



## Brief communication

## Impaired fasting glucose is associated with increased regional cerebral amyloid



Jill K. Morris<sup>a</sup>, Eric D. Vidoni<sup>a</sup>, Heather M. Wilkins<sup>a</sup>, Ashley E. Archer<sup>b</sup>, Nicole C. Burns<sup>a</sup>, Rainer T. Karcher<sup>a</sup>, Rasinio S. Graves<sup>a</sup>, Russell H. Swerdlow<sup>a</sup>, John P. Thyfault<sup>b</sup>, Jeffrey M. Burns<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Neurology and Alzheimer's Disease Center, University of Kansas School of Medicine, Kansas City, KS, USA

<sup>b</sup> Department of Molecular and Integrative Physiology, University of Kansas School of Medicine, Kansas City, KS, USA

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## ABSTRACT

The Alzheimer's disease risk gene apolipoprotein E epsilon 4 (APOE  $\epsilon$ 4) is associated with increased cerebral amyloid. Although impaired glucose metabolism is linked to Alzheimer's disease risk, the relationship between impaired glycemia and cerebral amyloid is unclear. To investigate the independent effects of APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 and impaired glycemia on cerebral amyloid, we stratified nondemented subjects ( $n = 73$ ) into 4 groups: normal glucose, APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 noncarrier (control [CNT];  $n = 31$ ), normal glucose, APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 carrier (E4 only;  $n = 14$ ), impaired glycemia, APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 noncarrier (IG only;  $n = 18$ ), and impaired glycemia, APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 carrier (IG+E4;  $n = 10$ ). Cerebral amyloid differed both globally ( $p = 0.023$ ) and regionally; precuneus ( $p = 0.007$ ), posterior cingulate (PCC;  $p = 0.020$ ), superior parietal cortex (SPC;  $p = 0.029$ ), anterior cingulate ( $p = 0.027$ ), and frontal cortex ( $p = 0.018$ ). Post hoc analyses revealed that E4 only subjects had increased cerebral amyloid versus CNT globally and regionally in the precuneus, PCC, SPC, anterior cingulate, and frontal cortex. In IG only subjects, increased cerebral amyloid compared with CNT was restricted to precuneus, PCC, and SPC. IG+E4 subjects exhibited higher cerebral amyloid only in the precuneus relative to CNT. These results indicate that impaired glycemia and APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 genotype are independent risk factors for regional cerebral amyloid deposition. However, APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 and impaired glycemia did not have an additive effect on cerebral amyloid.

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## 1. Introduction

Type 2 diabetes is a known risk factor for Alzheimer's disease (AD; Morris et al., 2014b), but the relationship between impaired glucose metabolism and cerebral amyloid is not well understood. In cognitively normal subjects, peripheral hyperglycemia is associated with decreased cerebral glucose metabolism (as measured using 2-deoxy-2-(<sup>18</sup>F)fluoro-D-glucose positron emission tomography [FDG-PET]) in several brain regions, including the precuneus, posterior cingulate, and parietal regions (Burns et al., 2013; Ishibashi et al., 2015a, 2015b; Kawasaki et al., 2008). These areas comprise a set of connections called the default mode network (DMN). They exhibit some of the highest metabolic rates in the brain, (Cavanna and Trimble, 2006; Gusnard et al., 2001), hypometabolism in AD (Bailly et al., 2015; Mosconi, 2005) and are among the first to accumulate amyloid (Hedden et al., 2009).

The most widely recognized risk gene for sporadic AD, apolipoprotein E epsilon 4 (APOE  $\epsilon$ 4) is consistently associated with

increased cerebral amyloid levels in nondemented subjects (Jansen et al., 2015). However, because of the relationship between peripheral and cerebral metabolism, specifically in DMN regions of interest, it is possible that impaired glycemia is an additional risk factor for accumulation of cerebral amyloid. The effect of glucose on amyloid levels is of particular clinical relevance in the elderly, as cerebral amyloid is a risk factor for AD and 3 quarters of US elderly individuals exhibit prediabetes or diabetes (Cowie et al., 2009). Thus, we stratified our sample into 4 groups to compare the independent and combined effect of each risk factor on cerebral amyloid. This is the first study to investigate the relationship of glucose metabolism, APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 genotype, and cerebral amyloid in nondemented elderly. We hypothesized that impaired glycemia may be an independent risk factor for elevated cerebral amyloid.

