FFAs are not involved in regulation of gluconeogenesis and glycogenolysis in adults with uncomplicated *P. falciparum* malaria

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Van Thien, Huynh, G. J. Weverling, M. T. Ackermans, Nguyen canh Hung, E. Endert, P. A. Kager, and H. P. Sauerwein. FFAs are not involved in regulation of gluconeogenesis and glycogenolysis in adults with uncomplicated *P. falciparum* malaria. Am J Physiol Endocrinol Metab 287: E609–E615, 2004. First published May 27, 2004; 10.1152/ajpendo.00026.2004.—In normal subjects, elevation of plasma free fatty acid (FFA) levels stimulates gluconeogenesis (GNG) and inhibits glycogenolysis (GLY) in both type 2 diabetics and healthy controls (33). These studies in diabetic patients have shown that glucose production (GNG) is increased and GLY decreased. To test the hypothesis that FFAs are regulators of GNG and GLY in uncomplicated *falciparum* malaria, we investigated the effect of inhibition of lipolysis by acipimox in 12 patients with uncomplicated *falciparum* malaria. Six of them were given acipimox, and six served as controls. Also as controls, six matched healthy subjects were studied on two occasions with and without acipimox. After 16 h of fasting, glucose production and GNG were significantly higher in the malaria patients compared with the healthy controls (P = 0.003 and <0.0001, respectively), whereas GLY was significantly lower (P < 0.001), together with elevated plasma concentrations of cortisol and glucagon. During the study, glucose production in patients declined over time (P < 0.0001), without a statistically significant difference between the acipimox-treated and untreated patients. In controls, however, with acipimox the decline was less outspoken compared with nontreated controls (P = 0.005). GNG was unchanged over time in patients as well as in healthy controls, and no influence of acipimox was found. In patients, GLY declined over time (P < 0.001), without a difference between acipimox-treated and untreated patients. In contrast, in controls treated with acipimox, no change over time was found, which was statistically different from the decline in untreated controls (P = 0.002). In conclusion, in *falciparum* malaria, FFAs are not involved in regulation of glucose production, nor of GNG or GLY.

Plasmodium falciparum; free fatty acids

**Subjects and Methods**

**Subjects.** Twelve adult, nonpregnant patients with uncomplicated *falciparum* malaria consecutively admitted to Bao Loc General Hospital were recruited. Entrance criteria were demonstration of asexual *P. falciparum* parasites in a blood smear and clinical appearance of malaria. Exclusion criteria were severe malaria based on the definition by the World Health Organization (40), treatment with quinine (10), concomitant infectious diseases, and prior history of peptic ulcer disease. Six healthy volunteers matched in sex and age were enrolled as controls. They were studied twice, one time with and one time without acipimox. These studies were done in balanced assignment and separated by a 4-wk washout period.

The study was approved by the local health authorities and by the Medical Ethics Committee, Academic Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

**Study design.** Patients were recruited on the day of admission after quinine use was excluded by quinine dipstick (32). All patients were treated orally with artemesunate. Six patients also received acipimox (see below), a known inhibitor of lipolysis; six did not receive acipimox. After signing informed consent, patients were asked to have dinner at 6 PM, followed by a fast until completion of the study. During the study, they could drink ad libitum water 0.5% enriched by deuterium oxide. The study design is shown in Fig. 1.

Ten hours after the end of last meal (t = −6 h), after a urine sample was obtained for determination of background 2H2O as well as drawing of blood for measurement of background (natural) isotope abundance, the patients/controls ingested 1 g 2H2O/kg body weight (Cambridge Isotope Laboratories, Andover, MA) at 30-min intervals.
for a total of five times (total dose of 5 g/kg body weight). Body water was estimated to be 60% of body weight in males and 50% in females.

Four hours later (t = −2 h), an intravenous cannula was introduced into each forearm, one for blood sampling, which was kept patent with a slow saline drip, 0.5% enriched with 2 H 2 O, and the other for stable isotopes (39). After blood was drawn for background isotope enrichment on the C-5 position in glucose, and body water enrichment remained constant during each sampling phase of the study, calculations for steady-state kinetics were applied, adapted for the use of stable isotopes (39).

