Serum Lp(a) lipoprotein concentration is not associated with clinical and angiographic outcome five years after coronary artery bypass graft surgery


Abstract

Objective—To examine the association between serum Lp(a) lipoprotein concentration and clinical and angiographic outcomes five years after coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) surgery.

Setting—A regional cardiothoracic centre, Freeman Hospital, and the University Clinical Investigation Unit, Royal Victoria Infirmary, Newcastle upon Tyne.

Patients and design—353 consecutive patients (56 female, 297 male, mean age 57±2 years) undergoing first time CABG surgery for stable angina were studied prospectively.

Main outcome measures—Late cardiac death (beyond 30 days) and non-fatal myocardial infarction; prevalence of angina five years after surgery in 291 (94%) survivors and vein graft patency (evaluated by patient) in 118 survivors five years after surgery. Serum Lp(a) concentration and lipid profiles were measured before operation, and 3, 6, 12, and 60 months after surgery. Lipid profiles were also measured 24 months after surgery.

Results—Weighted Lp(a) concentration (by tertile) was not associated with late cardiac death or with the combination of late cardiac death and non-fatal myocardial infarction, with the presence of angina, or with vein graft occlusion. The association remained non-significant if analysis was restricted to the upper tertile of LDL cholesterol (>4·1 mmol/l) or to patients under the age of 55 years at the time of surgery.

Conclusions—Serum Lp(a) concentration did not predict late cardiac death, the combination of late cardiac death and non-fatal myocardial infarction, or the prevalence of angina or vein graft occlusion five years after CABG surgery.

(Heart 1997;78:131–135)

Keywords: Lp(a) lipoprotein; coronary artery bypass graft surgery; graft occlusion; angina; mortality

Lp(a) lipoprotein was discovered in human serum more than 30 years ago.1 Its concentration is higher in white patients with coronary artery disease than in asymptomatic members of the same population, an association which is independent of other lipid risk factors.1 Lp(a) is made up of a low density lipoprotein particle, the apo B100 component of which is linked by a disulphide bond to a unique glycoprotein, apolipoprotein (a), which structurally is homologous to plasminogen. It is this structure that has led to the hypothesis that Lp(a) may play an important role in promoting both coronary atherosclerosis and thrombosis.

Following coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) surgery, coronary events may occur as a result of graft failure. Vein graft stenosis has been associated with high Lp(a) levels,2 but vein graft occlusion one year after CABG surgery was not associated with high serum Lp(a) concentration.3 Early after surgery, graft occlusion is generally a thrombotic event,4 while atherosclerosis becomes increasingly important beyond the first year.5 Thus, with a possible role in both thrombosis and atherosclerosis, the association between Lp(a) concentration and late outcome after CABG surgery deserves further evaluation. We report the association between Lp(a) concentration and cardiac events and vein graft occlusion in a prospective study of a consecutive group of patients undergoing CABG surgery at a single surgical centre.

Methods

SUBJECTS

During the period 25 October 1988 to 4 December 1989, 367 consecutive patients were admitted for elective first time CABG surgery to the Freeman Hospital. CABG surgery was performed for chronic stable angina or after unstable angina had settled. Fourteen patients were excluded. Eight lived outside the former Northern region, three had simultaneous valve surgery performed, and three refused to participate. Thus 353 patients (56 female, 297 male) consented and were recruited to this prospective study. The protocol for the study to five years was approved by the Newcastle joint ethics committee.

CLINICAL FOLLOW UP

Five years after CABG surgery, mortality status was established for all patients. The date and cause of death were obtained from hospital notes, copies of death certificates, necropsy mortem reports, and general practitioners. A sudden death was defined as a death occurring...
without previous symptoms or within one hour of the onset of new cardiac symptoms.\textsuperscript{6} An unwitnessed death was included in this group if the patient had been free of new symptoms for up to 24 hours before being found dead.

Forty one patients had died and three had undergone further cardiac surgery. Five years after surgery 309 patients were alive without further cardiac surgery; 253 (82\%) of these patients were seen in a study clinic, four were seen at home, and 34 completed postal questionnaires. Patients were asked to report hospital admissions. General practitioners were contacted in the event of patients (n = 18) failing to respond to questionnaires. The diagnosis during any hospital admission was corroborated by hospital notes. Confirmation of events suffered while patients were abroad was through their general practitioners if possible.

Patients were asked about symptoms of angina. These were either typical symptoms or, if atypical, were the same as those experienced preoperatively. The severity of angina was classified using the Canadian Cardiovascular Society functional classification.\textsuperscript{7}

**ANGIOGRAPHIC FOLLOW UP**

Coronary and graft angiography as part of the research protocol was considered after detailed clinical evaluation of patients who had not undergone repeat cardiac surgery. Patients over the age of 70 years and those thought to have a higher than usual risk of complications were excluded from these research directed angiograms. During the first 122 angiograms a higher than expected complication rate occurred and led to this part of the study being terminated prematurely.

