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Assessing the Independent Effect of Dietary Counseling and Hypolipidemic Medications on Serum Lipids

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ABSTRACT

Determination of changes in total cholesterol (TC) and triglyceride (TG) levels has focused primarily on hypolipidemic drug effects. Changes resulting from dietary effect alone versus diet and drug effect have not yet been fully established.

Seventy subjects were enrolled into four treatment groups to determine the impact of diet and drug effect upon TC and TG. Group 1 (n = 28) served as the control group and received no dietary counseling or drug therapy. Group 2 (n = 22) received dietary counseling. Group 3 (n = 7) underwent dietary counseling for six months and drug therapy for eighteen months. Subjects in groups 1-3 were monitored for eighteen months. Patients in group 4 (n = 13) were followed up for thirty-six months. No intervention occurred during the first eighteen months, and hypolipidemic medications were used during the second eighteen-month period.

Subjects in groups 1 and 4 received no specific dietary counseling and demonstrated no significant improvement over the course of the study. Patients in groups 2 and 3 showed significant reductions in both TC and TG. The improvement in TC seen for patients in group 3 was reduced after dietary counseling ceased.

(continued on next page)

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(Abstract continued)

Dietary intervention is necessary if patients are to statistically significantly reduce TC and TG levels. Drug therapy demonstrated the expected reductions in both TC and TG but did not statistically significantly lower lipid levels without concomitant dietary counseling. When dietary counseling and hypolipidemic medications are used together, reductions in TC and TG values are even greater than those seen with dietary effect alone. Diet control alone appears to significantly reduce TC and TG levels, resulting in reduced need for antianginal medications.

Introduction

The reversibility of coronary artery disease (CAD) by reduction of cholesterol levels was first documented¹⁻¹⁰ in Rhesus monkeys and cynomolgus macaques when these animals were placed on low cholesterol diets. Epidemiologic studies¹¹⁻¹⁴ have demonstrated a positive correlation between dietary intake of cholesterol and the prevalence of CAD as well as little notable effect of high density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol when the total cholesterol (TC) is less than 150 mg/dL.

Multiple studies¹⁵⁻²⁹ have looked at risk factor (RF) modification and the effects upon morbidity and mortality. Changes in CAD as assessed by coronary arteriography (CA) have also been studied³⁰⁻³⁸ despite limitations³⁹⁻⁴² in assessing changes in percent diameter stenosis (%DS) by using visual interpretation of CAs.

Recent work⁴³ has demonstrated reversibility/remodeling of CAD by use of quantitative coronary arteriography (QCA) and positron emission tomography (PET). The primary author (RMF) was involved in later components of this work, which attempted to place subjects on vegetarian diets along with hypolipidemic medications. Little work has been done to determine the effect of changes in diet versus hypolipidemic medications and the interactions of the two upon TC and triglyceride (TG) levels.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁷ This longitudinal study was designed to answer the following questions: (1) What is the impact on TC and TG levels when patients are advised by their cardiologist to reduce dietary intake of foods high in cholesterol and fat but receive no formal counseling? (2) What is the impact on TC and TG levels when patients undergo dietary counseling by either a dietitian or cardiologist trained in hyperlipidemia? (3) What is the effect of hypolipidemic medications on reducing TC and TG levels when

patients receive dietary counseling, and what are the ramifications once dietary counseling is withdrawn? The study was not designed to assess differences between various hypolipidemic medications since multiple studies have already addressed this issue.

Methods

Patient Population

Seventy subjects were divided into four groups as noted in Table I. Thirteen subjects were observed for thirty-six months and 57 for eighteen months. Group 1 included 28 individuals who served as the "control" group and were told by their cardiologist to reduce dietary intake of cholesterol and fats but received no specific dietary instruction except for dietary brochures made available to them. Group 2 consisted of 22 people who were advised by their cardiologist to make dietary changes and follow either step I or step II American Heart Association (AHA) guidelines (Table II) or, if possible, a vegetarian diet. Subjects received instruction from a cardiologist (RMF) experienced in treating hyperlipidemia and risk factor (RF) modification and/or a registered dietitian (KK) on each of the scheduled (Table I) office visits.

