

Original Article

Vitamin B₁₂ and Folate status of older New Zealand women

Nynke de Jong PhD¹, Timothy J Green PhD¹, C Murray Skeaff PhD¹,
Rosalind S Gibson PhD¹, Joanne E McKenzie MSc², Elaine L Ferguson PhD¹,
Caroline C Horwath PhD¹, Christine D Thomson PhD¹

¹Department of Human Nutrition, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

²Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

The primary aim of this study was to assess the biochemical vitamin B₁₂ and folate status of a representative group of elderly women (70-80 y) living in Dunedin, New Zealand. A second aim was to determine the prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia and to explore the determinants of homocysteine (hcy) concentration in this population. A cross-sectional study was carried out between June and August of 2000. Two hundred and fifty women were randomly selected from the 1998 electoral roll. Fasting blood samples were analysed for folate, vitamin B₁₂, total hcy, creatinine, and haematological parameters. Of the women selected, 87 did not respond, 37 were not traceable, 23 were not eligible or had died, and 103 agreed to participate. The overall response rate was 46%. Based on a cut-off of 150 pmol/L for serum B₁₂, 13 % of participants would be classified as having sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status. Of the women, 3 and 5 %, respectively, had low serum (<6.6 nmol/L) and erythrocyte folate (<317 nmol/L) concentrations. No participant had megaloblastic anaemia. The prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia (>15 µmol/L) in this population was 18%. Hyperhomocysteinaemia in this group may be partly explained by renal insufficiency because there was a significant association between serum creatinine and plasma hcy ($P<0.001$). Blood folate levels but not serum B₁₂ were significantly inversely associated with hcy. In conclusion, there was a moderately high prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia and suboptimal plasma vitamin B₁₂ concentrations but not low blood folate concentrations in this elderly female population.

Key Words: elderly women, vitamin B₁₂, cobalamin, folate, homocysteine, creatinine

Introduction

There is little data regarding the vitamin B₁₂ status of New Zealand elderly. Two earlier reports indicate that the prevalence of sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status among the elderly in this country is between 7-23%, based on low serum B₁₂ concentrations.^{1,2} Although these studies suggest a high prevalence of low serum B₁₂ concentrations among New Zealand elderly, both were carried out over a decade ago, and neither study used representative sampling techniques. Recently, there has been increased concern about sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status in the elderly. Evidence is accumulating that even in the absence of anaemia sub-optimal B₁₂ status may exist which places elderly at increased risk of neurological abnormalities.³

An elevated blood total homocysteine (hcy) concentration, common in older persons, is associated with an increased risk of several health outcomes in the elderly including ischaemic heart⁴ and Alzheimer's disease.⁵ Blood hcy concentration is inversely correlated with blood folate and vitamin B₁₂ and to a lesser extent vitamin B₆ concentrations.⁶ Low folate intakes are often implicated in the etiology of hyperhomocysteinaemia in the elderly,⁷ and folic acid given as a tablet⁸

or added to food⁹ has been shown to lower hcy concentrations in the elderly. There are other non-nutritional determinants of hcy concentration such as enzyme defects, impaired renal function, and lifestyle factors such as alcohol consumption and cigarette smoking.¹⁰ The reported prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia in a self-selected group of older persons (60+ years) from Dunedin was 6%.¹¹ There is no published data on the determinants of hcy in a representative group of elderly New Zealanders.

The primary aim of this study, therefore, was to provide up-to-date information on the vitamin B₁₂ and folate status of a representative sample of free-living Dunedin women between 70-80 years. Further aims were to determine the prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia and to explore the determinants of hcy concentration in this population.

Correspondence address: Dr Timothy J Green, Department of Human Nutrition, University of Otago, P.O. Box 56, Dunedin, New Zealand.