## 2. Methods

## 2.1. Approvals and recruitment

This study was approved by the University of Kansas Medical Center's IRB. All participants provided informed consent according to institutional guidelines, and this project was performed in

\* Corresponding author at: KU Alzheimer's Disease Center, Mail Stop 6002, 4350 Shawnee Mission Parkway, Fairway, KS 66205, USA. Tel.: 913-945-5022; fax: 913-945-5035.

E-mail address: [jburns2@kumc.edu](mailto:jburns2@kumc.edu) (J.M. Burns).

accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants ( $n = 73$ ) were aged 65 and older, sedentary (Mayer et al., 2008), and free of cognitive impairment (Clinical Dementia Rating of 0). Subjects could not participate if they exhibited insulin-dependent diabetes, uncontrolled hypertension, or recent history of major neuropsychiatric, musculoskeletal, or cardiorespiratory impairment (within 2 years). Cases were further reviewed at a consensus diagnosis conference to ensure normal cognition.

## 2.2. Metabolic measures

Blood was drawn after an overnight fast. Plasma glucose was quantified (YSI-2300, Yellow Springs Instruments) and subjects classified as normal (NG;  $FG < 100$  mg/dL) or impaired glycemia (IG;  $FG \geq 100$  mg/dL) based on the American Diabetes Association cut-point for impaired fasting glucose. Twelve subjects who met the cut-point for impaired glycemia had a prior diabetes diagnosis, and all diabetic subjects were on diabetic medication. We also quantified additional metabolic biomarkers (Insulin [Genway], amylin [Millipore], and nonesterified fatty acids [Wako Diagnostics]) in plasma using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay. Body mass was assessed using a digital scale accurate to 0.1 kg (Seca Platform Scale, model 707). Homeostatic model assessment of insulin resistance (HOMA-IR) was calculated from the product of glucose and insulin divided by 405.

## 2.3. Subject groups

Individuals were grouped into a control (CNT) group ( $n = 31$ ) if they had normal glycemia and did not carry the APOE  $\epsilon 4$  gene. E4 only ( $n = 14$ ) subjects had normal glycemia and carried at least one copy of APOE  $\epsilon 4$ . The IG group exhibited impaired glycemia but did not carry APOE  $\epsilon 4$ , and the combined IG+E4 group were both carriers of APOE  $\epsilon 4$  and exhibited impaired glycemia.

## 2.4. Florbetapir PET

We used Florbetapir PET imaging to measure fibrillar beta-amyloid ( $A\beta$ ) burden. Participants underwent two 5-minute scans, approximately 50 minutes after intravenous injection of 10 mCi (370 Mbq) of Florbetapir F18 ( $^{18}F$ -AV-45). Images were acquired on a GE Discovery ST PET/CT scanner and reconstructed using an iterative reconstruction algorithm, with a 3-mm full-width, half maximum Gaussian filter and were corrected for radiation attenuation and summed. We used Statistical Parametric Mapping 12 (SPM12) software (<http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/>) to process images, manually recentering images and normalizing to Montreal Neurological Institute space using an AV-45-specific PET template. We smoothed the resulting image using a 6-mm full-width, half maximum Gaussian filter. Standard uptake value ratios for 6 a priori defined region of interests (ROIs) were calculated relative to whole cerebellum. The ROI masks were created from the Wake Forest Pick Atlas (Maldjian et al., 2003) and included the anterior cingulate (ACC), posterior cingulate (PCC), precuneus, medial and superior frontal cortex, lateral temporal, occipital, and superior parietal cortex (SPC).

## 2.5. Statistical analyses

Data are expressed as means  $\pm$  standard deviation for continuous variables or number and percent for categorical data. Normality was assessed using Shapiro-Wilk tests of normality and non-normally distributed variables were log transformed before univariate analyses. Differences between groups were assessed by 1-way analysis of variance controlling for age and sex. For significant results, post hoc analysis was performed using the least significant difference test.

