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Gait adaptability and brain activity during unaccustomed treadmill walking in healthy elderly females

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated brain activity during unaccustomed treadmill walking using positron emission tomography (PET) and [^{18}F]fluorodeoxyglucose. Twenty-four healthy elderly females (75–82 years) participated in this study. Two PET scans were performed after 25 min of rest and after walking for 25 min at 2.0 km/h on a treadmill. Participants were divided into low and high step-length variability groups according to the median coefficient of variation in step length during treadmill walking. We compared the regional changes in brain glucose metabolism between the two groups. The most prominent relative activations during treadmill walking compared to rest in both groups were found in the primary sensorimotor areas, occipital lobe, and anterior and posterior lobe of the cerebellum. The high step-length variability group showed significant relative deactivations in the frontal lobe and the inferior temporal gyrus during treadmill walking. There was a significant relative activation of the primary sensorimotor area in the low step-length variability group compared to the high step-length variability group ($P = 0.022$). Compared to the low step-length variability group, the high step-length variability group exhibited a greater relative deactivation in the white matter of the middle and superior temporal gyrus ($P = 0.032$) and hippocampus ($P = 0.034$) during treadmill walking compared to resting. These results suggest that activation of the primary sensorimotor area, prefrontal area, and temporal lobe, especially the hippocampus, is associated with gait adaptability during unaccustomed treadmill walking.

1. Introduction

Increased gait instability and inconsistency from one step to the next are common in many elderly adults [1,2]. Gait variability, such as the coefficient of variation (CV) in step length [1,2], is a quantifiable feature of walking that is altered in clinical situations, such as falling, frailty, and gait disorders in neurodegenerative diseases [3–5]. The increase in gait instability observed in elderly adults without apparent neurological disease is multifactorial. Age-associated changes may contribute to gait instability, including reduced range of motion, decreased aerobic capacity and muscle function, and impaired balance [6,7]. However, the relationship between gait instability and brain function has not been studied in detail.

Gait is a complex sensorimotor action that is based on automated and reflexive spinal programs that are under the control of several distinct supraspinal centers located in the brainstem, basal ganglia, cerebellum, and cerebral cortex. Several imaging techniques have been developed to identify activation patterns during walking. These include the measurement of glucose metabolism during actual walking using positron emission tomography (PET) with [^{18}F]fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) [8–10] and single-photon emission tomography (SPECT) with technetium-99m hexamethylpropylene amine oxime or ^{99m}Tc-ethyl cysteinate dimer to measure fixed regional cerebral blood flow [11–13].

Previous PET and SPECT studies revealed that gait disturbance in Parkinson's disease may be associated with underactivity in the medial motor area and cerebellar hemispheres and overactivity in the cerebellar vermis [8,10–12] Recently, it was reported that elderly adults with gait disturbance, secondary to age-related white matter changes, exhibited underactivation

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of the supplementary motor area, thalamus, and basal ganglia compared to elderly adults without gait disturbance [13].

Treadmills are commonly used for gait analysis in clinical and research settings [14]. Treadmill walking, in theory, is mechanically equivalent to overground walking [15,16]. In reality, however, walking on a treadmill can initially be an unfamiliar experience [16,17]. Unimpaired younger adults required 4–6 min to familiarize themselves with the treadmill [14,17]. However, complete familiarization with treadmill in a 15-min single session was not attained in elderly adults [18]. Therefore, a treadmill walking task may be used to investigate the process of adaptation to an unfamiliar environment during walking.

The purpose of the study was, first, to compare the relative brain activation and/or deactivation during treadmill walking compared to resting condition and, second, to determine whether gait adaptability measured as gait variability could be explained through differences of brain activation and/or deactivation in response to an unaccustomed treadmill walk in the elderly adults.