Tel: +64 3 479 5068; Fax: +64 3 479 7958

E-mail: Tim.Green@stonebow.otago.ac.nz

Accepted 9 August 2002

Materials and methods

The study was carried out between June and August of 2000. The University of Otago Human Ethics Committee approved the study. Two hundred and fifty women, aged 70-80 years, living in the Dunedin, New Zealand, urban area were randomly selected from the 1998 electoral roll and contacted by telephone. Women who were institutionalised, non-ambulatory, or reported the presence of a terminal illness were excluded. Women who agreed to participate were asked to attend an early morning clinic during which fasting blood samples were collected by venepuncture into tubes with and without EDTA and immediately put on ice. A third fresh sample of EDTA-containing whole blood was used for a complete blood count. Within 2 hours, plasma from EDTA tubes and serum from tubes without anticoagulant were separated from whole blood by centrifugation. At a subsequent home visit a questionnaire was administered to obtain information on socio-demographic and health issues. Data on tobacco use was obtained through a self-administered questionnaire previously described by researchers of the European elderly SENECA study.¹²

Table 1. General characteristics of the study population and non-responders*

Parameter	Study population (N=103)		Non-responders (N=64)	
	% (N)	Median (1 st , 3 rd)	% (N)	Median (1 st , 3 rd)
Age (y)		74.3 (72.6, 78.3)		75.2 (72.1, 78.1)
Participants living alone	50 (51)		52 (33)	
Subjective health†		8 (7, 9)		8 (7,9)
Subjective appetite		6 (8, 10)		
Participants reporting				
>1 disease	88 (91)		83 (53)	
No. of prescribed medicines		3 (1,5)		3 (1, 5)
Smoking				
Never	51 (53)			
Previous	41(42)			
Current	8 (8)			
Socio-Economic Index‡				
High	32 (32)			
Medium	53 (55)			
Low	15 (16)			
Weight (kg)		66 (58, 75)		
BMI (kg/m ²)				
<18.5	2 (2)		26 (23, 30)	
>30	21 (22)			

*There were no significant differences between the study participants and non-responders; † Range: 1-10; 1 = poor, 10 = excellent; ‡ Based on Elley WB, Irving JC. Revised socio-economic index for New Zealand. N J Educational Studies 1976;11:25-36.

Alcohol intake was determined using a validated self-administered food frequency questionnaire designed to assess intake over the previous year.¹³ Serum vitamin B₁₂ was determined with an Abbott IMX analyzer, reagents, and calibrators (Abbott Laboratories, Abbott Park, IL). Serum folate and whole blood folate were determined using the microtiter technique exactly as described by O'Broin and Kelleher¹⁴ with Cloramphenicol resistant *Lactobacillus casei* as the test microorganism. The CV for the folate assay was 11.8%. Erythrocyte folate was calculated from whole blood folate by subtracting serum folate and correcting for haematocrit. The between-run coefficient of variation (CV) was 7.2% based on the controls provided by the manufacturer. Total plasma hcy concentrations were measured by HPLC according to the fluorometric method of Ubbink *et al.*¹⁵ The between-run CV was 2.5%. Serum creatinine was measured on a Cobas Fara Autoanalyser (Roche Diagnostic, Somerville, NJ). The interpretive value for 'at risk' used for serum B₁₂ was <150 pmol/L.¹⁶ Interpretive values for serum folate,¹⁷ erythrocyte folate,¹⁷ and plasma hcy were,^{6,18,19} < 6.6 nmol/L, < 317 nmol/L, and > 15 µmol/L, respectively.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS for windows, version 9.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois). The natural log transformation was used to normalize the biochemical variables for the multiple regression analysis. The following steps were used to develop a multiple regression model to explore the determinants of plasma hcy.²⁰ The following predictor variables which have been shown to be predictors of hcy in other studies were forced into the model: cigarette smoking, alcohol intake, vitamin supplement use (vitamin B₁₂, folic acid, and/or vitamin B₆; yes/no), age, serum folate, serum B₁₂, and serum creatinine.²¹ The exponential of the beta coefficients from the regression analysis with the natural log transformed outcome data provide comparisons between levels of predictor variables on a ratio scale.

Results

Of the 250 women who were posted an information letter, 103 agreed to participate and met the inclusion criteria. Eighty-seven women were classified as non-responders. Thirty-seven women were not traceable and 23 were not eligible or had died. The overall response rate was 46% for those who were eligible and traceable. Characteristics of the participants and non-responders are given in Table 1. There were no significant differences between the study participants and 64 non-responders who agreed to answer a short questionnaire with respect to age, subjective health and appetite, living arrangement, presence of disease, or number of prescribed medicines.

