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Vascular calcification: from pathophysiology to biomarkers

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ABSTRACT

The link between vascular calcification (VC) and increased mortality is now well established. Over time, as clinical importance of this phenomenon has begun to be fully considered, scientists have highlighted more and more pathophysiological mechanisms and signaling pathways that underlie VC. Several conditions such as diabetes, dyslipidemia and renal diseases are undoubtedly identified as predisposing factors. But even if the process is better understood, many questions still remain unanswered. This review briefly develops the various theories that attempt to explain mineralization genesis. Nonetheless, the main purpose of the article is to provide a profile of the various existing biomarkers of VC. Indeed, in the past years, a lot of inhibitors and promoters, which form a dense and interconnected network, were identified. Given importance to assess and control mineralization process, a focusing on accumulated knowledge of each marker seemed to be necessary. Therefore, we tried to define their respective role in the pathophysiology and how they can contribute to calcification risk assessment. Among these, Klotho/fibroblast growth factor-23, fetuin-A, Matrix Gla protein, Bone morphogenetic protein-2, osteoprotegerin, osteopontin, osteonectin, osteocalcin, pyrophosphate and sclerostin are specifically discussed.

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Abbreviations: 1,25 (OH)₂D, 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D; ALP, alkaline phosphatase; AVK, vitamin K antagonists; BAX, BCL2-associated X protein; BMDM, bone marrow-derived macrophage; BMP-2, bone morphogenetic protein-2; CAC, coronary artery calcifications; CAD, coronary artery disease; CaSR, calcium-sensing receptor; Cbfa1/Runx2, core-binding factor subunit 1 α / runt-related transcription factor 2; CKD, chronic kidney disease; cMGP, carboxylated MGP; CPP, calciprotein particles; dp-uc MGP, dephosphorylated uncarboxylated MGP; EPCs, endothelial progenitor cells; ePPI, extracellular PPI; Fet-A, fetuin-A; FGF-23, fibroblast growth factor-23; HD, hemodialysis; HIF-1 α , hypoxia-inducible factor 1 α ; MGP, matrix gla protein; MVs, matrix vesicles; MVSC, multipotent vascular stem cells; ND, non dialysis; OC, osteocalcin; ON, osteonectin; OPG, osteoprotegerin; OPN, osteopontin.

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82 **1. Introduction**

83 Occurrence of vascular calcification (VC) is not new. Arterial calcifi-
 84 cation has been discovered in the “Iceman” who lived 5000 years ago
 85 [1] and scientists had already paid attention to this phenomenon –
 86 and to its relation with renal disease – in the 19th Century[2]. VC
 87 increases with age and is notably dysregulated in diabetes, dyslipid-
 88 emia, renal disease and hypertension [3]. Bone formation involves
 89 hydroxyapatite [Ca₁₀(PO₄)₆(OH)₂] crystals, whose development
 90 begins in matrix vesicles (MVs) that bud from osteoblasts. Vascular
 91 smooth muscle cells (VSMCs) that have undergone osteoblast differ-
 92 entiation are also able to release similar vesicles with shared protein
 93 content [4]. Such differentiation is restrained or inhibited under normal
 94 conditions and there is a balance with osteoclast differentiation experi-
 95 enced by monocytes and macrophages within the vascular wall. More-
 96 over, the reaction which allows crystal growth is thermodynamically
 97 unfavorable and is inhibited by pyrophosphate [3]. In some situations,
 98 physiological balance is broken and VC is able to progress.

99 For a long time, VC has been considered as an ageing fatality. Despite
 100 the fact we cannot completely deny the link with ageing, VC is no longer
 101 regarded as a passive process. Today, it is considered as an actively reg-
 102 ulated and complex process that remains not completely understood.
 103 We know that many dynamic changes can trigger or promote VC and
 104 a lot of theories emerged during the last two decades. We will describe
 105 hereafter some of the physiopathological mechanisms. It is important to
 106 underline that these different mechanisms are not mutually exclusive
 107 [5].

108 **2. Overview of vascular calcification : from genetics to osteoblastic**
109 **differentiation**110 *2.1. Genetic predisposition*

111 As shown in Fig. 1, genetic predisposition certainly plays an impor-
 112 tant role in the genesis of this phenomenon. According to Rutsch et al.,
 113 2011 [6], 40–50% of cases of coronary calcification can be attributed to
 114 genetics. Genome-wide association studies have identified several loci
 115 linked to coronary arterial calcification, like 6p21.3, 6p24, 10q21.3 and
 116 9p21 [3,7–9]. Interestingly, some of these regions also appear to be
 117 related to coronary atherosclerosis [7] and the 6p24 locus is also
 118 linked to myocardial infarction [10]. An implication of several single

polymorphisms located at 9p21 locus near the cyclin genes has been
 suggested in the genesis of pathology [9]. These genes encode cyclins
 that may be broadly linked to cellular senescence and inflammation
 but the accurate causative DNA sequences remains debated [3].

Genes ENPP1 and NTSE are respectively implicated in infancy and
 idiopathic VC. The first one encodes a protein which transforms ATP to
 adenosine and pyrophosphate (PPI, inhibitor of calcification) whereas
 the second one converts AMP into adenosine and inorganic phosphate
 (Pi, accelerator of mineralization). The VC phenotype caused by muta-
 tions in these genes underlines the role of PPI and Pi in pathogenesis
 [3]. Mutations in ABCC6, a gene encoding a nucleoside-sensitive trans-
 porter, have also been linked to hereditary calcification. Alternative
 action of ABCC6 may include deficient hepatic production of inhibitory
 factor of matrix Gla protein (MGP), an important inhibitor of calcifica-
 tion [3,11].

122 *2.2. Osteoblastic differentiation* 134

123 One major mechanism in the development of VCs is similar to that of
 124 bone formation. First, vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMCs) undergo
 125 osteogenic differentiation into phenotypically distinct osteoblast-like
 126 cells [5,12]. In the case of renal failure, phosphate plays a key role in
 127 this mechanism [13,14]. In vitro, high extracellular phosphate concen-
 128 trations induce a rise in intracellular phosphate concentration which
 129 is actively mediated by Pit-1, a sodium dependent phosphate co-
 130 transporter [14,15]. This increasing phosphate concentration in the
 131 VSMC induces a phenotypic switch of VSMCs into osteoblast-like
 132 cells [5,14,16]. The protein Cfba1/Runx2 (core-binding factor subunit
 133 1α/runx-related transcription factor 2) is a specific and indispensable
 134 transcriptional regulator for this osteoblastic differentiation. Its expres-
 135 sion is also enhanced with high extracellular phosphate [14,16,17].
 136 These “new” cells will express alkaline phosphatase (ALP), secrete,
 137 under the control of Cfba-1, bone-associated proteins (such as osteo-
 138 pontin [18], collagen type 1, osteoprotegerin, bone morphogenetic protein-2
 139 and osteocalcin [14,19]) and release mineralization-competent MVs in
 140 the extracellular matrix [13,14,20]. VSMCs release MVs under normal
 141 physiological conditions and these MVs are protected from mineraliza-
 142 tion by the presence of calcification inhibitors. Under pathological
 143 conditions, a combination of factors makes the MVs “mineralization
 144 competent” [21]. Moreover, an increase of intracellular phosphate level
 145 mediated by Na/Pi transporter is thought to induce VSMC apoptosis
 146 157

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