2. Materials and methods

Two hundred and seventy-four females were selected from our database of elderly volunteers ($n = 1289$). Inclusion criteria were: age ≥ 75 years, no history of neurological or psychiatric disorders, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, heart failure, diabetes mellitus, head trauma, drug or alcohol abuse, or severe pain. Of the initial 274 females, 106 completed cognitive and physical performance tests including preferred walking speed. Sixty-nine females were excluded because of low cognitive function (Mini Mental State Examination score < 27 points), multiple medications, drug allergy, and gait disturbance (gait freezing, wide-based gait, or remarkable body sway during gait). Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) with T1-weighted contrast was performed in 37 females using a 1.5-T Sigma Horizon scanner (GE, Milwaukee, WI, USA). Thirteen females were excluded based on MRI exclusion criteria (cerebrovascular lesions or high cortical atrophy). The remaining 24 females participated in the study (mean age, 78.0 ± 2.3 years; range, 75–82 years).

Participants were fully informed of the purpose and potential risks of the experiments, including radiation dose, and provided written, informed consent. The Ethics Committee of the Tokyo Metropolitan Institute of Gerontology approved the study protocol.

Brain glucose uptake in the rest and treadmill walking conditions was assessed on separate days (within two weeks, at least two days apart). Each condition consisted of three phases: preparation, rest or treadmill walking, and a PET scan. Total time of the FDG–PET measurement was about 85 min in each condition. The preparation period was 40 min in duration, after which the participants either rested for 35 min or walked for 25 min on a treadmill. A 6 min FDG–PET scan was performed subsequently.

During the preparation period, a catheter for injection of FDG was inserted into a vein of the left forearm. FDG (180 MBq) was injected intravenously at the onset of rest and treadmill walking. For the resting condition, participants lay supine with their eyes closed for 35 min. For the treadmill walking condition, participants walked on a treadmill (PW-21; Hitachi, Tokyo, Japan) for 25 min at 2.0 km/h while holding the handrails, to avoid falling during walking and to provide a uniform visual environment. The participants then rested on a bed with their eyes closed for 10 min.

A step counter with an infrared ray device (m-Stride ST-1100; S & ME, Tokyo, Japan) recorded walking speed, cadence, and step length during the treadmill walking period to evaluate temporal changes in gait characteristics. The step counter was placed on side-rail of a treadmill to measure belt speed (cm/s) of the treadmill and step time (s) during treadmill walking using infrared ray. The step length (cm) and cadence (steps/min) were calculated as follows.

$$\text{Step length} = \text{Belt speed} \times \text{Step time}, \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Cadence} = 60/\text{Step time}, \quad (2)$$

Step length was measured for 1 min at 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, and the 24th–25th min. We used 200 steps for the analysis of step length and cadence, 50 steps from each 1 min period starting at the 10th–11th min, 15th–16th min, 20th–21st min, 24th–25th min of treadmill walking. Five minutes following the rest or walking periods, PET scans were performed using a Headtome-V (SET 2400W, Shimadzu, Kyoto, Japan) in the three-dimensional (3D) mode. This 6 min emission scan therefore occurred 40 min after the intravenous injection of FDG. The scan produced images that had the following parameters: matrix size, $96 \times 96 \times 50$; and voxel size, 2 mm $\times$ 2 mm $\times$ 3.125 mm. The attenuation was corrected via a transmission scan using a $^{68}Ga/^{68}Ge$ source.