The median age of the participants was 74.3 years. With the exception of one participant who reported being New Zealand Maori all participants were Caucasian. Common disease conditions reported by the participants included: arthritis (45%), hypertension (21%), osteoporosis (17%), as

well as cardiovascular disease, prior stroke, and angina (20%). Over 20% of the participants had a BMI (kg/m²) greater than 30 and are classified as obese.²² Two percent of women had a BMI less than 18.5 and are classified as underweight.²² Vitamin preparations containing vitamin B₁₂, folic acid, and/or vitamin B₆ were used by 16% of participants. Forty-one percent of participants had smoked at some time during their life but less than 10% were current smokers. Alcohol use was common: almost 60 % of participants claimed to have used alcohol in the previous month.

The distributions of serum vitamin B₁₂ concentrations and plasma hcy are given in Figure 1. The median (1st, 3rd quartiles) of vitamin B₁₂ and plasma hcy were 273 (194, 380) pmol/L and 11.6 (9.0, 13.8) µmol/L, respectively. Thirteen percent of women had sub-optimal serum B₁₂ concentrations (< 150 pmol/L). The prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia was 18% in this population based on a cut-off of 15 µmol/L. A summary of biochemical indices is given in Table 2. Based on interpretive values of 6.7 nmol/L for serum folate and 317 nmol/L for RBC folate, 3% and 5% of women, respectively, had low blood folate levels. Based on an interpretive value of 118 g/L, 6.8% of women had haemoglobin concentrations indicative of anaemia.²³ However, there were no cases of megaloblastic anaemia. One woman had an elevated MCV (i.e. >100 fL)^{24,25} but her haemoglobin was not low (124 g/L). Further, her serum B₁₂, plasma and RBC folate concentrations were normal (185 pmol/L, 7.8 nmol/L, and 888 nmol/L, respectively). Six participants had a serum creatinine indicative of impaired renal function (>106 µmol/L).²⁶

Multiple regression analysis revealed a significant inverse relationship between hcy and serum folate (Table 3). Each 10 nmol/L increase in serum folate was associated with an estimated 7% lower plasma hcy. Despite a narrow range age, was significantly associated with hcy. Serum creatinine, a marker of renal insufficiency, was positively and strongly associated with plasma hcy.

Smoking status, serum B₁₂, and use of supplements (vitamin B₁₂, folic acid, and/or vitamin B₆) were not significantly associated with hcy. Alcohol use was weakly associated with hcy such that each 15 g increase (equivalent to one standard drink) in ethanol intake was associated with a 0.7 % increase in hcy concentration.

Discussion

Over 10% of the elderly women in the present study had sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status based on serum vitamin B₁₂ (<150 pmol/L). Internationally the prevalence of sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status in the elderly based on low blood B₁₂ levels has varied considerably by study from 1.0% to 40.5 % depending largely on the cutoff used.²⁷ In the US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES III, 1988-94), which provides the most up-to-date data on the prevalence of sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status based on serum B₁₂ in a nationally representative sample, the prevalence of low serum B₁₂ (<150 pmol/L) was 6 % in women 70 years or older (n=883).²⁸ No similar data exist for New Zealand

elderly. Perhaps not surprisingly our reported prevalence in a free-living population of elderly women is much lower than that reported in residents of rest homes and geriatric wards in the Auckland region (n=100 men and women)² where nearly one-quarter of residents had serum B₁₂ levels indicative of sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status (<135 pmol/L).

