Metabolic imaging in dilated cardiomyopathy

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Abstract

Cardiac metabolism is deranged in dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM). Phosphorus-31 ($^{31}$P) and hydrogen-1 ($^{1}$H) magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) allow for the non-invasive assessment of various aspects of cardiac metabolism, showing deranged cardiac energetics and lipid accumulation in DCM. In the future, MRS may become an important biomarker tool for monitoring the effects of novel heart-failure treatments in DCM.

Keywords: Dilated cardiomyopathy, energetics, magnetic resonance spectroscopy, metabolism, steatosis

Introduction

Dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM) is a common cause of heart failure, and may be due to many different etiologies (genetic, post myocarditis, toxic, etc.). A common feature of DCM is a derangement of cardiac metabolism. As reviewed elsewhere, metabolic alterations are likely to be a key factor in the pathophysiology of contractile dysfunction [1]. Accordingly, metabolic modulation currently appears as one of the most promising new strategies for chronic drug therapy with the potential to further improve long-term prognosis, as an additive to established therapy with angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors, beta blockers, and diuretics.

In light of this, non-invasive assessment of the metabolic state of the myocardium in DCM has been an important goal in cardiology for many decades. In principle, two techniques allow for this: magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) and positron emission tomography (PET). The largest number of studies has been performed with MRS [2], and early proof-of-principle investigations point to the value of metabolic MRS parameters as biomarkers of disease and prognosis, and for monitoring therapy.

Methodological considerations

MRS can be performed on the same magnetic resonance systems used for imaging, typically at a field strength of 1.5–3 tesla (T). There are, however, additional hardware and software requirements, such as a phosphorus-31 ($^{31}$P) surface coil, a broadband radiofrequency transmitter, spectroscopy pulse sequences, and post-processing software [2,3]. After shimming the magnetic field, an MR spectrum is obtained using a spectral localization technique, which makes it possible to obtain signal from a voxel element within the heart [2]. Because of the inherent low resolution of MRS, a large number of acquisitions have to be signal averaged in order to obtain a
magnetic resonance spectrum with an acceptable signal-to-noise ratio. A typical $^{31}$P spectrum from a normal individual is shown in Figure 1. Resonances are shown for the three phosphorus atoms of adenosine-5'-triphosphate (ATP) ($\alpha$, $\beta$, and $\gamma$ ATP), phosphocreatine (PCr), and also 2,3-diphosphoglycerate (2,3-DPG) from blood and phosphodiesters (PDE) from phospholipids. The PCr to ATP ratio is an exquisitely sensitive index of the energetic state of the heart [4]. Figure 2 shows a hydrogen-1 ($^1$H) MR spectrum from the heart (Figure 2). While $^1$H spectra show many metabolites, quantification has so far been limited to lipids (triglycerides), which provide a measure of myocardial steatosis (another key factor in the development of contractile dysfunction), and to the total creatine peak [5].
**Findings in DCM**

Deranged cardiac energy metabolism is a hallmark of the failing heart [1], regardless of the etiology. In DCM, PCr to ATP ratios are reduced, correlating with the New York Heart Association (NYHA) functional class [4] and left ventricular ejection fraction [6]. Most importantly, they are a strong predictor of prognosis, and in one study the PCr to ATP ratio was a better predictor of long-term survival than NYHA class or left ventricular ejection fraction (Figure 3) [7]. Although PCr to ATP ratios are powerful indicators of the extent of energetic derangement in DCM, they still underestimate the true extent of metabolic derangement. Recent spectroscopy techniques have made the absolute quantification of ATP and PCr possible, showing approximately 50% reduction in PCr and 35% reduction in ATP, with a concomitant 25% decrease in the PCr to ATP ratio, in heart failure [8]. An even more sensitive indicator of deranged energetics may be the dynamic rate of turnover of ATP. Recently, ATP turnover (ATP flux through the creatine kinase reaction) was measured in volunteers and patients with heart failure; for an 18% reduction in PCr concentrations, a 50% reduction in the rate of turnover of ATP was demonstrated [9]. Thus, the measurement of ATP turnover rates holds promise as a highly sensitive indicator of energetic derangement in heart failure.

There are only two previous studies on 1H-MRS in DCM. In a mixed group of patients with non-ischemic heart failure (15 patients, 11 of whom had DCM), Nakae et al. [10] found a nearly 50% decrease in total creatine content, which also correlated inversely with plasma brain natriuretic peptide (BNP) levels. Apart from an early proof-of-principle study [11], there are no data on 1H-MRS-measured myocardial lipid levels in patients with DCM, and these studies are urgently needed.

**Treatment studies**

An important area is the use of MRS for monitoring energetic changes in the heart after novel forms of treatment of DCM. We showed that conventional treatment of DCM with beta blockers, ACE inhibitors and diuretics for 3 months significantly improved the PCr to ATP ratio, together with clinical improvement [12]. Most recently, a study of the use of the investigational drug trimetazidine in patients with heart failure of mixed etiology revealed that trimetazidine was associated with a 33% increase in the PCr to ATP ratio, concomitant with improvements in NYHA class and left ventricular ejection fraction (EF) [13]. In a recent study, we investigated the effects of chronic exercise on DCM, and found an improvement on EF after 8 months of therapy, achievable...

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**Figure 3.** Phosphorus-31 ($^{31}$P) magnetic resonance spectroscopy in dilated cardiomyopathy. Left: $^{31}$P magnetic resonance spectra in, from bottom upward: a healthy volunteer, a patient with mild dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM), a patient with severe DCM with reduced phosphocreatine (PCr) to adenosine-5'-triphosphate (ATP) ratio, and a patient who died 7 days after the magnetic resonance examination, showing a massive reduction in the PCr to ATP ratio. Right: Kaplan–Meyer curve analysis of total mortality in DCM. Patients were subdivided according to the initial PCr to ATP ratio (greater or less than 1.60). Substantially increased mortality was observed in patients with an initially reduced PCr to ATP ratio. Modified from Beer M et al. [8]. ©2002 American College of Cardiology Foundation.
without extra energetic cost to the myocardium, as estimated by similar PCR to ATP ratios [14]. Although currently available studies on this subject are clearly limited by their small size, the concept of monitoring novel drug therapy for heart failure with regards to its effects on cardiac energetics is an extremely appealing one.

**Future perspective**

The main challenge for MRS is the improvement of the method’s low signal to noise. Promising techniques on the horizon to achieve this are higher field strength (7T and more) and hyperpolarisation methods (for carbon-13 [13C] MRS) [15], which can boost the signal by several orders of magnitude, but require intravenous application of external hyperpolarized [13C] metabolites. These are exciting novel directions for future research.

**Summary**

MRS allows for the non-invasive assessment of various aspects of cardiac metabolism in DCM, and has the potential to become an important biomarker tool for diagnostic and prognostic assessment as well as for the monitoring of therapy.

**REFERENCES**