Categorical data were analyzed by  $\chi^2$  analyses. Relationships between continuous variables were analyzed using linear regression. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS, version 22. Results were considered significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

## 3. Results

There were no differences in age, sex, or education or genotype between groups (Table 1). Overall, significant differences in cerebral amyloid between groups were observed both globally ( $p = 0.023$ ) and regionally, in the precuneus ( $p = 0.007$ ), PCC ( $p = 0.020$ ), SPC ( $p = 0.029$ ), ACC ( $p = 0.027$ ), frontal cortex ( $p = 0.018$ ). Post hoc analyses revealed the most widespread increases in E4 only subjects. This group had higher amyloid versus CNT globally ( $p = 0.002$ ) and regionally; precuneus ( $p = 0.023$ ), PCC ( $p = 0.015$ ), SPC ( $p = 0.016$ ), ACC ( $p = 0.015$ ), and frontal cortex ( $p = 0.007$ ). Increased amyloid in the IG only group compared with CNT was restricted to DMN regions; precuneus ( $p = 0.013$ ), PCC ( $p = 0.022$ ), and SPC ( $p = 0.030$ ). The IG+E4 group had the most isolated increase in cerebral amyloid; only differing from CNT in the precuneus ( $p = 0.021$ ). No other intergroup differences aside from those versus the CNT group were significant for any groups. Post hoc findings between groups are summarized in Table 2.

In pooled analyses of all subjects, linear regression did not reveal any relationships between metabolic biomarkers and cerebral amyloid in any region. However, analyses of APOE  $\epsilon 4$  carriers and noncarriers separately revealed DMN-specific relationships. In APOE  $\epsilon 4$  noncarriers, fasting glucose was positively related to increased cerebral amyloid in the precuneus ( $\beta = 0.308$ ,  $p = 0.031$ ), PCC ( $\beta = 0.345$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ), and SPC ( $\beta = 0.320$ ,  $p = 0.029$ ). In APOE  $\epsilon 4$  carriers, no relationships between metabolic biomarkers and cerebral amyloid were observed in any region.

Metabolic differences between the stratified groups were observed for body mass index (BMI;  $p = 0.007$ ) and body weight ( $p = 0.029$ ). Post hoc analyses revealed that the IG+E4 group had higher BMI compared with the CNT ( $p = 0.003$ ) and E4 only ( $p = 0.010$ ) groups, and higher body weight compared with the CNT ( $p = 0.018$ ) and E4 only ( $p = 0.008$ ) groups. The IG only group had higher BMI than the CNT group ( $p = 0.017$ ) and higher body weight compared with the E4 only subjects ( $p = 0.032$ ). Other measures, including fasting insulin, amylin, nonesterified fatty acids, and HOMA-IR were not significantly different between groups.

The number of individuals with a history of diabetes did not differ between the groups with impaired glycemia (IG only and IG+E4). Because all 12 diabetic subjects in this study were taking diabetic medication, (11 metformin, 1 sitagliptin) we reanalyzed the data excluding diabetics. The IG only group still showed increased amyloid versus CNT in the precuneus and SPC but not the PCC, and the effect of increased cerebral amyloid in the precuneus of the E4+IG subjects versus control was also no longer significant. Whether this is due to loss of power or is an effect of diabetic medication warrants further study.

## 4. Discussion

This is the first study to examine the relationship between impaired glycemia, APOE  $\epsilon 4$  genotype, and cerebral amyloid in cognitively-healthy elderly. Individuals with only the risk factor of impaired glycemia (IG only) exhibited higher cerebral amyloid than CNT subjects in 3 highly metabolic brain regions. Even mild increases of fasting glucose in cognitively normal subjects are associated with decreased regional brain glucose metabolism (FDG-PET) in these regions (Ishibashi et al., 2015a, 2015b; Kawasaki et al., 2008) known to show glucose hypometabolism in AD (Minoshima et al., 1997; Mosconi, 2005; Sakamoto et al., 2002).