Table 2. Biochemical indices in the study sample

Parameter	Median (1 st , 3 rd)	Interpretive values for 'at risk'	% at risk
Serum B ₁₂ (pmol/L)	273 (194, 380)	<150	13
Serum folate (nmol/L)	16.4 (11.6, 25.6)	< 6.7	4
Erythrocyte folate (nmol/L)	627 (456, 886)	< 315	5
Plasma homocysteine (µmol/L)	11.6 (9.0, 13.8)	> 15	18
Mean corpuscular vol. (fl)	90.8 (87.8, 93.5)	> 100	1
Haemoglobin (g/L)	134 (128, 142)	< 118	7
Serum creatinine (µmol/L)	65 (55,74)	> 106	6

Table 3. Estimated changes in plasma homocysteine(umol/L) according to selected variables.*

Variable	Estimated % Change	Confidence Interval	P
Age (5-y increase)	-7.1	-0.2, -13.4	0.044
Smokers vs. Nonsmokers†	-8.3	-41.5, 43.5	0.557
BMI (kg/m ²) (1-point increase)	0.9	-0.1, 1.9	0.074
Supplement users vs. nonusers‡	-3.7	-39.5, 53.4	0.854
Alcohol (15 g ethanol intake per day increase)	0.7	0.1,1.4	0.047
Serum folate (10-nmol/L increase)	-7.0	-10, -3.7	<0.001
Serum B ₁₂ (10-pmol/L increase)	-0.2	-0.4, 0.1	0.197
Creatinine (10-umol/L increase)	8.0	5.2, 10.8	<0.000

*Estimated in a regression model with the natural log of homocysteine as the dependent variable. n=103, r²=0.52; † Current Smoker, n=9; ‡ Folic acid, B₁₂, or Vitamin B₆ supplement user, n=16.

Our estimate is higher than that reported in a community-based sample of elderly men and women over 65 years from a medical centre in Christchurch (n=257 men and women) in the early 1990s¹ where 7.3% of patients had serum vitamin B₁₂ levels indicative of sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status. In the Christchurch study, however, a lower cut-off for serum B₁₂ of < 114 pmol/L was used to define sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status. If a cut-off of 114 pmol/L is applied in the present study a similar 6.9 % of elderly women have sub-optimal vitamin B₁₂ status.

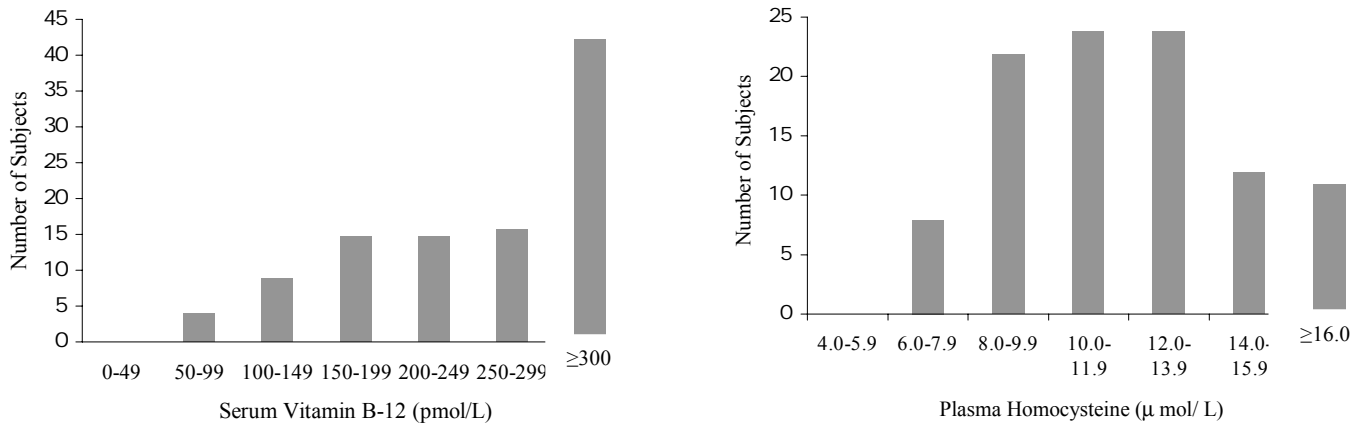


Figure 1. Frequency distribution of plasma homocysteine and serum vitamin B12 among elderly (70-80 y) participants (n=103)