The glucose production rate was calculated from the dilution of labeled glucose in plasma. Because the plasma glucose concentrations and enrichments for [6,6-2 H 2 ]glucose remained constant during each sampling phase of the study, calculations for steady-state kinetics were applied, adapted for the use of stable isotopes (39).

The rate of GNG was calculated by multiplication of the total rate of glucose production by fractional GNG. The fractional GNG = 100 × (3H enrichment on C-5 of glucose/2H enrichment in urinary water%). The rationale for these calculations has been discussed in detail by Landau et al. (22). In brief, during GNG, but not during...
GLY, the hydrogen on the C-5 position of glucose exchanges with the hydrogen in body water. During both GNG and GLY, the hydrogen at C-2 in glucose exchanges with the hydrogen in body water. Therefore, the ratio of the $^2$H enrichment on the C-5 and the C-2 positions in glucose gives an estimate for the percentage of GNG. In steady state, the $^2$H enrichment on the C-2 position in glucose equals the $^2$H enrichment in urinary water; thus the percentage of GNG can also be calculated by dividing the $^2$H enrichment on the C-5 position in glucose by the $^2$H enrichment in urinary water.

Differences between malaria patients and controls at baseline were analyzed by use of an independent-sample t-test. To study the influence of acipimox in malaria patients compared with controls with respect to gluconeogenic precursors, glucoregulatory hormones, and cytokines, we calculated the change over 6 h and tested the malaria and acipimox interaction in an analysis of variance (ANOVA). To adjust for multiple testing, we used the method described by Holm (18). To examine the influence of acipimox over time on FFAs and the different glucose parameters, we used a linear mixed-model approach for patients and controls separately. This analysis studies average changes in parameters, taking into account the association between variables for individual subjects measured at separate time points, entering time as random factor. We performed these analyses with the SAS MIXED procedure (version 8.02; SAS Institute, Cary, NC).

Data are presented as means ± SE unless otherwise stated.

RESULTS

Clinical data. Twelve Vietnamese patients with uncomplicated falciparum malaria and six healthy controls were studied. The characteristics of the three groups are shown in Table 1. The different groups were well matched for age, sex, body mass index, kidney function, and plasma liver enzyme values. The two groups of patients (one with and one without acipimox) were completely comparable. The duration of illness of the patients with malaria-acipimox was 3 ± 1 days and in the patient group without acipimox 4 ± 1 days. Two patients, both in the without-acipimox group, had taken an anti-malarial agent (chloroquine and sulfadoxine-pyrimethamine, respectively) before admission. All (including these two) were treated orally with artesunate, to which they responded with complete recovery.

FFAs. There was no difference in FFAs among groups in the basal state. In the control subjects, without acipimox, FFAs increased during fasting ($P = 0.008$). In the malaria patients (control group), FFAs did not increase over time. This difference in FFA pattern between patients and controls was statistically significant ($P = 0.0003$). Acipimox suppressed FFAs significantly both in patients and controls ($P < 0.001$ and 0.0003 respectively; Fig. 2).

Glucose kinetics between malaria patients and healthy controls in the basal state. In the basal state, after 16 h of fasting, plasma glucose concentration, glucose production, and GNG, in percentage or in absolute value, were all significantly higher in malaria patients compared with healthy controls ($P = 0.043$, 0.003, and <0.0001, respectively), whereas GLY was significantly lower ($P < 0.001$) (Table 2).

Glucose metabolism. Although glucose production declined over time in the patients ($P < 0.0001$), there was no statistically significant difference in rate of decline between the acipimox-treated and untreated patients, nor was there a time-dependent influence observed from acipimox (Fig. 3). In the controls, acipimox inhibited this decline compared with the nontreated controls ($P = 0.005$).