A third group of patients consisted of 7 individuals who received dietary counseling during the first six months and hypolipidemic medications for the full eighteen months of the study. Groups 1-3 were followed up for eighteen months, and subjects in group 4 were followed up for (Table I) thirty-six months. Group 4 was composed of 13 people who were advised to reduce cholesterol and dietary fat intake for the first eighteen months, using the same approach as the

Table I*Scheduled Visits in Months for Evaluating Fasting Lipoproteins*

	-18	-12	-9	-6	-3	Base- line	+3	+6	+9	+12	+18
Group 1	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
Group 2	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
Group 3	-	-	-	-	-	+	+	+	+	+	+
Group 4	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

"-" indicates not applicable, "+" indicates scheduled monthly visit.

Table II*Suggested Daily Dietary Guidelines for Patients in Groups 2 and 3*

Constituent	Current American Diet*	Step I AHA Diet*	Step II AHA Diet*	Vegetarian Diet*
Total fat	42	< 30	< 20	< 10
Saturated	14-19	< 10	< 7	
Monosaturated		10-15	10-15	
Polysaturated		< 10	< 10	
Carbohydrate		50-60	50-60	75
Protein		15-20	15-20	15
Cholesterol	500 mg	< 300 mg	< 200 mg	5 mg

*Percent of daily calories.

"control" group. After completion of the first eighteen months subjects were then given hypolipidemic medications designed to reduce TC and/or TG levels for the next eighteen months.

Subject Enrollment

Patients were enrolled in the study if they had type IIa, IIb, or IV hyperlipidemia. Forty-three

men and 27 nonpregnant women participated in the study. Subject participation was voluntary. Patients who demonstrated ischemic changes on nuclear imaging⁴⁸ requested specific dietary counseling, which placed them by definition into Group 2 or 3. Subjects were excluded from the study if they had hypercholesterolemia secondary to hypothyroidism, nephrotic syndrome, diabetes mellitus, obstructive liver disease, or a drug ef-

fect caused by beta antagonists, thiazide diuretics, progesterone, or anabolic steroids.

Dietary Counseling

Patients in group 2 (eighteen months) and 3 (first six months) received dietary counseling from a registered dietitian (KK) and/or cardiologist (RMF). Subjects were counseled individually for one hour during their first session. Follow-up sessions ranged from fifteen to thirty minutes depending upon the needs of the patient. Patients were advised to change their dietary habits to that of a vegetarian lifestyle. If this could not be accomplished, they were encouraged to follow step II AHA standards or at least step I AHA guidelines. Since the study was designed to investigate what could realistically be accomplished, patients and their families made the final decisions about which dietary guidelines they would follow.

During each of the follow-up visits patients in groups 2 and 3 were able to review their progress, assess individual dietary concerns, and set their own future goals. Patients were encouraged about the progress they had made with criticisms limited to constructive comments.

Medications

Since the purpose of the study was not to compare specific hypolipidemic agents, selection of these medications was independently made by the cardiologist(s) taking care of the patient. Selection consisted of hydroxymethylglutaryl coenzyme A (HMG-CoA) reductase inhibitors, bile acid sequestrants, fibric acid derivatives, and nicotinic acid. Combination regimens were used at the discretion of the primary cardiologist and were not influenced by the investigators. Medications were used according to physician preferences and guidelines established for each of the agents in the current physician desk reference (PDR), with appropriate monitoring of drug effect and side effects.