Debate exists about the most appropriate cut-off for serum B₁₂ and cutoffs from 70 pmol/L to greater than 200 pmol/L have been suggested.^{9,24,29} In our study, as in others,²⁷ low serum cobalamin concentrations (<150 pmol/L) were not accompanied by megaloblastic anaemia. Anaemia, induced by depletion of vitamin B₁₂ occurs only at the far end of the vitamin deficiency spectrum. As a consequence, it is difficult to find abnormal hematological indexes in people who may be mildly deficient.³⁰ Therefore, the presence of megaloblastic anaemia should not be the sole criteria for the diagnosis of B₁₂ deficiency. It is now recognised that significant neurological disturbances can occur in elderly patients, that improve with vitamin B₁₂ supplementation, in the absence of haematological abnormalities.³ Some researchers have even argued that a higher cutoff, as high as 258 pmol/L for serum cobalamin should be established; a cut-off figure that has been based on elevated levels of serum metabolites such as methylmalonic acid and hcy that respond to vitamin B₁₂ therapy.^{24,29,31-33} Based on a cut-off of 200 pmol/L nearly 50% of participants in the present study would be classified 'at risk' for vitamin B₁₂ deficiency. Recent evidence, however, suggests that methylmalonic concentrations need to be interpreted with caution in the elderly because they are often elevated due to renal insufficiency.³⁴

In contrast to vitamin B₁₂, the elderly women in our study generally did not appear to have a poor folate status. Very few women had levels of serum or erythrocyte folates indicative of deficiency (3 and 5%, respectively). As with vitamin B₁₂, no national prevalence data are available for folate deficiency in New Zealand seniors. However, our findings are in agreement with the Christchurch researchers where 1 and 3.3 % of elderly persons (>65 years), respectively, had low levels of serum and erythrocyte folate.¹

In the US NHANES III, however, 7% of elderly women (n=1658) had serum folate levels less than 6.7 nmol/L and over 20% had erythrocyte folate levels (n=1496) less than 317 nmol/L.²⁸ The radio-isotopic method used in the NHANES study for measuring folate is known to under-

estimate folate levels, particularly in erythrocyte, relative to the microbiological method, used in our study.²⁸

Almost 20% of participants in our study had elevated hcy levels (>15µmol/L). The prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia in our study was much higher than the 6% reported in a sub-sample of male and female participants over 60 years age in a recent Dunedin study.¹¹ This study consisted of adult volunteers and, therefore, may have included healthier individuals. Moreover participants in that study were younger than in our study. Age has been associated with hcy in several studies³⁵ and was positively associated with hcy in the present study despite an age range of just ten years. In the US NHANES III, nearly 50% of women over 60 years (n=1136) were classified as having high hcy concentrations based on a cut-off of >10.4 µmol/L.³⁵ Using this cut-off, the prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia would be over 40% in our study. As with serum vitamin B₁₂ there is considerable debate about the definition of hyperhomocysteinaemia. Cut-offs ranging from 9 to over 20µmol/L have been suggested³⁶ with 15 µmol/L being the most frequently used.^{6,18,19} However, there is evidence that a lower cut-off may be more appropriate.³⁶ First, in a meta-analysis of observational studies, which included many older participants, it was predicted that each 1 µmol/L decrease in hcy was associated with a 10% reduction in risk of coronary artery disease.⁴ This risk reduction was based on a hcy concentration of between 10-15µmol/L. Also the cardiovascular benefit of lowering hcy concentrations in high-risk individuals has recently been demonstrated.³⁷ Restenosis rates after coronary angioplasty were reduced from 39% to 26% in patients who took a daily folic acid, B₁₂, and B₆ supplement. These patients had a mean baseline hcy concentration of only 11.1 µmol/L.

Despite the general absence of low blood folate concentrations in our study, hcy was inversely correlated with both serum folate and erythrocyte folate. This finding is consistent with several overseas studies where hcy has been shown to be inversely correlated with folate across the whole