Coronary and graft angiograms were performed using the Judkins technique and a standard protocol used to define occlusion of vein graft distal anastomosis. Native coronary arteries and grafts were visualised by selective injection of contrast. A distal vein graft anastomosis was defined as occluded if no contrast was seen to enter the recipient artery during selective injection, or alternatively by the absence of any graft opacification during aortography, preferably supplemented by evidence of either a non-occluded native artery or collaterals to that coronary artery territory.

**LIPOPROTEIN (A) AND LIPID ASSAYS**

Patients were studied immediately before CAGB surgery, and 3, 6, 12, and 60 months after surgery. Lipid assays were also performed at 24 months. Blood samples were obtained after a 12 hour overnight fast. Total cholesterol and triglyceride concentrations were determined from serum samples and high density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol concentration was measured in EDTA/plasma. Lp(a) concentration was determined from stored serum samples. Previous studies confirm the reliability of Lp(a) assay in stored samples.\textsuperscript{8}

Lp(a) was measured by an enzyme linked immunosorbert assay (ELISA; Biopool (Umeå, Sweden), interassay coefficient of variation 3\% to 8\%), as previously described.\textsuperscript{8} Standard enzymatic methods (Cobas Bio centrifugal analyser, Roche Products, Welwyn Garden City, UK) were used to measure serum cholesterol (cholesterol oxidase, inter assay coefficient of variation 1-3\% to 2-1\%) and triglycerides (lipase-glycerol kinase; inter assay coefficient of variation 2-7\% to 9-4\%). HDL cholesterol was measured after precipitation of apolipoprotein B containing lipoproteins with heparin and manganese or with phosphotungstate and magnesium, and assayed by the cholesterol oxidase method (inter assay coefficient of variation 8-8\% to 14-6\%). Values obtained using the phosphotungstate and magnesium method were adjusted to be equivalent to those using the heparin and manganese method using the regression equation, phosphotungstate and magnesium method = 0.99 × heparin and manganese method – 0.07. Low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol concentration was calculated from the Friedewald equation.\textsuperscript{9}

**STATISTICS**

Data manipulation and analyses was performed using two statistical packages, Statview (Abacus Concepts, Inc, Berkeley, California, USA) and STATA 3.1 (STATA Corporation, College Station, Texas, USA).

Categorical variables were expressed as the number (percentage) and continuous variables as the mean (SD).

Serum Lp(a) and LDL cholesterol concentrations were measured at intervals after CAGB surgery. A weighted mean was calculated for each variable. For example, weighted mean Lp(a) = [(3×(a+b)/2) + (3×(b+c)/2) + (6×(c+d)/2) + (48×(d+e)/2)]/60, where a, b, c, d, and e are the Lp(a) concentration before surgery and 3, 6, 12, and 60 months after surgery.

If patients died, weighted Lp(a) concentration was calculated for the duration of time until death. If patients alive after five years had missing measurements, the weighted mean was calculated from those measurements available for that time period.

Weighted mean Lp(a) concentration had a highly skewed distribution (figure) and was categorised into tertiles.

**Distribution of weighted serum Lp(a) concentrations.**

**Graph showing distribution of weighted serum Lp(a) concentrations.**
Clinical event-free survival was estimated with life table methods. Patients undergoing repeat cardiac surgery were censored at the time of the second operation. The log rank test for trend was used to compare survival probabilities between patients stratified by Lp(a) concentration tertiles. Hazard ratios were calculated for each tertile with the first tertile as base and are referred to as the relative risk with the appropriate 95% confidence intervals (CI). Deaths within 30 days of surgery were treated as censored in the analysis of late cardiac death and major events. To avoid the interdependence of multiple vein grafts in one patient and of multiple distal anastomoses in sequential grafts, vein graft occlusion was analysed by patient: that is, patients with at least one distal anastomosis occluded were compared with those with all distal anastomoses patent. The $\chi^2$ test for trend was used to compare patients with and without angina, and patients with and without an occluded vein graft respectively. Relative risks with 95% CI were calculated for each tertile with the first tertile as base.

Results

PATIENT CHARACTERISTICS BEFORE OPERATION AND OPERATION DETAILS

The clinical and angiographic characteristics of the 353 patients studied are summarised in tables 1 and 2. Mean age (SD) at the time of surgery was 57.2 (7.3) years. Hypertension was present in 38% (defined if the patient was previously diagnosed as hypertensive, whether treated or not, and in any patients in whom the systolic blood pressure was more than 160 mm Hg or diastolic blood pressure more than 90 mm Hg, measured after a 10 minute rest). More than 60% had a history of preoperative myocardial infarction and 5% a history of heart failure; 98% reported recent angina, 73% with severe (grade III or IV) symptoms.

