Phenotype of asthma related with high serum periostin levels

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 30 June 2014
Received in revised form 14 November 2014
Accepted 22 November 2014
Available online 13 January 2015

Keywords:
Chronic rhinosinusitis
Eosinophils
Nasal polyp
Olfactory dysfunction
TH2-high asthma

A B S T R A C T

Background: Asthma is a heterogeneous disease composed of various phenotypes. Periostin, a molecule inducible with interleukin (IL)-4 or IL-13 in bronchial epithelial cells, is a biomarker of “TH2-high” asthma. The objective of this study is to examine whether the serum periostin concentrations are correlated with the severity, specific phenotype(s), or comorbidity of asthma.

Methods: Serum concentrations of periostin were measured in 190 Japanese asthmatic patients and 11 healthy controls. The protocol was registered under UMIN 000002980 in the clinical trial registry.

Results: The serum concentrations of periostin were significantly higher ($P = 0.014$) in asthmatics [70.0 (54.0–93.5) ng/ml] than in healthy subjects [57.0 (39.0–63.0) ng/ml], though we found no correlation between serum periostin concentrations and treatment steps required to control asthma. To characterize “high-periostin” phenotype(s), the patients with asthma were divided among tertiles based on the serum concentrations of periostin. The high-periostin group was older at onset of asthma ($P = 0.04$), had a higher prevalence of aspirin intolerance ($P = 0.04$) or concomitant nasal disorders ($P < 0.001$), higher peripheral eosinophil counts ($P < 0.001$), and lower pulmonary function ($P = 0.02–0.07$). The serum concentrations of periostin were particularly high in asthmatic patients complicated by chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps and olfactory dysfunction. In contrast, neither atopic status, control status of asthma, nor quality of life were related with the “high-periostin” phenotype.

Conclusion: Elevated periostin concentrations in serum were correlated with a specific phenotype of eosinophilic asthma, late-onset and often complicated by obstructive pulmonary dysfunction and nasal disorders.

Introduction

Asthma is an inflammatory disease of the airways characterized by bronchial hyperresponsiveness and reversible airflow limitation, affecting about 300 million people in the world. While
airway inflammation and respiratory symptoms can be controlled with inhaled corticosteroids in most instances, they remain refractory to the highest tolerable doses of inhaled corticosteroids, long-acting bronchodilators, and leukotriene receptor antagonists in patients with severe asthma. The frequent disease exacerbations suffered by these patients, and multiple emergency department visits and hospitalisations represent a heavy social and economic burden. Furthermore, because the heterogeneous characteristics of severe asthma preclude its control by a single therapeutic agent, relevant phenotyping and individualized treatment are essential.

Interleukin (IL)-13, a TH2 cytokine, plays an important role in the development and persistence of eosinophilic inflammation and hyperresponsiveness in the asthmatic airways. Patients with “TH2-high” asthma have been identified by transcriptome analysis, whose bronchial epithelial cells express excessive amounts of IL-13-inducible genes, such as Ccl1 and Postn. These patients present with increased eosinophilic inflammation and airway hyperresponsiveness, thickened basement membranes, and greater responsiveness to corticosteroids. On the other hand, periostin, the product of IL-13-inducible Postn, is an extracellular matrix protein of the fasciulin family, and can be measured in serum. Serum periostin concentrations are correlated with a sustained eosinophilic inflammation of the airways and rapid decline of pulmonary function despite treatment with inhaled corticosteroids. Another study has suggested that the concentrations of serum periostin can be used to predict the responsiveness to treatment with anti-IL-13 antibody. Therefore, periostin might be a useful biomarker as a companion diagnostic for severe asthma.

However, clinical characteristics or phenotype of asthmatics with elevated serum periostin levels are not well studied. This study examined whether, in asthmatic Japanese, the serum concentrations of periostin are correlated with the disease severity, specific phenotype or comorbidity.

