Brain glucose metabolism is associated with hormone level in Cushing's disease: A voxel-based study using FDG-PET

Shuai Liu[a,1], Yinyan Wang[b,1], Kaibin Xu[c,d], Fan Ping[e], Renzhi Wang[a], Fang Li[f], Xin Cheng[f,*]

[a]Department of Neurosurgery, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Peking Union Medical College, Beijing, China
[b]Department of Neurosurgery, Beijing Tiantan Hospital, Capital Medical University, Beijing, China
[c]Brainnetome Center, Institute of Automation, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China
[d]National Laboratory of Pattern Recognition, Institute of Automation, Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing, China
[e]Department of Endocrinology, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Peking Union Medical College, Beijing, China
[f]Department of Nuclear Medicine, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Peking Union Medical College, Beijing, China

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ABSTRACT

Chronic exposure to elevated levels of glucocorticoids can exert a neurotoxic effect in patients, possibly manifesting as molecular imaging alterations in patients. The aim of this study was to investigate the potential association between brain metabolism and elevated hormone level using ^{18}F-fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography. We retrospectively enrolled 92 consecutive patients with confirmed diagnosis of Cushing's disease. A voxel-based analysis was performed to investigate the association between cerebral ^{18}F-fluorodeoxyglucose uptake and serum cortisol level. Relatively impaired metabolism of specific brain regions correlated with serum cortisol level was found. Specifically, notable correlations were found in the hippocampus, amygdala, and cerebellum, regions considered to be involved in the regulation and central action of glucocorticoids. Moreover, some hormone-associated regions were found in the frontal and occipital cortex, possibly mediating the cognitive changes seen in Cushing's disease. Our findings link patterns of perturbed brain metabolism relates to individual hormone level, thus presenting a substrate for cognitive disturbances seen in Cushing's disease patients, as well as in other conditions with abnormal cortisol levels.

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1. Introduction

For nearly half a century, the brain has been recognized as a target organ for plasma glucocorticoids (Martignoni et al., 1992). Although the mechanism of central action of hormones derived from circulation is far from clear, an increasing number of studies have linked excessive plasma glucocorticoids with cognitive symptoms in otherwise normal subjects, as well as in patients with disorders in which glucocorticoids have been implicated, notably major depression, Alzheimer's disease, and organic psychoses (Belanoff et al., 2001). In particular, Cushing's disease (CD) presents a unique human model to investigate brain changes resulting from chronic endogenous cortisol overexposure (Newell-Price et al., 2006).

It is well-established that excessive glucocorticoids can exert a neurotoxic effect (McEwen, 2007). The cognitive impairments of CD patients include concentration, learning, and memory deficits, as well as mood disorders such as depression, euphoria, and anxiety (Forget et al., 2000). Besides these neuropsychiatric symptoms, excessive glucocorticoid exposure in CD patients can cause structural abnormalities in radiological brain images. Indeed, previous studies have demonstrated that brain volume (Bourdeau et al., 2002; Momose et al., 1971) is significantly decreased among patients with excessive glucocorticoid exposure. The hippocampus, a brain area involved in regulating the secretion of glucocorticoids (Herman et al., 2005; Jacobson and Sapolsky, 1991), has shown structural and functional changes in such patients (Maheu et al., 2008; Starkman et al., 1992). In general, the detection of perturbed brain structure and function by medical imaging is an important tool to explore mechanisms underlying the cognitive complaints of CD patients, and can also help to reveal how excessive hormone levels might interfere with brain health.

[^{18}F]Fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography (FDG PET) presents an important method for metabolic brain imaging, and has been widely used in evaluating compromised brain function in Alzheimer's disease as well as other conditions manifesting in cognitive disorders (Habeck et al., 2012; Robert et al., 2012). To date, no studies have investigated the relationship between FDG PET measurements of brain metabolism and individual hormone level in CD patients using voxel-based methods. In the current study we enrolled a large

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Abbreviations: CD, Cushing's disease; FDG PET, ^{18}F-fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography; ACTH, adrenocorticotropic hormone; HPA, hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal.

* Corresponding author at: Department of Nuclear Medicine, Peking Union Medical College Hospital, Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences and Peking Union Medical College, Beijing 100730, China.

E-mail address: pumch_chengxin@126.com (X. Cheng).

[1] Shuai Liu and Yinyan Wang contributed equally to this work.

consecutive cohort of CD patients for FDG PET investigation. We performed a voxel-based statistical comparison to identify the anatomical correlations between brain metabolism and individual hormone alteration in CD patients.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Patients

The current study retrospectively enrolled 92 consecutive CD patients treated at Peking Union Medical College Hospital between January 2010 and January 2015. The patients included in this study met the following criteria: adults with confirmed diagnosis of CD; informed consent for a presurgical PET scan; presurgical examination for serum cortisol and serum adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH) levels; no prior craniotomy or stereotactic biopsy. All patients were diagnosed with CD at the Endocrinology and/or Neurosurgery division of our hospital (78 patients had a pathology-based diagnosis of a pituitary tumor). Laboratory tests of the 8 AM serum cortisol and ACTH concentrations were performed for all patients; the laboratory tests were obtained using standard procedures within 1 month of the PET acquisition. All research activities in this study were approved by the Ethics Committee of our hospital, and all patients provided informed consent.

