups had higher waist/hip ratio (WHR) than the mild steatosis and the control groups. The highest waist measurements were found in severe liver steatosis group. The mean BMI of each steatosis group was significantly higher than that of control group. The subcutaneous (SC_{max}, SC_{min}) and preperitoneal (PP_{max}, PP_{min}) fat layer measurements did not show any significant difference between the groups (data were not shown for SC_{min} and PP_{min}), but the visceral (VS) fat layer thickness was significantly higher in group 3 with severe liver steatosis compared to the mild, moderate liver steatosis and control groups. The mean SBP and DBP were significantly higher in the severe steatosis group compared to the control group (Table 1).

There were no significant differences in serum glucose, lipid fractions, and GGT, ALT and AST levels between the groups. The subjects in the severe liver steatosis group had significantly higher fasting insulin, uric acid levels and HOMA-IR index than the others. (Table 2). Visceral fat thickness was positively correlated with serum UA levels (r = 0.246; p<0.05), HOMA-IR (r = 0.233; p<0.05), TG (r = 0.518; p<0.0001), waist-cr (r = 0.753; p<0.0001). There were not any significant relationships between other parameters.

**DISCUSSION**

NAFLD describes a spectrum of various conditions. This spectrum is mainly characterized by histological findings of macrovesicular hepatic steatosis in individuals consuming little or no alcohol [13]. NAFLD possesses many components of the metabolic syndrome

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**Table 1. Clinical features, anthropometric and ultrasonographic measurements of the groups.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control (n = 10)</th>
<th>Group1 (n = 43)</th>
<th>Group2 (n = 33)</th>
<th>Group3 (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>38.7 ± 13.4</td>
<td>43.8 ± 12.1</td>
<td>44.2 ± 11.1</td>
<td>48.3 ± 10.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (kg/m^2)</td>
<td>31.3 ± 2.2</td>
<td>34.7 ± 4.7^a</td>
<td>35.8 ± 3.6^a</td>
<td>42.9 ± 8.3^a,b,c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waist/hip ratio</td>
<td>0.82 ± 0.1</td>
<td>0.85 ± 0.1</td>
<td>0.92 ± 0.1^b</td>
<td>1.0 ± 0.2^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waist-cr (cm)</td>
<td>86.9 ± 4.1</td>
<td>94.2 ± 8.8^a</td>
<td>98.4 ± 9.1^a</td>
<td>113.7 ± 9.0^a,b,c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FM (%)</td>
<td>40.5 ± 5.9</td>
<td>42.6 ± 5.1</td>
<td>42.7 ± 4.3</td>
<td>46.4 ± 5.6^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBP mmHg</td>
<td>113.9 ± 13.6</td>
<td>121.2 ± 23.1</td>
<td>127.5 ± 13.5</td>
<td>137.0 ± 17.7^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBP mmHg</td>
<td>78.3 ± 6.1</td>
<td>82.7 ± 6.0</td>
<td>84.6 ± 8.4</td>
<td>89.0 ± 8.8^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VS (mm)</td>
<td>61.0 ± 16.2</td>
<td>63.4 ± 18.7</td>
<td>68.6 ± 16.5</td>
<td>98.8 ± 24.0^a,b,c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC max (mm)</td>
<td>36.5 ± 8.8</td>
<td>34.5 ± 10.2</td>
<td>35.8 ± 9.5</td>
<td>39.5 ± 11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PP max (mm)</td>
<td>16.2 ± 6.3</td>
<td>17.5 ± 5.3</td>
<td>18.3 ± 5.2</td>
<td>22.0 ± 7.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^a p<0.05 versus control group, ^b p<0.05 versus group 1, ^c p<0.05 versus group 2