range of blood folate concentrations.¹⁰ Further, folic acid has been shown to effectively lower hcy concentrations in populations with adequate biochemical folate status and normal hcy concentrations.³⁸ It must be remembered that 'cut-off' values for blood folate indices are for megaloblastic anaemia and not for the optimization of hcy concentrations. Given the high prevalence of low serum B₁₂ in our study it was somewhat surprising that serum B₁₂ was not a significant determinant of plasma hcy. Other investigators report an inverse relationship between hcy and serum B₁₂ especially in the elderly^{39, 40} but this finding has been less consistent than for folate. Moreover, vitamin B₁₂ supplements are generally not as effective as folic acid in lowering hcy.⁸ A potential weakness of our study is that we did not consider the effect of vitamin B₆ on hcy concentrations. Vitamin B₆ is involved in the metabolism of hcy. However, it has been shown in several populations, including the elderly, that vitamin B₆ is not an important determinant of hcy.^{6,9} Further, in a recent meta-analysis of hcy lowering trials it was established that folic acid reduces blood homocysteine concentrations by 25% and that vitamin B₁₂ produces an additional 7% reduction. However, no additional hcy lowering effect could be attributed to vitamin B₆.⁸

The finding that creatinine was the greatest determinant of hcy in our elderly population is an important finding and is consistent with the findings of others.^{21,41,42} The relation between circulating concentrations of hcy and serum creatinine may reflect the effect of renal function on hcy concentrations but could also reflect increased hcy production during creatine metabolism.^{41,43} Renal failure is frequently accompanied by elevated hcy concentrations.⁴⁴ However, urinary clearance of hcy is low and the importance of renal uptake and metabolism of hcy in hcy elimination remains controversial. Homocysteine has been used a functional indicator of folate and to a lesser extent vitamin B₁₂ status. The high correlation between creatinine and hcy means that hcy needs to be interpreted with caution as a functional indicator of folate and B₁₂ status in the elderly.

Smoking and alcohol use have been associated with hcy in several studies of the elderly.^{45,46} The failure to find a significant association between smoking and hcy in our study is likely explained by the low number of current smokers (n=9). The finding that folate, B₁₂, or B₆ supplement use was not associated with lower hcy was unexpected and not consistent with the findings of other investigators. Possible explanations include the low number of vitamin supplement users in the present study (16%), our insensitive measure of vitamin B₁₂, folic acid, and/or vitamin B₆ supplement use (yes/no); or irregular use of supplements by the supplement users.

We aimed to recruit a representative sample of non-institutionalised elderly Dunedin women between 70-80 years. There was no evidence that responders differed markedly from non-responders relative to age, subjective health, and living arrangements. There is the potential, however, that responders differed in unmeasured variables such as biochemical measures. The findings should not be

considered representative of the New Zealand elderly female population. Our study was carried out in an urban centre. Further, we did not include institutionalised or non-ambulatory elderly women who would be expected to have a poorer vitamin status than these women.¹ Our results probably underestimate the prevalence of sub-clinical vitamin B₁₂ for the general elderly population.

New Zealand health authorities are considering a mandatory food folic acid fortification policy to reduce the incidence of neural tube defects (NZ Ministry of Health, Personal Communications). However, there is a concern that folic acid added to food could mask (i.e. correct) the anaemia of B₁₂ deficiency allowing the neurological damage that B₁₂ deficiency can cause to progress undetected.⁴⁷ We did not find a single case of megaloblastic anaemia in the 103 participants surveyed suggesting the risk of 'masking' is low in this population. Further, hcy was inversely associated with folate blood concentration suggesting that this population might benefit from folic acid fortification through a reduction in hcy. Folic acid fortification in the United States was associated with a fall in hcy concentrations in the elderly.⁴⁸

In conclusion, we have shown a moderately high prevalence of sub-optimal plasma vitamin B₁₂ concentrations among non-institutionalised senior women in Dunedin. However, low plasma B₁₂ concentrations were not associated with megaloblastic anaemia. There was little evidence of folate deficiency in this group. However, the prevalence of hyperhomocysteinaemia was high and hcy was inversely associated with folate blood concentration.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to our research assistants Fiona Simpson and Eva Corpeleijn, to our lab technicians Steve Tiszavari, Ashley Duncan, and Michelle Harper and to our departmental nurse Margaret Waldron. We wish to thank Professor Jim Mann who provided money from the Bristol Meyers/Squibb Mead Johnson Award to conduct this study and the Dutch Foundation Doctor Catharina van Tussenbroek for partly funding Nynke de Jong while in New Zealand.

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