2.2. Image acquisition

The PET data were acquired on a Biograph 64 TruePoint TrueV PET/ CT system (Siemens Medical Solutions, Erlangen, Germany). FDG was produced on-site using a RDS-111 Cyclotron (CTI, Knoxville, TN, USA) and standard procedures for FDG production. Before the PET examinations, the patients were required to fast for at least 4 h; the level of blood glucose in each patient was confirmed to be within normal limits (<6.4 mM). We administered FDG intravenously at a dose of 5.55 MBq (0.15 mCi) per kilogram of body weight.

2.3. Spatial normalization and reference scaling of FDG PET images

Images from all subjects were registered at the Montreal Neurological Institute space using SPM8 (http://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/spm/ software/spm8) and spatially smoothed with a Gaussian kernel at a full width at half maximum of 6 mm. Considering the well-known variation of the baseline cerebral metabolism between subjects, FDG uptake data were normalized to the mean global cerebral intensity.

2.4. Voxel-based analysis

To evaluate the association between brain metabolism and the serum hormone levels, a voxel-based analysis was performed using the following general linear model:

$$Y = (\text{Hormone}, \text{Age}, \text{Sex}, 1) \times \beta + \varepsilon$$

For each voxel, Y represents the FDG PET signal in each individual patient, Hormone represents the serum cortisol, Age and Sex denote the age and the sex (1 = male, 0 = female) of the patients, respectively, 1 represents the intercept term, β represents the model parameter to be estimated, and ε is the estimated residual. The results were displayed on a template brain at a significance threshold of probability value ($p < 0.05$) and a minimum cluster size of 50 contiguous voxels. The results were then corrected by a permutation test (Chen and Herskovits, 2010) ($n = 1000$) using a randomized ranking of hormone level. The estimated beta values for each hormone were recorded to form a distribution of the regression coefficient. Only voxels with an original p-value less than the 95% p-values based on the permutation test were considered significant.

2.5. Evaluation of the hormone associated brain regions

Based on the method described above, we identified voxel clusters with a significant association between brain metabolism and serum cortisol. The mean normalized metabolism value of the positively and negatively correlated clusters was calculated separately for each patient. Pearson correlation analysis was performed to investigate the association between the serum cortisol and the mean value of the clusters for each patient.

2.6. Statistical analysis

The general linear model and permutation test were performed for voxel-based analysis by using Matlab (R2012a, MathWorks, Natick, MA, USA). Pearson correlation was performed to investigate the association between brain metabolism of the clusters identified by voxel-based analysis and serum cortisol by using Prism (6.0c, GraphPad Software, San Diego, CA, USA). In this study, a p-value of <0.05 indicated a significant difference.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic and clinical data

We systematically reviewed a total of 92 CD patients, 78 of whom had diagnosis of pituitary adenoma confirmed by pathological examination of surgical specimens. Of the patients, 26 (28%) were male and 66 (72%) were female, with a median age of 35 years old (range, 18– 65 years old). The mean serum cortisol and serum ACTH levels of the patients were 28.3 μg/dL and 98.3 pg/mL, respectively. The detailed clinical characteristics of the patients are shown in Table 1.

3.2. Voxel-based analysis findings

The anatomical correlation between brain energy metabolism and individual hormone level was identified using voxel-based analysis. Clusters showing a significant association between brain metabolism and serum cortisol levels are shown in Fig. 1. The clusters with a positive correlation between relative FDG uptake and serum cortisol levels were preferentially located in the anteromedial temporal lobe including the hippocampus and amygdala, the insular cortex, and the cerebellum. Meanwhile, the regions where relative brain metabolism was negatively correlated with the serum cortisol levels were mainly in the lateral frontal cortex, medial and posterior occipital cortex, head of the caudate nucleus, and the anterior cingulate gyrus. Allowing to see the inside structures more clearly, we made a rendering image with cutouts (Fig. 2).

3.3. Correlations of hormone level and brain metabolism

The results of correlations between the serum cortisol level and the metabolism of the clusters are shown in Fig. 3. A statistically significant correlation was found between the cortisol level and the mean

Table 1
Clinical characteristics of patients with Cushing's disease ($n = 92$).

Variables	Patients
Number	92
Age	
Median (range)	35 (18–65)
Gender	
Male (%)	26 (28)
Female (%)	66 (72)
Cortisone (μg/dl) (mean ± S.D.)	28.3 ± 10.4
ACTH (pg/ml) (mean ± S.D.)	98.3 ± 80.8

ACTH = adrenocorticotropic hormone.