Magnetic resonance relaxation time in evaluating the cyst fluid characteristics of endometrioma

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Introduction

Endometriomas, the so-called chocolate cysts of the ovary, are common in patients with advanced endometriosis. Surgical resection has been the main treatment. Recently, ultrasound-guided aspiration of the endometrioma has been proposed as one step in a therapeutic approach (Aboulghar et al., 1991; Abu-Musa et al., 1991; Vercellini et al., 1992; Aisa et al., 1994).

The cyst fluid characteristics of the endometrioma must be determined prior to puncture as it is difficult to aspirate an advanced or chronic endometrioma. A non-invasive evaluation of the cyst fluid would allow the determination of the stage of development, and then selection of treatment. However, conventional imaging techniques such as computed tomography and ultrasonography cannot be used in evaluating the cyst fluid. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is useful in diagnosing endometriosis (Nishimura et al., 1987; Arrive et al., 1989; Zawin et al., 1989; Takahashi et al., 1994), although endometriomas are sometimes indistinguishable from other haemorrhagic adnexal lesions (Outwater et al., 1993). An endometrioma is formed by repeated haemorrhage. The cyst fluid can show a varying content of haemoglobin. In addition, the fluid can change as the cyst progresses; the concentration of iron can increase exponentially and the viscosity of the fluid can rise. Therefore we investigated the relationship between the magnetic resonance relaxation time of surgically proven endometrioma and the concentration of iron in cyst fluid.

Materials and methods

We evaluated 36 endometriomas from 24 Japanese patients (aged 21–43 years; mean 34 years) who were due to have surgery (laparoscopy or laparotomy). Comparative studies of the density and concentration of iron in the endometrioma and the signal intensity (SI) of MRI [calculated relaxation time \( T_2 \) value, calculated relaxation time \( T_2 \) value, signal intensity on a \( T_1 \)-weighted image \((T_1\text{SI})\) and on a \( T_2 \)-weighted image \((T_2\text{SI})\) of the cyst; \( T_1\text{SI}/signal \text{ intensity of the gluteus maximus muscle (MSI), and } T_2\text{SI/MSI of the cyst} \) were performed. The density of the cyst fluid and its iron concentration were found to be directly proportional. There was a significant relationship between the concentration of iron and the \( T_2\text{SI/MSI} \) and calculated \( T_2 \) values. In particular, the concentration of iron and the ratio of \( T_2\text{SI/MSI} \) were inversely proportional. Therefore, \( T_2\text{SI/MSI} \) reflected the concentration of iron in endometriomas without recourse to measurement of the calculated \( T_2 \) value, which suggests that the MRI and \( T_2 \) signal intensity may be useful for evaluating the cyst fluid characteristics of endometriomas.

Key words: endometrioma/iron concentration/magnetic resonance imaging/relaxation time
same gain as for recording values. A calculated $T_2$ image was obtained with the $T_2$-weighted and the proton density images. We designated a region of interest on the $T_1$-weighted and $T_2$-weighted images covering the endometrial cyst as widely as possible. A region of interest >100 pixels was drawn in the gluteus maximus. We designated the same region of interest in the endometrial cyst on the calculated images (Figure 1). Most endometrial cysts are a little heterogeneous. Therefore, the signal intensity (SI) on each conventional image was measured three times; the $T_1$ and $T_2$ values on each calculated image were measured three times, and the average calculated. Intra-observer variability was $\pm 0.8\%$ of the calculated $T_1$ value, and $\pm 1.1\%$ of the calculated $T_2$ value. We obtained the calculated $T_1$ value, calculated $T_2$ value and the signal intensities on the $T_1$-weighted image ($T_1$SI) and on the $T_2$- weighted image ($T_2$SI) of each endometrial cyst. To normalize the $T_1$SI and $T_2$SI values among the subjects, we calculated the ratios of signal intensity of the endometrial cyst/the signal intensity of the gluteus maximus muscle on the $T_1$-weighted image ($T_1$SI/MSI), as well as the signal intensity of the endometrial cyst/the signal intensity of the gluteus maximus muscle on the $T_2$-weighted image ($T_2$SI/MSI). The concentration of iron and the signal intensity of each image were compared statistically using a $\chi^2$ analysis. A probability of $<5\%$ was accepted as statistically significant.

Results

Figure 2 shows a significant positive correlation between the concentration of iron and the density of the fluid in the endometriomas ($r = 0.847, P = 0.0001$). Table 1 shows the correlations between the concentration of iron and the signal intensity of each image. There was no significant correlation between the iron concentration and the calculated $T_1$ value or its associated signal intensity ratios. However, there was a significant correlation between the iron concentration and the calculated $T_2$ value, $T_2$SI and $T_2$SI/MSI. The coefficients of correlation between the iron concentration and the $T_1$-calculated $T_2$ value, the value of $T_2$SI and the ratio of $T_2$SI/MSI were 0.612 ($P = 0.0001$), $-0.684 (P = 0.0001)$ and $-0.856 (P = 0.0001)$ respectively (Figures 3–5). The concentration of iron was strongly negatively correlated with $T_2$SI/MSI, which suggested an inverse relationship between these two factors.