No changes in the absolute rate of GNG were found in patients and in controls with or without acipimox. However, in the healthy controls 4 h after the acipimox treatment, GNG tended to be lower in acipimox-treated controls compared with untreated controls at that time point ($P = 0.06$, t-test).

In the patients, the absolute rate of GLY declined over time ($P < 0.001$) without an effect by acipimox. In contrast, in the healthy controls, acipimox inhibited the decline in GLY found over time in the untreated subjects ($P = 0.002$).

Precursors, glucoregulatory hormones, and cytokines. After an overnight fast, the plasma concentrations of alanine were significantly lower (227 ± 19 vs. 383 ± 34 μmol/l, $P = 0.001$), and the concentrations of glucagon, cortisol, and IL-10 were significantly higher in the malaria patients compared with

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**Table 1. Clinical and biochemical characteristics of 12 patients and 6 controls at study entry**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>P. falcip. Patients</th>
<th>P. falcip./ Acipimox</th>
<th>Controls</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, yr</td>
<td>26±4</td>
<td>23±2</td>
<td>26±4</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI, kg/m²</td>
<td>20.4±0.7</td>
<td>19.6±0.8</td>
<td>20.9±0.5</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex, male/female</td>
<td>5/1</td>
<td>5/1</td>
<td>5/1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperature, °C</td>
<td>37.8±0.2</td>
<td>38.3±0.4</td>
<td>38.6±0.1</td>
<td>0.016*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parasitemia, per μl</td>
<td>5.91±2.185</td>
<td>4.875±3.595</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemoglobin, mmol/l</td>
<td>7.8±0.7</td>
<td>7.6±0.2</td>
<td>8.7±0.2</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum AST, U/l</td>
<td>63±16</td>
<td>61±20</td>
<td>24±2</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum ALT, U/l</td>
<td>60±16</td>
<td>87±50</td>
<td>22±3</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creatinine, μmol/l</td>
<td>115.7±6.6</td>
<td>106.7±5.7</td>
<td>111.5±2.9</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are means ± SE. P. falcip., Plasmodium falciparum malaria; BMI, body mass index; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; ND, not detectable; NS, not significant. *$P = 0.016$ and 0.018, P. falcip. (either group) patients vs. controls.
Table 2. Glucose kinetics in malaria patients and healthy controls in basal state

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Malaria (n = 12)</th>
<th>Healthy Control*</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glucose concentration, mmol/l</td>
<td>5.66±0.20</td>
<td>5.17±0.12</td>
<td>0.043</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glucose production, μmol/kg⁻¹·min⁻¹</td>
<td>20.7±0.5</td>
<td>17.5±0.5</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluconeogenesis, %</td>
<td>85±2</td>
<td>52±4</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abs. gluconeogenesis, μmol/kg⁻¹·min⁻¹</td>
<td>17.5±0.4</td>
<td>8.9±0.6</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abs. glycogenolysis, μmol/kg⁻¹·min⁻¹</td>
<td>3.2±0.5</td>
<td>8.2±0.8</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data presented are means ± SE: *n = 6, studied on 2 study occasions, serving as their own controls. Abs., absolute.

Acipimox had no statistically significant influence on any of these parameters in either the patients groups or the control group.


DISCUSSION

Uncomplicated P. falciparum malaria infection results in increased gluconeogenesis and decreased glycogenolysis with a mean glucose production 20% higher and a doubling of plasma cortisol and glucagon concentrations compared with healthy controls after 16 h of fasting. Although inhibition of lipolysis by acipimox stimulated glycogenolysis and (tended to) decrease gluconeogenesis in healthy humans, no such effect on gluconeogenesis and glycogenolysis was seen in the patients with P. falciparum malaria, suggesting that FFAs have no role in the regulation of intrahepatic glucose fluxes in uncomplicated malaria, contrary to the findings in type 2 diabetics, who have changes in gluconeogenesis and glycogenolysis comparable to those found in our malaria patients.