**Table 1**  
Demographic, metabolic, physiologic, and neuroimaging outcomes

Outcome measure	CNT (n = 31)	E4 only (n = 14)	IG only (n = 18)	IG+E4 (n = 10)	p value
<b>Demographic</b>					
Age (y)	73.0 (6.3)	72.0 (5.5)	74.2 (6.1)	71.1 (4.5)	0.558
Sex, n (% male)	14 (45.2%)	1 (7.1%)	9 (50.0%)	4 (40.0%)	0.060
Education (y)	16.6 (2.8)	15.9 (3.5)	16.2 (2.9)	15.3 (1.8)	0.515
Diabetes history, n (%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	7 (39%)	5 (50%)	<0.01*
<b>Metabolic</b>					
Glucose (mg/dL)	88.8 (7.6)	84.0 (9.6)	107.3 (19.1)	118.3 (11.8)	<0.01*
Insulin ( $\mu$ U/mL)	7.01 (7.5)	6.69 (5.6)	15.67 (19.0)	10.3 (8.1)	0.361
Amylin (pM) <sup>a</sup>	13.03 (27.7)	12.5 (14.2)	16.9 (21.6)	10.3 (11.0)	0.221
NEFAs (mmol/L) <sup>a</sup>	0.40 (0.21)	0.40 (0.47)	0.64 (0.80)	0.61 (0.78)	0.093
HOMA-IR	1.55 (1.72)	1.40 (1.16)	4.28 (5.71)	2.95 (2.36)	0.085
<b>Physiologic</b>					
Systolic BP (mmHg)	127.8 (13.6)	131.8 (16.8)	130.9 (18.3)	132.0 (15.5)	0.755
Diastolic BP (mmHg)	75.1 (7.6)	76.1 (9.5)	73.1 (8.0)	78.4 (9.2)	0.469
Waist:hip ratio	0.88 (0.08)	0.87 (0.06)	0.93 (0.07)	0.89 (0.09)	0.075
BMI	27.2 (4.3)	27.3 (4.3)	30.1 (4.0)	31.7 (2.6)	0.007*
Weight (kg)	76.1 (15.6)	73.5 (12.8)	88.1 (19.5)	90.1 (12.3)	0.029*
<b>Neuroimaging</b>					
Precuneus	1.15 (0.14)	1.30 (0.22)	1.30 (0.27)	1.32 (0.23)	0.007*
Posterior cingulate (PCC)	1.16 (0.11)	1.28 (0.15)	1.26 (0.17)	1.25 (0.15)	0.020*
Superior parietal cortex (SPC)	1.07 (0.10)	1.18 (0.17)	1.16 (0.18)	1.15 (0.16)	0.029*
Anterior cingulate (ACC)	1.20 (0.15)	1.35 (0.24)	1.28 (0.22)	1.32 (0.19)	0.027*
Medial and superior frontal	1.02 (0.13)	1.17 (0.20)	1.08 (0.19)	1.11 (0.18)	0.018*
Lateral temporal	1.08 (0.06)	1.14 (0.08)	1.11 (0.09)	1.10 (0.11)	0.179
Occipital	1.05 (0.06)	1.11 (0.10)	1.08 (0.11)	1.08 (0.10)	0.258
Global cortical	1.03 (0.06)	1.12 (0.09)	1.08 (0.10)	1.07 (0.09)	0.023*

All values given are means and standard deviation. All analyses were controlled for sex and age.

Key: CNT, control; HOMA-IR, homeostatic model assessment of insulin resistance; NEFAs, nonesterified fatty acids; SUVR, standard uptake value ratio.

\*p < 0.05.

<sup>a</sup> Available on a subset of subjects (n = 69).

Interestingly, APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 carriers with impaired glycemia (IG+E4) exhibited more isolated increases in cerebral amyloid, whereas APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 carriers with normal glucose levels exhibited the most widespread increases in cerebral amyloid.

Prior studies of peripheral metabolism and cerebral amyloid are mixed. In late middle-aged adults with normal glucose, greater insulin resistance (HOMA-IR) is associated with greater amyloid burden in 2 broad ROIs (frontal and temporal; Willette et al., 2015). A much smaller study of the relationship between diabetes diagnosis and cerebral amyloid in 4 ROIs (ACC, frontal cortex, parietal cortex, and precuneus) showed no relationship (Moran et al., 2015). An additional study found that insulin resistance was not predictive of cerebral amyloid in elderly subjects and found no relationship between glucose and postmortem AD pathology (Thambisetty et al., 2013). However, subjects were grouped in tertiles (not an established cut-point) based on either fasting or 120 minutes postoral glucose tolerance test values. Impaired fasting glucose and impaired glucose tolerance are different states of insulin resistance that do not necessarily define the same subjects or state of metabolic impairment (Nathan et al., 2007). Studies using glucose tolerance testing

may yield different metabolic results compared with studies examining fasting measures; thus, inconsistent findings may due to differing methodology for defining impaired glucose or insulin resistance.