Discussion

An endometrioma is a haemorrhagic cyst whose appearance on MRI varies over time. An acute haematoma shows hypo-intensity on both $T_1$- and $T_2$-weighted images, which is consistent with the presence of deoxyhaemoglobin. A subacute haematoma is seen as isointense fat on the $T_1$-weighted image,
An endometrioma diagnosed by MRI shows characteristic of the endometrial cyst, contributes to the mechanism of shading. An endometrioma diagnosed by MRI shows a variable intensity on $T_2$-weighted images because of cyst content.

In our experience, the cyst fluid characteristics influence the management of endometriomas, and the aspiration of advanced or chronic endometriomas is more difficult. Therefore, it is clinically important to evaluate the cyst fluid characteristics of an endometrioma prior to aspiration. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the relationship between the cyst concentration of iron and the signal intensity on MRI. We focused on the content of the endometrioma in that a change in its content may be associated with its age. Previous reports (Bradley and Schmidt, 1985; Stark et al., 1985) on subarachnoid haemorrhages stated that their appearance on MRI is related to the presence of methaemoglobin, free Fe$^{3+}$ ions, haematocrit, protein and lipids. In particular, the concentration of methaemoglobin and of free Fe$^{3+}$ ions is related to the $T_2$ value, while the haematocrit is related to the $T_1$ value. The endometrial cyst differs from intracranial haematoma in that the cyst content shows a marked increase in the concentration of iron and in viscosity with time because of the degradation of old blood.

For the relationship between the cyst concentration of iron and the MRI measurements, $T_1$ and $T_2$ are the most important values. However, it is very complicated to obtain these values. To obtain the $T_1$ value, a calculated $T_2$ image must be obtained with a $T_2$-weighted image and a proton density image. We have to perform manual prescanning to maintain the values. Additional time and complicated work is required for these procedures. On the other hand, it is easy to obtain $T_1$ and $T_2$ values. The procedure only involves setting a region of interest. If $T_1$ and $T_2$ are reliable measurements, then this method may be useful in routine work. We used a two-points technique to obtain the relaxation time. We understand that the two-points technique has certain limitation. However, this technique is clinically useful because no additional scanning is necessary. In this study, a very accurate relaxation time is not required. Therefore, we think that the relaxation time obtained by this two-points technique is acceptable. If a correlation with iron concentration is expected, it might be necessary to perform gradient echo measurements to ensure that the shortening in $T_2$ is caused by iron and not viscosity. However, gradient echo measurements are very sensitive to the iron concentration, which is usually extremely high. When gradient echo is used, an echo signal cannot be obtained from most endometrial cysts, and thus we cannot observe a signal difference between different lesions. For these reasons we used spin-echo sequences.

Our study revealed that the calculated $T_2$ value and the concentration of iron were negatively correlated, which indicates that fewer factors influence the relaxation time for an endometrioma than for an intracranial haematoma, as found by Bradley and Schmidt (1985). Our results agree with those that Fullerton (1988) observed, i.e., a corresponding increase in the relaxation time with an increase in the concentration of iron and the viscosity of the cyst fluid, although this study indirectly addressed the question of a correlation between iron content and viscosity by determining the density instead of the viscosity. The viscosity and protein concentration of a fluid...
are known to influence its signal intensity (Fullerton, 1988). In our study we did not measure the protein concentration in addition to the density, because the iron concentration we found reflects the protein concentration. The density and concentration of the endometrial cyst fluid were directly proportional. Because an endometrioma is a retention cyst, we suspect that its water content decreases with time, while the level of protein and minerals increases. We specifically evaluated the iron concentration, the mineral in the endometrioma. Many factors may affect the T2 relaxation time. We only evaluated the relationship between the relaxation time and the iron concentration. It seems that the relationship between iron concentration and T2/SI/MSI may be better than that between the iron concentration and the T2 relaxation time.

Because the T2/SI/MSI ratio reflects the iron concentration of the endometrioma without recourse to the measurement of the calculated T2 value, this parameter may be useful for evaluating the progression of the cyst. Although the final conclusion must be evaluated in a prospective study which includes a large series of endometriomas, we recommend that an endometrioma should be evaluated by MRI prior to aspiration. Naturally these findings should only be used in conjunction with other results to determine the feasibility of cyst aspiration.

References

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