More than one quarter had three vessel disease and 13% had left main stem disease. Left ventricular function, assessed in the 30° right anterior oblique projection, was normal in 41% of patients; 29% of patients had only hypokinetic segments, while in a further 29% akinetic or dyskinetic segments were also present. A left internal mammary artery conduit was used in 75% of patients, and in only 6% of patients were internal mammary artery grafts the only conduits used.

OUTCOMES

Mortality

Forty one patients died within five years of surgery and three had further cardiac surgery (two with repeat coronary artery bypass surgery nine and 51 months after initial surgery respectively, and one with cardiac transplantation 45 months after initial grafting). The actuarial survival of patients without further cardiac surgery 60 months after surgery was 87%. Fourteen patients (4.0%) died within 30 days of surgery. Twenty seven patients died between 30 days and 60 months after surgery. Sixteen of these deaths were cardiac deaths, of which 10 were sudden and five were due to an acute myocardial infarction. One death was unwitnessed in a patient who had an recent episode of unstable angina.

Non-fatal myocardial infarction

Overall, eight patients (2.3%) suffered at least one postoperative non-fatal myocardial infarction (excluding perioperative infarction), one of whom later died from a cardiac cause. Survival free from an admission with non-fatal infarction 60 months after surgery was 98%.

Angina

Two hundred and ninety one patients (94%) completed questionnaires at a mean (SD) of 59.1 (1.4) months after CABB surgery. One hundred and thirty nine patients (48%) suffered from angina. Of those with angina, 30 (22%) had grade 1, 60 (44%) grade 2, 35 (26%) grade 3, and 12 (9%) grade 4 symptoms.

Vein graft occlusion

Coronary and graft angiography was performed in 122 patients as part of the research protocol and in six patients for clinical indications at a mean (SD) of 60.2 (2.3) months after CABB surgery. Four angiograms could not be analysed for technical reasons. Five of the remaining patients had only internal mammary artery conduits, and only one patient had an internal mammary artery conduit and a vein graft. The clinical and angiographic characteristics of the 353 patients studied are summarised...
Table 3 The association between Lp(a) lipoprotein concentration and outcome five years after coronary artery bypass graft surgery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tertile</th>
<th>1 (n = 116)</th>
<th>2 (n = 115)</th>
<th>3 (n = 116)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lp(a) lipoprotein (mg/l)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole cohort</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Late cardiac death (beyond 30 days)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Late cardiac death + MI</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angina</td>
<td>42/95 (44%)</td>
<td>44/93 (47%)</td>
<td>53/99 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vein graft occlusion</td>
<td>16/38 (42%)</td>
<td>15/40 (38%)</td>
<td>20/40 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper tertile LDL (&gt; 4.1 mmol/l, n = 115)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late cardiac death (beyond 30 days)</td>
<td>1/25</td>
<td>3/38</td>
<td>1/52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late cardiac death + MI</td>
<td>1/25</td>
<td>4/38</td>
<td>3/52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angina</td>
<td>10/18 (56%)</td>
<td>11/29 (38%)</td>
<td>28/47 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vein graft occlusion</td>
<td>7/10 (70%)</td>
<td>3/10 (30%)</td>
<td>11/22 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 55 years (n = 124)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late cardiac death (beyond 30 days)</td>
<td>3/49</td>
<td>1/41</td>
<td>1/34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late cardiac death + MI</td>
<td>4/49</td>
<td>2/41</td>
<td>2/34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angina</td>
<td>20/39 (51%)</td>
<td>21/39 (54%)</td>
<td>18/30 (60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vein graft occlusion</td>
<td>6/22 (36%)</td>
<td>7/18 (39%)</td>
<td>6/13 (46%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One patient who died had no Lp(a) assays performed.
LDL, low density lipoprotein; MI, myocardial infarction.

Discussion

We have found no association between serum Lp(a) concentration and outcome five years after CABG surgery. During the first five years after CABG surgery, thrombosis, intimal hyperplasia, and atherosclerosis may all contribute to graft occlusion and we hypothesised that a high Lp(a) concentration, with its potential role in both thrombosis and atherosclerosis, may predict vein graft occlusion. We also hypothesised that a high Lp(a) concentration may predict clinical outcome. Symptoms of recurrent ischaemia and reduced survival early after operation are associated with graft occlusion and narrowing, while later both changes in grafts and progression of native disease are important.