Lipoprotein Analysis

Subjects were asked to fast for a minimum of twelve hours prior to having blood drawn for serum total cholesterol (TC), high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C), and triglyceride (TG) levels. The Paramax reagent methods were

used to determine TC and TGs. HDL-C was measured by means of magnesium phosphotungstate precipitation and centrifugation methodology. Low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) was calculated as follows:

$$\text{LDL-C} = \text{TC} - (\text{HDL-C}) - (\text{TG}/5)$$

Statistical Analysis

Each lipoprotein was measured on scheduled visits as outlined in Table I. Results for each group were determined and described as mean \pm standard deviation. Differences between groups and for differences within groups over time were analyzed by unmatched two-tailed *t* tests. Results of group differences are graphically depicted. Other statistical analyses of TC and TGs, including range, confidence intervals, and correlation between changes in weight, TC, and TG values, were done but yielded no additional useful information.

Results

Each individual's age and weight were recorded at entry and throughout the study. No significant differences existed between groups, as shown in Table III. Baseline TC and TG levels, as noted in Tables IV and V, were comparable for each of the groups. Changes in weight over time did not appreciably correlate with changes in TC or TG.

Changes in TC and TGs over the course of the study are shown in Tables IV and V respectively. Subjects in the "control" group demonstrated an increase in both TC and TG values by the end of the eighteen months. These increases in TC and TG levels, while notable, were not statistically significant.

Subjects in group 2 demonstrated a statistically significant reduction in TC ($P < 0.005$) and TG ($P < 0.005$) levels following eighteen months of dietary counseling without the use of hypolipidemic medications. These results are shown in Tables IV and V and graphically depicted in Figures 1 and 2. Changes in dietary habits were anecdotally better if a supportive family group existed. Subjects in the second group of patients, with recent-onset exertional angina, required only "low-dose" nitrate therapy for control of angina

Table III*Patient Group Characteristics on Entry into the Study*

	Number in Group	Age (Years)*	Weight (Pounds)*
Group 1	28	64 \pm 9	184 \pm 38
Group 2	22	59 \pm 11	190 \pm 34
Group 3	7	60 \pm 10	186 \pm 61
Group 4	13	58 \pm 7	180 \pm 34

*Results shown as mean \pm standard deviation.**Table IV***Results for Total Cholesterol (mg/dL)*

Month	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
-18	—	—	—	263
-12	—	—	—	273
- 9	—	—	—	266
- 6	—	—	—	260
- 3	—	—	—	278
Baseline	238	239	250	270
+ 3	254	193	216	241
+ 6	256	207	183	225
+ 9	264	234	146	237
+12	254	183	236	247
+18	273	169	218	235

"—" indicates not applicable.

Table V
Results for Triglycerides (mg/dL)

Month	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
-18	—	—	—	266
-12	—	—	—	266
- 9	—	—	—	160
- 6	—	—	—	162
- 3	—	—	—	259
Baseline	198	186	242	278
+ 3	206	178	137	241
+ 6	161	137	147	193
+ 9	195	213	86	183
+12	198	118	148	218
+18	391	102	110	226

“—” indicates not applicable.

once their cholesterol levels had appreciably decreased following initial dietary changes.

Patients in group 3 demonstrated a statistically significant reduction in TC ($P < 0.005$) by reducing serum levels from 250 to 183 mg/dL by the end of the sixth month (Table IV) of combined dietary counseling and hypolipidemic medication. While this overall reduction in TC for group 3 (Figure 1) was greater than that seen in group 2, the differences were not statistically significant. By the end of six months, TG levels for group 3 were significantly ($P < 0.025$) reduced from baseline values as shown in Table V and Figure 2. The difference in TG reductions (Figure 2) seen at the end of six months of treatment was not statistically different for groups 2 and 3.

After completion of the first six months, subjects in group 3 were withdrawn from participation in the dietary counseling component of the study but continued with hypolipidemic medication(s). The effects of dietary counseling persisted during the nine-month follow-up but had dis-

appeared twelve months into the study. Patients in group 3 continued to display beneficial reductions in TC at the end of the study, although they had regressed to values ($P < 0.025$) seen three months into the program. Reductions in TGs were maintained after cessation of dietary counseling, although further statistically significant improvement was not seen.

