Association of Plasma Viscosity and Carotid Thickening in a French Working Cohort

Jaime Levenson, Jérôme Gariepy, Muriel Del-Pino, Jean Salomon, Nicolas Denarie, and Alain Simon

Plasma viscosity and intima-media thickness (IMT) are frequently associated with cardiovascular disease and its risk factors. We evaluated the association of rheologic and vascular factors in asymptomatic subjects. Plasma viscosity (coaxial cylinder viscometry) and both preintrusive and intrusive atherosclerosis in the carotid arteries (ultrasonography) were investigated in 246 men and 337 women aged 17 to 65 years from the AXA study, a prospective cohort of healthy workers. Plasma viscosity was positively related to age-adjusted mean bifurcation carotid artery IMT (P < .01 for men; P < .04 for women) and maximum carotid artery IMT (P < .01 for men; P < .02 for women), but not to mean common carotid artery IMT. Multivariate adjustment affected these relations to a greater extent in men than in women. The odds ratio (range) of having intrusive atherosclerosis in relation to 1 SD greater plasma viscosity was 2.27 (1.52–3.38) in men and 1.63 (1.17–2.26) in women. Adjustment of age, waist-to-hip ratio, smoking, hypercholesterolemia, hypertension, diabetes, and fibrinogen had very little effect on the magnitude of these odds ratios. Thus, plasma viscosity was associated with carotid thickening, suggesting that rheologic factors are involved in the subclinical phase of atherosclerosis. Am J Hypertens 2000;13:753–758 © 2000 American Journal of Hypertension, Ltd.

KEY WORDS: Plasma viscosity, intima-media thickness, carotid thickening, atherosclerosis.
furcation and the internal carotid artery because these locations were more susceptible to atherosclerosis.¹⁹

We examined the association of plasma viscosity with mean far wall common carotid artery (CCA)-IMT, bifurcation carotid artery (BCA)-IMT, and maximum carotid artery (MxCA)-IMT, as well as the prevalence of carotid artery atherosclerosis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects Subjects were drawn from the AXA Study (Paris, la Défense, France), a cohort of a prospective single-center, 4-year follow-up of healthy workers, the objectives and design of which have been described elsewhere.¹² Five hundred eighty-three subjects free from cardiovascular disease (including stroke, transient ischemia, coronary heart disease, congestive heart failure, and intermittent claudication) who completed ultrasonic measurements of the carotid arteries, biologic investigations, plasma viscosity, and fibrinogen determination were included. Thus, 246 men and 337 women aged 17 to 65 years, with data for all variables, were studied.

Cardiovascular Risk Factors All traditional risk factors were carefully evaluated in each subject. Waist (W) was measured using a cloth tape just above the level of the lateral iliac crest, below the lower costal arch at the end of gentle expiration. Hip (H) was measured at the level of the great trochanters.²⁴ Blood pressure was measured in the supine position as the average of three measurements taken from the right arm after a 10-min rest by using standard sphygmomanometric procedures.²⁵ Hypertension was defined as an SBP ≥ 160 mm Hg and/or a DBP ≥ 95 mm Hg, the presence of antihypertensive drug treatment, or a combination of these.²⁵ Biologic parameters were measured on the day of blood collection at the workplace. Total cholesterol triglycerides, HDL cholesterol after the precipitation of LDL and very low density lipoproteins (VLDL), and glycemia were measured with the use of enzymatic kits (Ektachem DT60 analyzer, Johnson & Johnson, Clinical Diagnostics, Issy les Moulineaux, France). Citrated plasma was used to measure plasma fibrinogen according to the thrombin time method described by Clauss.²⁶ Plasma viscosity was also measured in citrated plasma at high shear rates (240 s⁻¹) in a couette viscometer with coaxial cylinders (Low Shear 30, Contraves AG., Zurich, Switzerland) at 37°C.² Hypercholesterolemia was defined as a total cholesterol level ≥ 6.2 mmol/L, the use of lipid-lowering drugs, or both.²⁵ Diabetes was defined as a fasting blood glucose level ≥ 7.8 mmol/L, the use of antidiabetic drugs, or both. Lifelong smoking dose (in pack-years) was assessed by questioning the subjects. Smoking status was also categorized in subjects who were current smokers.