In patients with native coronary artery disease, serum Lp(a) concentration has been reported to be associated with the risk of myocardial infarction,13-15 the presence of angiographically documented coronary disease,16-17 and the progression of coronary disease without new myocardial infarction.18 Apolipoprotein (a) has also been found in vein graft tissue resected from symptomatic patients undergoing repeat coronary artery bypass graft surgery.19 Our results show that there may be no true association between Lp(a) concentration and graft occlusion or cardiac events within five years of CABG. The rate of graft occlusion is greatest during the first year and thereafter, during the next four years, occlusion occurs less frequently.20 Technical factors21 and recipient artery size22 have an impact on the early outcome of surgery and it may be that it is factors such as these that are of greater significance early after operation. Thus graft atherosclerosis and its causes may be more important later, when a larger proportion of grafts are occluded by this mechanism.

Eritsland et al.23 have also reported that high serum concentrations of Lp(a) did not predict graft occlusion one year after CABG surgery. Both our study and that by Eritsland contrast with two other studies in which serum Lp(a) concentration did predict vein graft disease. However, there are important differences between these two positive studies and ours. In both studies reporting an association between Lp(a) concentration and graft disease there was selection bias, because patients underwent cardiac angiography for postoperative symptoms. In addition, the time interval after surgery when angiography was performed was wide, with a mean of 7 (range 0-7 to 14-3) years23 and 95 years (range 17 to 203) months22 after surgery. The outcome was either a continuous measure of vein graft stenosis or a combination of significant graft narrowing and occlusion.22 Our study is distinct in being a prospective cohort study.

Table 4 Relative risk (95% confidence interval) of an event in the second or third tertile Lp(a) lipoprotein concentration with the first tertile as base

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First tertile</th>
<th>Second tertile</th>
<th>Third tertile</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>*Late cardiac death (beyond 30 days)</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.63 (0.53 to 4.99)</td>
<td>0.40 (0.08 to 2.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Late cardiac death + MI</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.46 (0.40 to 5.96)</td>
<td>0.72 (0.33 to 2.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angina</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.47 (0.64 to 1.78)</td>
<td>1.21 (0.58 to 2.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vein graft occlusion</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>0.89 (0.39 to 2.03)</td>
<td>1.19 (0.54 to 2.60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One patient who died had no Lp(a) assays performed.
MI, myocardial infarction.
Serum \( Lp(a) \) after coronary artery bypass graft surgery

Examining both clinical and angiographic outcomes five years after CABG surgery and assessing graft disease by graft occlusion or patency.

The association between serum \( Lp(a) \) concentration and native coronary artery disease and between \( Lp(a) \) concentration and vein graft stenosis is reported to be greatest in younger patients or in those with raised LDL cholesterol. In contrast, we have not found that stratification of our cohort by age or LDL cholesterol uncovered a significant association between coronary events and \( Lp(a) \) concentration.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

A weak association between \( Lp(a) \) concentration and outcome five years after CABG surgery may have remained undetected in our study. For late major cardiac events the smallest significant detectable difference between the upper and lower tertiles of \( Lp(a) \) concentration represents a relative risk of 2.3.

\( Lp(a) \) is an acute phase reactant, but we do not have C reactive protein concentrations available to evaluate this. However, our patients did not have unstable symptoms at the time of assessment before surgery, and sampling at intervals after surgery was avoided at times when an acute phase reaction was likely. We did not rely on single assay, but used a weighted mean from a number of samples. In addition, an acute phase response as a result of graft closure would have strengthened any association, not weakened it.

\( Lp(a) \) concentration is mainly genetically determined. HMG co-reductase inhibitors reduce the synthesis of cholesterol and increase the catabolism of LDL by the LDL receptor pathway. Reports of the effects of these drugs on serum \( Lp(a) \) concentration are conflicting and they may increase or have no effect on \( Lp(a) \) concentrations. Five years after surgery only 36 patients were taking lipid lowering drugs and of these 11 were taking a statin. No patients who died were known to have taken a statin. With a lack of definitive data showing an impact of treatment with statins on \( Lp(a) \) concentration and only small numbers of patients treated any contribution of such therapy changes has been ignored.

CONCLUSION

The potential role of \( Lp(a) \) in both thrombosis and atherosclerosis raised the possibility that there may be an association between \( Lp(a) \) concentration and outcome after CABG surgery. In our consecutive group of 353 patients, serum \( Lp(a) \) concentration was not associated with outcome five years after CABG surgery.

This study was supported by a grant from The British Heart Foundation. MF held a Wellcome junior clinical research fellowship and JSS held a research training fellowship awarded by the Research and Development Division of the Northern Region. We are grateful for the support of Professor RW F Campbell, Mr J H Dark, and all the cardiologists and cardiothoracic surgeons whose patients have been studied, and to Ma Nicola Cleghorn for technical assistance.