**Methods**

**Patient populations**

Between April 1, 2010 and December 31, 2012, we enrolled Japanese patients ≥20 years of age, who presented with difficult-to-treat asthma at Keio University Hospital and affiliated hospitals. Asthma was diagnosed on the basis of the Japanese Society of Allergology guideline. Asthma requiring step 4 or 5 treatment actions, defined in the updated version of the 2006 statement by the Global Initiative for Asthma (GINA) to achieve its optimum control was defined as severe asthma. Healthy subjects with no history of allergic diseases and patients with mild to moderate asthma controlled with step 1 to 3 treatment actions of GINA, served as controls. Patients with uncontrolled malignant tumours or widespread lung disease that prominently impaired lung function were excluded from enrolment. The protocol (no 2009-9-5) initially approved by the institutional Review Board of Keio University School of Medicine, was subsequently approved by the Review Board of each participating institution, and implemented in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants granted their written informed consent.

**Collection of clinical information**

The study participants reported their clinical information at the time of enrolment by means of a self-completed questionnaire. Poor adherence to the treatment was defined as <5 day-use of inhaled corticosteroids per week. Olfactory dysfunction was defined by the presence of hyposmia/anosmia. The control status of asthma and the disease-specific quality of life were ascertained, using the Japanese versions of the asthma control test (ACT) and the Juniper’s asthma quality of life questionnaire, respectively. Laboratory data and information pertaining to medications and disease exacerbations were collected from medical records.

**Serum concentrations of periostin and cytokines**

The serum periostin concentrations were measured by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay, as previously reported. The serum concentrations of IL-4, IL-5, and IL-13 were measured, using the Bio-Plex® Suspension Array System (Bio-Rad Laboratories, Hercules, CA, USA). Total and allergen-specific serum immunoglobulin (Ig)E concentrations for house-dust mites, cat dander, fungi, and insects were measured using a fluorescence-enzyme immunoassay (Mitsubishi Chemical Medience Corporation, Tokyo, Japan). Atopic asthma was defined as one or more allergen-specific IgE concentrations >0.70 UA/mL.

**Pulmonary function tests**

Pulmonary function during stable asthma was measured using a CHESTAC-9800 spirometer (Chest, Tokyo, Japan), which met the criteria of the American Thoracic Society. The predicted value of vital capacity (VC) and forced expiratory volume in 1 s (FEV1) for a Japanese population was calculated using the formula proposed by the Japanese Respiratory Society. The fraction of exhaled nitric oxide was measured with a Sievers nitric oxide analyser (GE Healthcare Japan, Tokyo, Japan) in some participating institutions.

**High-resolution computed tomography**

Airway wall thickness was measured by high-resolution computed tomography scans, using an Aquilion® (TOSHIBA Medical Systems Corporation, Tochigi, Japan) or LightSpeed® volume scanner (GE Healthcare). The wall area and % wall area of the apical bronchus of the right upper lobe (RB1) were measured using the AZE VirtualPlace Lexus64® software (AZE, Tokyo, Japan).

**Statistical analysis**

The data are expressed as means ± SD, median and interquartile range, or percentages. Categorical data were analysed with the chi-square test. Mann–Whitney test or Kruskal–Wallis test, as appropriate. Spearman’s rank correlation coefficient was determined between serum levels of periostin, TH2 cytokines, and blood eosinophil counts. A regression analysis was performed to examine the correlations between pulmonary functions and age- and sex-adjusted or unadjusted, log-transformed serum periostin concentration, duration of asthma and smoking history. A statistically significant difference was defined as a two-tailed P value <0.05. All statistical analyses were performed with the SPSS statistical software package for Windows, version 20.0 (IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY, USA).