**Table 2. Biochemical characteristics of the groups.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control (n = 10)</th>
<th>Group1 (n = 43)</th>
<th>Group2 (n = 33)</th>
<th>Group3 (n = 19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glucose (mg/dl)</td>
<td>103.5 ± 9.9</td>
<td>107.4 ± 18.4</td>
<td>119.4 ± 32.2</td>
<td>113.6 ± 40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TC (mg/dl)</td>
<td>204.2 ± 53.5</td>
<td>197.6 ± 38.9</td>
<td>199.7 ± 38.3</td>
<td>213.6 ± 35.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDL-C (mg/dl)</td>
<td>130.2 ± 40.7</td>
<td>131.6 ± 34.1</td>
<td>126.3 ± 33.4</td>
<td>128.0 ± 41.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG (mg/dl)</td>
<td>116.4 ± 62.1</td>
<td>110.2 ± 60.9</td>
<td>131.6 ± 70.0</td>
<td>164.9 ± 97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDL-C (mg/dl)</td>
<td>50.8 ± 14.5</td>
<td>44.2 ± 9.7</td>
<td>48.6 ± 14.0</td>
<td>47.7 ± 12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulin (mmol/l)</td>
<td>10.2 ± 4.1</td>
<td>11.7 ± 7.6</td>
<td>12.1 ± 5.6</td>
<td>18.7 ± 7.6^a,b,c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOMA-R</td>
<td>2.6 ± 1.1</td>
<td>3.1 ± 2.1</td>
<td>3.5 ± 1.7</td>
<td>4.9 ± 2.5^a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UA (mg/dl)</td>
<td>4.7 ± 1.1</td>
<td>5.0 ± 0.9</td>
<td>5.3 ± 1.2</td>
<td>6.1 ± 1.3^b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALT (IU/L)</td>
<td>21.5 ± 5.5</td>
<td>24.3 ± 6.6</td>
<td>40.5 ± 3.3</td>
<td>30.5 ± 11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AST (IU/L)</td>
<td>22.1 ± 4.6</td>
<td>22.7 ± 5.0</td>
<td>32.1 ± 19.3</td>
<td>27.6 ± 8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GGT (IU/L)</td>
<td>12.9 ± 6.5</td>
<td>17.9 ± 12.0</td>
<td>21.8 ± 15.0</td>
<td>24.2 ± 19.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

^a p<0.05 versus control group, ^b p<0.05 versus group 1, ^c p<0.05 versus group 2
such as obesity, DM, hypertriglyceridemia but may also occur in patients with insulin resistance without obesity. Moreover, fatty liver has been considered to be hepatic component of metabolic syndrome. NAFLD consists of two stages: in the first stage, the liver becomes steatotic mainly by the transport of free fatty acids from adipose tissue, in the second stage, oxidative stress and consequently released cytokines lead to fibrosis and dysfunction of hepatocellular organelle [14, 15]. The incidence of advanced fibrosis and cirrhosis are approximately 3-28 % in obese subjects and in patients with NASH [16-18]. Simple steatosis remains stable in some patients; however, it progresses to advanced fibrosis and cirrhosis in others. The reason of this circumstance is still unclear. Identification of specific origin of lipid accumulation in the livers of patients with NAFLD is the most important step to prevent and improve this condition [5, 19].

Although any imaging method is not available to distinguish simple steatosis from NASH and also to detect the stage of fibrosis [20], recently, ultrasonographic examination has been proposed as an alternative non-invasive, cheap and reliable technique to evaluate intra-abdominal fat thickness and liver steatosis [21-23]. The changes in fat content of liver can be assessed by ultrasonographic examination. Increased echogenic regions within normal liver parenchyma owing to focal hepatic fat infiltration can be observed and compared with the echogenicity of spleen or renal cortex by ultrasound [24].