Patients enrolled in group 4 spent the first eighteen months of the study with elevated TC and TG levels (Tables IV and V respectively) without the input of either a dietitian or physician trained in the management of hyperlipidemia. After completion of these first eighteen months, there was no statistical difference between initial levels and that considered to be present at “baseline,” as defined in Table I. Subjects continued without dietary counseling but were then given hypolipidemic medications for the next eighteen months. While TC was reduced by 10.6% and TGs by 14.8%, these improvements, which are frequently seen with the use of hypolipidemic med-

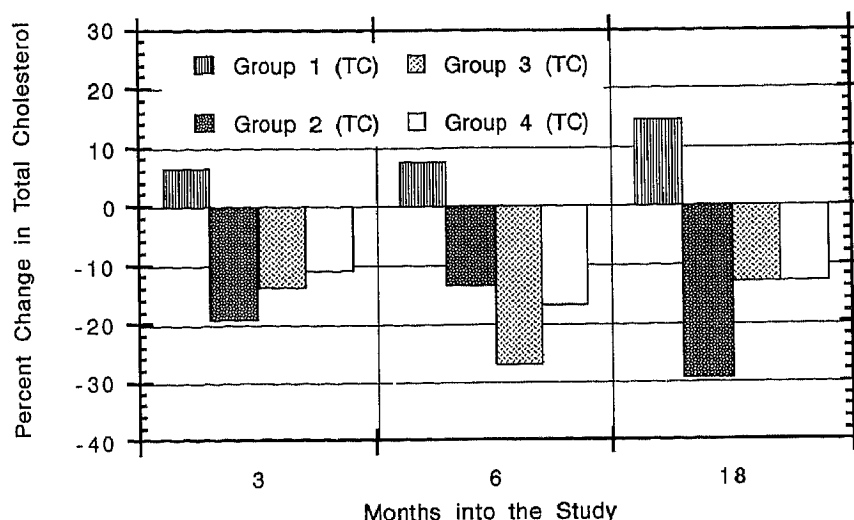
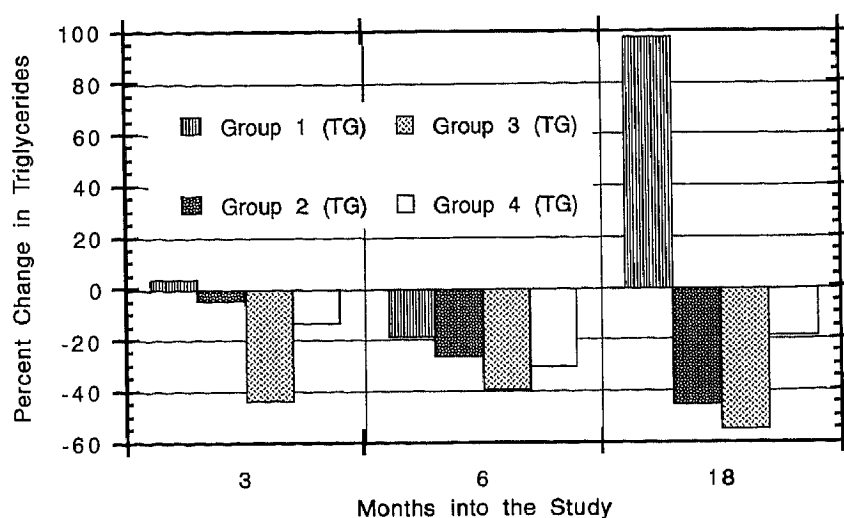


Figure 1. Results of Changes in Total Cholesterol (TC) for Each of the Four Treatment Groups. Group 1 represents the control group and is noted by a bar with vertical lines. Subjects in this group showed an increase in TC during the study. Subjects in group 2 are represented by small squares in a vertical bar. There was an overall improvement seen in this group throughout the study. Group 3 is represented by diagonal lines within the bar, while group 4 is represented by a white vertical bar.