Ultrasound Arterial Investigation Echographic investigations were performed with a real-time, B-mode ultrasound imager (Ultramark 4, Advanced Technology Laboratorie, Les Vlis, France) using a 7.5-MHz probe. Imaging of the IMT was performed in the far wall of the right and left common carotid arteries 2 to 3 cm proximal to the bifurcation and in the far wall of the right and left carotid bifurcation itself, according to a standardized procedure reported in detail elsewhere.⁸¹¹¹² Average CCA-IMT was calculated as the mean value of 147 ± 44 point measures performed along at least 1 cm of the common carotid arteries and average BCA-IMT as the mean of 18 ± 11 point measures performed along 1 cm of the carotid bifurcation arteries. For each subject, a total IMT [(left + right)/2] was taken as a measure of current wall thickness of the common carotid and bifurcation carotid arteries. When this measure was missing on one side, the IMT estimate was based on the measurement of the site for which a value was available. In bifurcation carotid arteries, total IMT was not obtained in three patients because IMT could not be measured on both sides. The study also included the higher values of IMT (MxCA) performed in the far wall of the right and left common and bifurcation carotid arteries. In addition, carotid artery atherosclerosis was estimated by the occurrence of plaques, defined as a focal echogenic structure encroaching into the vessel lumen having a distance between the media-adventice interface and the lesion surface facing the lumen greater than 2 mm. For this, scanning of the common carotid artery, the carotid bifurcation, the carotid bulb, and the internal carotid arteries in multiple longitudinal and transverse planes was performed.

Statistical Analysis Values are expressed as mean ± SD or, for categorical parameters, as percentage. Comparisons of risk factors between groups defined by tertiles of plasma viscosity were made by ANOVA. Least-squares linear regression was used to assess the association of CCA-IMT, BCA-IMT, and MxCA-IMT across tertiles of plasma viscosity. Multivariate linear regression was then used to adjust these parameters for the possible confounding risk factors. Odds ratio for prevalent carotid artery atherosclerosis per 1 SD increase in plasma viscosity were computed from multiple logistic regression model.

RESULTS Table 1 shows mean ± SD values for cardiovascular risk factors in tertiles of plasma viscosity stratified by gender. Significant positive association was found between plasma viscosity and age, hypertension, and plasma fibrinogen in men and women. In contrast, whereas the association with lifelong smoking was
significant only for men, hypercholesterolemia was associated with plasma viscosity only for women.

Table 2 presents the average CCA-IMT, BCA-IMT, and MxCA-IMT distributed by tertiles of plasma viscosity in men and women, both unadjusted and when adjusted for age and either for age, waist-to-hip ratio, current smoking, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, and diabetes (Model A), or for plasma fibrinogen (Model B). Unadjusted CCA-IMT increased significantly \((P < .01)\) across tertiles of plasma viscosity only in women; however, the significance was eliminated by adjusting for age and for the previously mentioned factors. Mean bifurcation-IMT and MxCA-IMT were significantly higher \((P < .001\) for men and women) as plasma viscosity levels increased from the first to the third tertile. Similar results were observed for carotid artery atherosclerosis (Fig. 1; \(P < .001\) for men and women). In both genders, after adjustment for age the association between BCA-IMT, MxCA-IMT, carotid artery atherosclerosis, and tertile of plasma viscosity persisted for men \((P < .01)\) and for women \((P < .04)\). Further adjustment for age, waist-to-hip ratio, current smoking, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, and diabetes reduced the significance of the association of MxCA-IMT and carotid artery atherosclerosis with plasma viscosity in men and women \((P < .05)\), but the BCA-IMT associated with plasma viscosity was reduced to marginal nonsignificance \((P < .065)\) in men. Except for carotid artery atherosclerosis, none of the carotid wall thickening parameters was associated with plasma viscosity tertiles in men, when additionally adjusted for plasma fibrinogen. In contrast, this adjustment increased the statistical significance between BCA-IMT \((P < .01)\), MxCA-IMT \((P < .01)\), carotid artery atherosclerosis \((P < .001)\), and plasma viscosity tertiles in women.
The odds ratio of having carotid artery atherosclerosis in relation to a 1-SD greater plasma viscosity concentration was 2.27 (1.52–3.38) in men and 1.63 (1.17–2.26) in women (Table 3). The aforementioned adjustment had very little effect on the magnitude of these odds ratios.

**DISCUSSION**

The main finding of this study is that plasma viscosity was found to be associated with increased mean IMT of the carotid bifurcation and maximum thickness of the carotid arteries in both genders, but not with mean IMT of the far wall common carotid arteries. The lack of significant relation between CCA-IMT and plasma viscosity in our study, which contrasts with the results observed in the carotid bifurcation, may be related to the complex pattern of blood velocity distribution inside the arterial lumen. In the straight distal CCA, blood flow is laminar and a symmetrical velocity profile is generally observed. This contrasts with the blood flow characteristics of the carotid bifurcation, in which fluid blood can disturb and an asymmetrical velocity profile occurs, resulting in lower shear stress.27 The almost 55% greater IMT in the carotid bifurcation than in the common carotid artery is in line with the hypothesis that rheologic factors might have a greater role for arterial thickening in vessel bifurcations.27,28 The relation between plasma viscosity and BCA-IMT or MxCA-IMT persisted after adjustment of other cardiovascular risk factors, many of which demonstrated a strong association with atherogenesis.