The images were reconstructed using a filtered back projection algorithm with a second-order low-pass filter with a cutoff frequency of 1.25 cycles/cm. Corrections were applied for dead time and detector non-uniformity. Image processing and data analysis were performed using statistical parametric mapping (SPM8 software, Wellcome Department of Cognitive Neurology, Institute of Neurology, Queen Square, London, UK) implemented on MATLAB (MathWorks, Natick, MA, USA). The tasks performed using SPM8 were MRI/PET coregistration, spatial normalization, spatial smoothing, MRI segmentation, normalization, and SPM analysis. Anatomical brain MR images were spatially normalized into the Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI, McGill University, Montreal, Canada) standard template using an affine transformation (12 parameters for rigid transformations) [19]. The parameters were applied to the coregistered FDG–PET images. Therefore, all stereotactic coordinates given in this paper refer to the MNI coordinate system. Subsequently, the spatially normalized images were blurred with a Gaussian filter (FWHM 12 mm) to increase signal-to-noise ratio. All scans were analyzed after normalization to the white matter. The normalization prior to voxel-based statistics was performed using an anatomical mask in MNI space. This normalization was used for all participants to remove the effects of differences in the overall counts. The pixel values were normalized by scaling the activity in each pixel in proportion to the global activity. This ensured that the variance related to the substantially different global activity between high- and low-dose images was stabilized. In this process, the mean global activity of each scan was adjusted to 50. Planned comparisons between the rest and exercise conditions were performed using t statistics for each voxel. These analyses generated statistical parametric maps of the t statistic (SPM $\{t\}$), which were subsequently converted to unit normal distribution (SPM $\{Z\}$). The estimated final spatial resolution was 19 mm $\times$ 21 mm $\times$ 18 mm.

The standard deviation for the CV, the ratio of the standard deviation to the mean, in step length during the treadmill walk was large in our sample (mean $7.2 \pm 6.0\%$). However, there was a bimodal distribution around the median value for the CV for step length and it was therefore appropriate to use the median step length for CV as the cut-point dividing the females into low step-length variability (LSV) and high step-length variability (HSV) groups. Student's t test was used to compare age and gait variables between the LSV and HSV groups during treadmill walking. The significance threshold was set at $P < 0.05$. SPSS version 19 (Chicago, IL, USA) was used for statistical analyses.

The locations of relatively activated and deactivated brain areas were identified and listed according to stereotaxic coordinates and visual inspection of the structural MRI provided by SPM8. Significant relative increase (walk > rest) and decrease (rest > walk) in cerebral glucose uptake during the gait condition compared with the rest condition were explored for each group separately. Both relative increases and decreases in glucose metabolism were calculated and considered significant at $P < 0.05$, and were corrected for multiple comparisons using a familywise error (FWE) method [20].

A region of interest (ROI) analysis was used to assess activated and deactivated brain areas during treadmill walking between the HSV and LSV groups, which were interpreted as the relative difference in gait-induced glucose uptake changes between groups. The ROIs were determined on visually apparent regions of relative activation (walk > rest) and deactivation (rest > walk) images for all participants. Glucose metabolism in the ROIs was measured based on the standardized uptake value (SUV), which was defined as follows.

$$\text{SUV} = C/D/w, \quad (3)$$

where C represents the radioactive concentration in the tissue (Bq/mL), D represents the injected dose (Bq), and w represents body mass (g) [21]. FDG dose was adjusted to body weight. Student's t test was used to compare the SUV between the LSV and HSV groups. The significance threshold was set at $P < 0.05$ during between-group comparisons in specific regions. The ROI analysis was performed using the Dr. View software (AJS, Tokyo, Japan). The anatomical designations used to the Talairach Client and MRI atlas of human white matter [22].

3. Results

There was no difference in age between the LSV and the HSV groups (77.4 ± 2.3 versus 78.7 ± 2.2 years; $P = 0.19$) or the following treadmill variables: walking speed (34.7 ± 0.4 versus 34.4 ± 0.5 m/min; $P = 0.26$), cadence (101.4 ± 15.1 versus 96.0 ± 15.7 steps/min; $P = 0.39$), and step length (34.9 ± 5.2 versus 37.4 ± 6.4 cm; $P = 0.31$). The HSV group had a higher step length CV compared to the LSV group (2.7 ± 0.8 versus 11.8 ± 5.5; $P < 0.001$).

The most prominent relative activations during treadmill walking in the LSV group were found in the primary sensorimotor areas (Broadman area (BA) 3 and 4), occipital lobe (BA 17, 18, and 19), and anterior and posterior lobe of the cerebellum compared with the resting condition (Table 1, Fig. 1A). The LSV group did not