Figure 2. Results of Changes in Triglycerides (TG) for Each of the Four Treatment Groups. Group 1 represents the control group and is noted by a bar with vertical lines. Subjects in this group showed an increase in TG during the study. Subjects in group 2 are represented by small squares in a vertical bar. There was an overall reduction in TG seen for this group. Group 3 is represented by diagonal lines within the bar, while group 4 is represented by a white vertical bar.



ications, do not represent statistically significant reductions for either TC or TG levels.

Discussion

Seventy subjects were enrolled into four different treatment groups, with a longitudinal study design. The effects of dietary counseling, hypolipidemic medications, combination effect, and the effect of neither dietary counseling nor medical management were assessed to determine the effects of each upon TC and TG levels.

When patients received no specific dietary counseling (group 1) but were given dietary brochures and told by their cardiologist to decrease dietary intake of cholesterol and fats, there was an actual increase in serum levels for both TC and TG. While these changes were not statistically significant, they clearly represent an increased risk for CAD. Subjects in group 4 demonstrated slightly increased TC and TG values during the first eighteen months, before the addition of hypolipidemic medications. Eighteen months after treatment with hypolipidemic medications, subjects in group 4 showed the expected reductions in TC and TG levels. While these improvements are considered significant, they are not statistically significant and fell short of the improvement seen by patients in groups 2 and 3, during dietary counseling. These results suggest that significant reductions in lipoproteins require dietary changes.

Subjects in group 2 demonstrated significant reductions in both TC and TGs as a result of dietary counseling alone. While motivation may play a role in the overall reduction of TC and TGs seen for subjects receiving dietary counseling, the results clearly show that many patients who wish to reduce TC and TG levels and who undergo dietary counseling on a regular basis are frequently able to reduce and maintain lower levels of serum lipids. The effect is possibly influenced by a supportive family and requires further investigation.

When subjects in group 3 were receiving both dietary counseling and medical management, the reductions in TC and TGs were even greater than that seen in group 2. If the patients had continued to receive dietary counseling, the results seen at six months suggest that even greater improvements in TC and TG levels would have been seen,

resulting in even further reductions in CAD risk. Supporting evidence for this comes from the continued reductions in TC and TG levels seen at nine months. This probably represents some residual effect from earlier dietary counseling that was not lost until the twelfth month. While some of the improvement in TC for patients in group 3 was lost by the end of the study, little effect was lost for control of TGs. This suggests some retained impact from earlier dietary teaching when results of groups 3 and 4 are compared.

Control of angina with lower than the expected dose of nitrates and significant reductions in TC and TGs for participants in groups 2 and 3 support the idea that significant reductions in serum lipids may result in remodeling of atherosclerotic plaques, reduction of percent diameter stenosis, and improvement in coronary blood flow, resulting in improved stenosis flow reserve³⁸⁻⁴³ and improved exercise capacity. Reductions in medical costs are seen by patients requiring either no additional medication or lower doses of beta antagonists, slow calcium channel antagonists, and/or nitrate compounds. Subsequently, the overall cost of dietary counseling may be significantly less than the cost of the medications it reduces or replaces, with fewer potential side effects.

Conclusions

The overall results emphasize the need for dietary counseling if patients are to obtain meaningful reductions in lipid levels. Simply being advised to reduce dietary TC and fats does not have a significant impact unless supportive dietary counseling occurs. For subjects receiving hypolipidemic medications, the maximum effect of medical management is realized with the addition of dietary counseling. Withdrawal of dietary counseling can blunt if not totally nullify the benefit of medications, while medical management in the absence of any dietary counseling appears to provide little if any statistically significant benefit.

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