Our study used a clinically accepted, readily available cut-point for to analyze this relationship and yields interesting insight on the potentially separate effects of impaired glycemia and APOE  $\epsilon$ 4 on cerebral amyloid pathology. Elevated insulin often precedes high glucose by compensating for mild insulin resistance (Prentki and Nolan, 2006), and hyperglycemia develops with the onset of beta-cell dysfunction and loss of compensation. Here, fasting insulin was not significantly different across groups. This is noteworthy because both glucose (Macauley et al., 2015) and insulin (Gasparini et al., 2001; Kulstad et al., 2006; Reger et al., 2008) affect amyloid production and trafficking but may involve different pathways or having different magnitudes of effect on A $\beta$  (reviewed in [Sato and Morishita, 2015]).

Impaired glycemia is associated with disease progression in mild cognitive impairment (Morris et al., 2014a; Velayudhan et al., 2010). This study extends these findings by showing that before cognitive impairment, impaired glycemia is associated with increased cerebral amyloid in DMN regions of subjects not at genetic (APOE mediated) AD risk. It is postulated that because neuronal depolarization, repolarization, and protein trafficking all involve high-energy demand, bioenergetic failure may play a key role in AD (Pathak et al., 2013; Swerdlow et al., 2010). Peripheral hyperglycemia is associated with hypometabolism in the brain (Ishibashi et al., 2015a, 2015b; Kawasaki et al., 2008), and animal studies suggest that deficits in cellular energy metabolism affect the processing and transport of A $\beta$  in vitro and in vivo (Chao et al., 2016; Kong et al., 2015; Macauley et al., 2015) and excess A $\beta$  may in turn exacerbate hypometabolism (Tarczylyuk et al., 2015).

An additional consideration of this study includes diabetes medication use. Laboratory studies have shown that the first-line diabetes medication metformin both increases (Chen et al., 2009;

**Table 2**  
Post hoc comparisons of cerebral amyloid between groups

Region	E4 only	IG only	IG+E4
Precuneus	↑ vs. CNT	↑ vs. CNT	↑ vs. CNT
Posterior cingulate (PCC)	↑ vs. CNT	↑ vs. CNT	
Superior parietal cortex (SPC)	↑ vs. CNT	↑ vs. CNT	
Anterior cingulate (ACC)	↑ vs. CNT		
Medial and superior frontal	↑ vs. CNT		
Global cortical	↑ vs. CNT		

Differences were only significant versus the control group and varied from widespread regions (E4 only) to primarily DMN-related regions (IG only) and finally only to the precuneus (IG+E4 group).

↑ indicates that the group exhibited an increase in regional cerebral amyloid versus CNT.

Key: CNT, control; DMN, default mode network.

Picone et al., 2015) and decreases (Hettich et al., 2014) BACE1 expression, which could affect cerebral amyloid levels. It is worth noting that autopsy studies have failed to show that diabetes diagnosis is associated with increased amyloid pathology (Alafuzoff et al., 2009; Arvanitakis et al., 2006), although most studies have assessed global markers of neuropathology, and our findings of increased amyloid pathology in the groups with impaired glycemia were regional in nature. In fact, the E4 only group was the only group to show significantly higher global cerebral amyloid. Additional well-powered studies are needed to evaluate the potential effect of diabetes and diabetic medication on regional cerebral amyloid in humans.

An important limitation of this study is the small sample size. Although A $\beta$  loads seemed similar between IG only and IG+E4 groups, particularly in DMN regions, this effect was significant in IG only subjects in the precuneus, PCC, and SPC, but only in the precuneus in the IG+E4 group, possibly due to lack of power. In addition, our measures of glucose metabolism are limited to peripheral, rather than cerebral measures. However, this adds to the current literature by indicating that peripheral hyperglycemia, which is very easy to measure with noninvasive measures, is related to cerebral amyloid deposition in subjects not at genetic AD risk in highly metabolic brain regions. In conclusion, this study shows regional differences in cerebral amyloid deposition because of both genotype and glycemic status in cognitively-healthy elderly. This is important as it suggests that regional amyloid deposition tracks with impairments in glucose metabolism before cognitive impairment in elderly individuals not at genetic AD risk and further substantiates the building evidence that impaired glucose metabolism is a significant risk factor for the development of cognitive impairment in particular cohorts.

## Disclosure statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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