**Results**

**Characteristics of the study groups**

This study enrolled 11 healthy subjects (mean age 39.5 ± 12.1 years, 73% men) and 190 asthmatic patients (mean age 60.2 ± 14.5 years, 44% men), including 22 in the GINA steps 1 and 2, 20 in step 3, 83 in step 4 and 65 patients in step 5. In 58 patients in step 4 (70%) and 58 patients in step 5 (89%), the status corresponded to the definition of severe asthma by international ERS/ATS
guidelines. Table 1 compares the characteristics of 42 patients included in the GINA treatment steps 1 to 3 with those of 148 patients included in steps 4 and 5. The serum concentration of total IgE and fractional exhaled nitric oxide in the latter group were significantly higher, while VC, FEV₁, and the asthma control test and asthma quality of life questionnaire scores were significantly lower. The rate of patients with poor adherence to the treatment was lower in severe asthma group, and there were no differences between the 2 groups in sex distributions, age, body mass index, peripheral blood eosinophil counts, atopic status, and prevalence of comorbidity, including aspirin intolerance, atopic dermatitis, allergic rhinitis and chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps.

**Relationship between serum periostin concentrations and severity of asthma**

The median serum periostin concentrations in the 190 asthmatic patients was 70.0 (54.0–93.5) ng/ml, versus 57.0 (39.0–63.0) ng/ml in the 11 healthy subjects (P = 0.014). There were no significant differences, however, in the serum periostin concentrations measured among patients in GINA step 1–3 [66.5 (51.0–87.0) ng/ml], step 4: 70.0 (57.0–97.0) ng/ml, and step 5: 72.0 (54.0–103.0) ng/ml (Fig. 1). Periostin concentrations >90 ng/ml, observed in 33% of the step 4 & 5 group, was found in only 14% of the step 1-3 group (P = 0.02 compared to step 4 & 5 group), and none of the healthy controls (P = 0.02 compared to step 4 & 5 group), suggesting that a specific asthmatic phenotype(s) characterized by elevated serum periostin concentrations ("periostin-high" asthma) is more prevalent among patients requiring the most intensive treatment.

### Table 1

**Characteristics of the study groups.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GINA steps</th>
<th>P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–3</td>
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<tr>
<td>(n = 42)</td>
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<td>4 &amp; 5</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(n = 148)</td>
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<td><strong>Demographic and clinical observations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age, y</td>
<td>60.6 ± 14.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age at onset of asthma, y</td>
<td>36.1 ± 20.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Body mass index, kg/m²</td>
<td>22.5 ± 3.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>History of smoking</td>
<td>26.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aspirin intolerance</td>
<td>12.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atopic dermatitis</td>
<td>22.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allergic rhinitis</td>
<td>61.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps</td>
<td>43.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Olfactory dysfunction</td>
<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor adherence to the treatment</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily dose of inhaled corticosteroids, µg²</td>
<td>273 ± 195</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patients treated with daily oral corticosteroids</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patients treated with omalizumab</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Laboratory measurements</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Eosinophils/µl of blood</td>
<td>421 ± 667</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total serum IgE, U/ml</td>
<td>190</td>
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<tr>
<td>(interquartile range)</td>
<td>(71–550)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atopic type</td>
<td>53.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pulmonary function (n = 173)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>VC, % predicted</td>
<td>98 ± 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEV₁, % predicted</td>
<td>91 ± 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEV₁/FVC, %</td>
<td>69 ± 10</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fractional exhaled nitric oxide, ppb (n = 80)</strong></td>
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<td>29 ± 29</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Asthma severity and quality of life scores</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Asthma Control Test</td>
<td>22.5 ± 3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asthma Quality of Life Questionnaire</td>
<td>5.5 ± 1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are proportions of patients in each study groups or means ± SD if not otherwise specified. IgE, immunoglobulin E; VC, vital capacity; FEV₁, Forced expiratory volume in 1 s; FVC, forced vital capacity.² Dose of inhaled corticosteroids are shown as fluticasone propionate equivalent.