In this ultrasonographic study, we demonstrated the relationships between biochemical, anthropometric measurements, abdominal fat distribution and liver steatosis in obese patients. In our study, even though increased BMI was observed progressively with the degree of steatosis, total fat mass (%) was significantly increased in severe steatosis compared to the control group. In our study, waist circumference, which is a good predictor of the visceral obesity [25], also increased according to the severity of liver steatosis. We did not find any significant differences in subcutaneous and preperitoneal fat layer measurements between the groups, but the visceral (VS) fat layer thickness was significantly higher in group 3 with severe liver steatosis compared with the mild, moderate liver steatosis and control groups. In this study, there were significant correlations between visceral fat thickness and waist circumference, TG, fat mass, HOMA-IR levels. The potential source of lipid accumulation in the livers of patients with NAFLD is the fat stored in adipose tissue. Approximately 80 % of fatty acid content of plasma NEFA pool is contributed by adipose tissue [26]. Thus, the most likely explanation for excess TG accumulation in patients with NAFLD may be the overproduction of fatty acids in the adipose tissue and their flow to the liver via the NEFA pool [26]. In a previously published histopathological study, it was determined that abdominal fat distribution was a predictor of hepatic steatosis [27]. Although subcutaneous fat layer is more sensitive to the inhibitory effect of insulin, visceral fat compartment is relatively resistant to insulin and is metabolically active with high rate of FFA turnover in individuals with abdominal obesity [28, 29]. Therefore, visceral fat layer provides FFA to the liver and other tissues. The data of the study support the significance of visceral fat on liver steatosis. In accordance with our result Thomas et al. demonstrated the significant relationship with hepatic steatosis and central adiposity with proton magnetic resonance spectroscopy in 11 hepatic steatosis patients [30].

Free fatty acids are produced within the liver by de novo lipogenesis and dietary fatty acids [31, 32]. The stored fat flows to liver via plasma non-esterified fatty acid (NEFA) pool and insulin regulates re-esterification of FFA. Hyperinsulinemia is consequence of insulin resistance and leads to an increase in serum FFA levels. In the current study, in accordance with visceral fat thickness the highest fasting insulin, HOMA-IR were observed in the severe liver steatosis group, while there were no significant differences in serum glucose and lipid fraction levels between the groups. Also, visceral fat thickness was positively correlated with HOMA-IR, waist circumference and serum TG. Increased FFA is taken up by the liver to be driven for production of TG. Visceral adipose tissue may be the starting current of this pathological process. This process may give rise to hepatic steatosis [33]. The steatotic liver becomes resistant to insulin [34]. Chronic hyperinsulinemia promotes de novo hepatic lipogenesis through up-regulation of lipogenic transcription factors [35], and may activate some cytokines inducing the progression of liver damage [36].

Elevated ALT levels are frequently observed in obese patients, but this elevation is not associated with fatty liver [37]. Liver enzyme levels do not consistently correlate with liver histology. Therefore, the full range of disease can be seen in patients with NAFLD, even if these patients have normal serum transaminase levels [37]. In fact, elevated ALT levels are related with insulin resistance, because the subjects with NAFLD have features of the metabolic syndrome [38]. We did not demonstrate any significant differences according to serum ALT levels between the study groups. But there were significant correlations between liver steatosis degree and serum ALT, AST, GGT, TG and visceral fat thickness.

Elevated serum UA concentration is positively correlated with insulin resistance, dyslipidemia, obesity and visceral fat thickness [39-41]. Therefore, hyperuricemia may be considered as a component of metabolic syndrome [42]. Increased serum UC levels might be caused by reduced UA clearance in obese subjects, because UA clearance is inversely related with body weight [43]. In this current study there were positive correlations between serum UA and liver steatosis degree, waist circumference, visceral fat thickness, serum ALT, AST and GGT levels. Serum UA concentration were significantly higher in the severe steatosis group than mild steatosis and control groups. In our opinion these outcomes were not correspondence of a cause-result effect thereby consistent with that UA as a parameter of the insulin resistance.

In conclusion, this study suggests that visceral adipose tissue, HOMA-IR and serum uric acid levels are main determinants of NAFLD in obese patients and reducing visceral fat tissue and serum uric acid levels might be important for the management of liver


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