To our knowledge, the Edinburg Arteries Study (EAS) cohort of men and women aged 60 to 80 years23 is the only study before this one that reported an association among blood viscosity, its major determinants, and intima-media thickness. There are, however, some differences with regard to IMT measurements. In contrast with EAS, which used a single measurement of the maximum far wall IMT of the common carotid artery, in our study a large number of IMT measures at the same site were performed by an automated computerized system every 10 μm along at

**FIG. 1.** Percent of subjects with carotid artery atherosclerosis in men and women according to plasma viscosity tertiles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plasma Viscosity Tertiles, mPa.s</th>
<th>Main Effects, P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unadjusted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Men (n)</strong></td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean common carotid IMT (mm)</td>
<td>0.542 ± 0.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean bifurcation carotid IMT (mm)</td>
<td>0.816 ± 0.248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum carotid IMT (mm)</td>
<td>1.05 ± 0.292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Women (n)</strong></td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean common carotid IMT (mm)</td>
<td>0.492 ± 0.070</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean bifurcation carotid IMT (mm)</td>
<td>0.746 ± 0.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximum carotid IMT (mm)</td>
<td>0.927 ± 0.244</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are ± SD. Tertiles cut-points for plasma viscosity are 1.197 and 1.234 mPa.s. n = number.

Model A: Adjusted for age, waist-to-hip ratio, current smoking, hypertension, hypercholesterolemia, and diabetes. Model B: same covariates as Model A plus fibrinogen.
least 1 cm of the artery, and the real values of thickness were calculated as the average of at least 100 measures. The lack of association between plasma viscosity and CCA-IMT is not discrepant with the results observed in the EAS cohort, because the approach that quantifies the maximum IMT may identify an advanced status of arterial thickening. Our study also included maximum IMT, with results similar to those of the EAS cohort for men. We also observed a positive relationship between maximum IMT and plasma viscosity in women.

A striking result of our study concerns the loss of the association of plasma viscosity with BCA-IMT and MxCA-IMT only in men when fibrinogen was introduced into the multiple regression. Fibrinogen is associated with most of the cardiovascular risk factors and with carotid IMT, and is a strong predictor of cardiovascular events and related to subclinical extracoronary and coronary atherosclerosis. However, the respective roles of plasma viscosity and fibrinogen to estimate cardiovascular events were difficult to differentiate in the Caerphilly and Speedwell studies. The fact that the relationship between plasma viscosity and BCA-IMT and MxCA-IMT was only independent of fibrinogen for women may be attributable to the difference in gender interindividual variance in plasma viscosity and fibrinogen. The correlations of plasma viscosity and fibrinogen were 0.71 for men and 0.62 for women, suggesting that the higher interindividual variance in plasma viscosity in men (51%) than in women (39%), attributable to the variance in fibrinogen, can explain the gender difference observed in the study.

Another aspect contributing to the fibrinogen-independent relation of arterial thickening and plasma viscosity concerns the severity and extension of atherosclerosis. Our study includes the identification of focal areas of disease or arterial plaques on the overall carotid tree, defined as an echogenic structure encroaching into the vessel lumen and having a distance between the media-adventice interface and the lesion surface > 2 mm. We found that the presence of confirmed subclinical carotid artery atherosclerosis was strongly related to the higher values of plasma viscosity. Indeed, of the 30 men and 29 women having a focal disease area, 67% and 72%, respectively, were included in the higher tertile of plasma viscosity. After controlling for age and other risks factors, the strength of having carotid artery atherosclerosis in relation to plasma viscosity remained significantly elevated. Further adjustment for plasma fibrinogen level had very little effect and the statistical significance still remained high. These results strongly suggest that rheologic modification of blood may play a role in atherogenesis, namely, in the severity of arterial disease.

In conclusion, the results of the present study indicate that plasma viscosity was independently associated with carotid artery atherosclerosis and strengthen the hypothesis that increased plasma viscosity may be one mechanism linking rheologic factors to atherogenesis, namely, in the carotid segments in which fluid blood can disturb.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**REFERENCES**


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**TABLE 3. GENDER-SPECIFIC ODDS RATIOS FOR CAROTID ARTERY ATHEROSCLEROSIS IN RELATION TO EACH 1-SD INCREASE IN PLASMA VISCOSITY**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjustment</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Odds Ratio (95% CI)</td>
<td>Odds Ratio (95% CI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unadjusted</td>
<td>2.27 (1.52–3.38)</td>
<td>1.63 (1.17–2.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age-adjusted</td>
<td>2.24 (1.43–3.50)</td>
<td>1.48 (1.07–2.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multivariate-adjusted</td>
<td>2.06 (1.27–3.36)</td>
<td>1.64 (1.07–2.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plus fibrinogen</td>
<td>1.90 (1.02–3.54)</td>
<td>1.72 (1.20–2.48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*SD = standard deviation; CI = confidence interval.
* Adjusted for age, waist-to-hip ratio, cigarette smoking, hypercholesterolemia, hypertension, and diabetes.