### High serum periostin concentrations indicate a specific asthmatic phenotype

To characterize the “periostin-high” phenotype of asthma, we divided the 190 asthmatic patients among tertiles according to the serum periostin concentrations (Table 2). The average age and age at onset of asthma were significantly older in the high-than in the low-periostin group, and the prevalence of late-onset asthma (age at onset ≥ 40 y) in high-periostin group (59.3%) was 1.7 times as high as that in low-periostin group (34.5%, P = 0.009). Furthermore, allergic rhinitis, olfactory dysfunction and aspirin-intolerance were more prevalent, and abnormalities of pulmonary function tests and peripheral eosinophil counts were significantly greater in the high-than the low-periostin group (Table 2). Finally, the serum concentrations of TH2 cytokines, IL-4 and IL-13, were higher in the high-periostin group, though the difference was of borderline statistical significance (Table 2). There was a weak to moderate correlation between serum periostin levels and peripheral blood eosinophilia (r = 0.38, p < 0.0001) and weak correlation with TH2 cytokine levels in serum (ρ = 0.18–0.21, p = 0.01–0.03, Supplementary Fig. 1). When the analysis was limited to the 148 patients included in the GINA step 4 and 5 group, the highest-periostin group was also older at the time of onset of asthma, was leaner, had a higher prevalence of nasal diseases, lower pulmonary functions, and higher serum TH2 cytokine concentrations and peripheral eosinophil counts (Supplementary Table 1).

Because high periostin concentrations were correlated with nasal disorders, such as allergic rhinitis, chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps, and olfactory dysfunction (Supplementary Fig. 2), then we examined which component(s) of the disorders determined this relationship. Fig. 2 shows that the patients who suffered from both chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps and olfactory dysfunction had the highest serum periostin concentrations (P = 0.001 compared with the patients without nasal disorder). FEV₁ and FEV₁/FVC forced vital capacity (FVC) were lower among patients with high serum periostin concentrations (Table 2). We, therefore, performed single and multivariate analyses to examine whether serum periostin was correlated with obstructive pulmonary dysfunction, and found that log-transformed serum periostin concentrations were weakly correlated with FEV₁/FVC (P = 0.03; Table 3), but not with %predicted FEV₁ (P = 0.27). By multiple variable analysis, serum periostin concentration was marginally correlated with FEV₁/FVC independently of asthma duration or smoking history (Table 3).
Values are proportions of patients in each study groups or means ± SD if not otherwise specified.

IgE, immunoglobulin E; VC, vital capacity; FEV1, Forced expiratory volume in 1 s; FVC, forced vital capacity.
1 Low versus High periostin group.
2 Dose of inhaled corticosteroids are shown as fluticasone propionate equivalent.

Discussion

Since asthma is a heterogeneous disease, its treatment, especially when severe, should be based on the specific molecular mechanism identified in each individual patient. The serum periostin concentration was expected to be a reliable surrogate marker of IL-13 activity in vivo and of persistent eosinophilic inflammation in the airways. The present study adds further evidence that serum periostin is clinically useful, by showing that its concentration is correlated with a specific phenotype of asthma, instead of with its severity.

Periostin is localized with other matricellular proteins in the subepithelial layer of the airways. Its elevated expression in bronchial epithelial cells is related to subepithelial fibrosis of the airways. Furthermore, the serum periostin concentrations correlate with an annual decline in FEV1 independently of the severity of asthma and smoking history, in asthmatics treated with inhaled corticosteroids. Therefore, periostin seems to contrast with other biomarkers of asthma, such as YKL-40 and C-reactive protein, which reflect airway inflammation, but not a specific phenotype such as a rapid deterioration of pulmonary function.

Our observation that patients with high serum periostin concentrations had low FEV1 and FEV1/FVC in spite of shorter duration of asthma confirms that periostin is a biomarker of rapid decline in pulmonary function. However, we could not show a relationship between serum periostin concentrations and airway remodelling assessed by the airway wall thickness on computed tomography morphometry. That relationship will require further studies.

The “high-periostin” phenotype identified in our study, i.e. late-onset asthma with eosinophilia and concomitant nasal disorders, corresponds to the phenotypes/endotypes proposed by other researchers. A cluster analysis of severe asthma suggested the presence of an inflammation-predominant phenotype, characterized by a late onset of the disease with active eosinophilic inflammation. Another study also described a population of patients with severe, adult-onset asthma, who were more likely to be non-atopic, associated with increased concentrations of exhaled nitric oxide and sputum eosinophils, and in whom nasal symptoms and polyposis were more prevalent. This late-onset, hypereosinophilic asthma is also considered a specific endotype.

We found that high concentrations of serum periostin were correlated with other nasal disorders, such as allergic and non-allergic rhinosinusitis. Among the nasal disease manifestations, the combination of chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps and olfactory dysfunction was most prominently correlated with high concentrations of serum periostin. The combination of nasal polyps and of persistent eosinophilic inflammation, but not a specific molecular phenotype of asthma, instead of with its severity.
and hypnosia/anosmia is observed in patients with chronic eosinophilic rhinosinusitis, often complicated by peripheral blood eosinophilia and aspirin-intolerant asthma.\(^2,3\) Therefore, a high proportion of our patients presenting with both chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps and olfactory dysfunction might have suffered from chronic eosinophilic rhinosinusitis, though this was not confirmed by pathologic studies. Periostin mRNA is increasingly expressed in the nasal mucosa of patients presenting with chronic eosinophilic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps.\(^4,5\) Therefore, the concentrations of serum periostin may reflect an increased production of this molecule in both the upper and the lower airways.

It has been considered that early-onset atopic asthma is a TH2-related disease,\(^6\) however, our study showed that the high serum periostin concentrations were not correlated with serum concentrations of IgE or atopic status, and rather associated with late-onset asthma. It has been reported that the expression of periostin is decreased by corticosteroids,\(^2,7\) therefore, the periostin concentrations in early-onset atopic asthma might have been decreased by corticosteroid. The reason why the concentrations of periostin remained elevated despite corticosteroid in adult-onset eosinophilic asthma has not been clear yet. In in vitro experiments, corticosteroids completely inhibited the IL-4/13-induced periostin production in fibroblasts, and enhanced it in microvascular endothelial cells, however, the TGF-\(\beta\)-induced production of periostin in fibroblasts is resistant to corticosteroids,\(^8,9\) suggesting that the site or microenvironment of periostin synthesis might be different in early-versus late-onset asthma. Serum periostin levels, therefore, can be a useful biomarker to identify specific phenotypes of severe asthma independently of atopic status.

**Study limitations**

The diagnoses of concomitant disorders, such as aspirin-intolerant asthma, atopic dermatitis, allergic rhinitis and chronic rhinosinusitis with nasal polyps were based on the patients’ answers to the questionnaire, not on objective measurements from challenge tests, or radiographic and pathological examinations. Therefore, patients with asymptomatic concomitant diseases may have been missed in the analysis. Second, since this study was based on a cross-sectional analysis, we could not determine whether the concentrations of periostin in serum were stable through the course of the disease, or varied according to its control or therapeutic interventions. Third, we have no data whether serum periostin levels can be influenced by age or sex, therefore, the difference in serum periostin levels between healthy subjects and asthmatic patients may have been compromised by the differences in age and gender distribution.

In conclusion, periostin is a biomarker that reliably identifies a TH2-related asthma, late-onset, eosinophilic, and often complicated with declining pulmonary function and nasal diseases, chronic eosinophilic rhinosinusitis in particular.

**Acknowledgements**

We thank Ms. Chiyomi Uemura for her professional assistance. This study was supported in part by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) (25461504) from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science to Koichiro Asano, MD, a Grant in Aid for Research on Allergic disease and Immunology from the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare to Koichiro Asano, MD, and a Grant-in-aid from Glaxo-Smith-Kline, PLC.

Yusuke Suzuki is affiliated with MSD Endowed Program for Allergy Research and has received funds for research.

**Appendix A. Supplementary data**

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.alit.2014.07.003.

**Conflict of interest**

KI received research funding from Shino-Test Corporation. KA received research funding from Astellas Pharma; honoraria as lecture fees from Astellas Pharma, GSK, and MSD. TB received research funding from GSK. The rest of the authors have no conflict of interest.

**Authors’ contributions**

MM and HirK equally contributed to this work.

**References**