Plasma cortisol and glucagon were significantly higher in our patients and therefore were potential confounders. Although plasma cortisol was higher in our patients than in our control subjects, these levels were comparable to those in patients reported by Boden et al. [362 ± 54 nmol (Ref. 2)], who showed a clear-cut regulatory role for FFAs in type 2 diabetics. This makes cortisol a less likely confounder. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that, with suppression of plasma cortisol, a regulatory role of FFAs would become visible. However, this does not invalidate our conclusion about the absence of a glucoregulatory role by FFAs in malaria, as
stimulation of cortisol secretion is an integral part of this disease. The same way of reasoning can be followed for the slightly elevated plasma glucagon levels in our malaria patients.

Glucagon secretion. Our data in healthy subjects without acipimox were completely in agreement with literature showing a slight fall in glucagon concentration over time with a decline only in glycogenolysis, whereas gluconeogenesis remained constant (4, 5, 8, 19, 31). Also in accord with others is the effect of acipimox maintaining the rate of gluconeogenesis (2, 5).

Gluconeogenesis. Our data in the healthy subjects about the contribution of absolute gluconeogenesis to total glucose production and the effect of short-term fasting are in good agreement with the literature (5, 8, 22, 31). The effect of acipimox on gluconeogenesis in our healthy controls is also in line with the literature, although the decrease in gluconeogenesis after 4 h of receiving acipimox was only marginally significant (2, 5, 15). This difference disappeared in the last 2 h of our study, probably caused by the well-known induction of the counter-regulatory hormone response induced by acipimox, as has been found by us and others (16, 17, 24, 27). In the present study, the plasma levels for glucagon, cortisol, and epinephrine were all higher after administration of acipimox in both patients and controls. However, this difference did not reach statistical significance after adjustment for multiple testing was made. Our data between 16 and 20 h of fasting are in agreement with the literature (2, 5). The fact that those studies (2, 5) did not find an effect is probably due to the fact that those studies lasted 2 h less than our study, therefore obscuring the effect of acipimox on glucregulatory hormone secretion.

Surprisingly, in our malaria patients with and without lipolysis suppression, the completely comparable (elevated) rates of gluconeogenesis over time in the two malaria groups in the absence of abnormalities in the secretion of glucregulatory hormones and precursors availability suggest that in malaria gluconeogenesis is stimulated by an unclear mechanism that overrides or bypasses the intermediate role of FFAs on gluconeogenesis found in healthy subjects and type 2 diabetics.

Glycogenolysis. The data in our healthy subjects are consistent with literature showing a reciprocal relationship between FFAs level and the rate of glycogenolysis (4, 5). When the increase in plasma FFA level was inhibited by acipimox, glycogenolysis was unchanged over time. In the patients with uncomplicated malaria, lowering FFAs had no effect on the rate of glycogenolysis. These data also suggest that in malaria there is an unknown mechanism dominating glycogen kinetics, escaping the suppressive effect of FFAs. There is a link between glycogen content and the rate glycogen breakdown (23), and it could be argued that the absence of an effect of acipimox in our malaria patients originates from a partially depleted glycogen store. However, in the malaria patients with acipimox, glycogenolysis was still 1.6 μmol·kg−1·min−1, equal to 9% of total glucose production at the end of their study, making less likely the impossibility for acute changes in the rate of glycogenolysis.

Malaria results in increased gluconeogenesis and decreased glycogenolysis, with the mean glucose production ~20% higher than in controls after 16 h of fasting (12). The pathophysiological mechanism behind this is still not elucidated. Glucagon can stimulate glucose production and is increased in our patients. However, it is a less likely explanation for the changes in glucose metabolism induced by malaria, because in cerebral malaria a doubling of glucose production is found despite plasma glucagon levels comparable to those in healthy controls (36). An increase in plasma cortisol levels was also less likely the cause as discussed previously (36, 37). Lower plasma alanine concentrations can certainly not explain an increase in glucose production. Elevated IL-10 levels has been reported in malaria (12, 25), but IL-10 has no known effect on glucose metabolism.

The present study rules out an important role for FFAs. These findings point to intrahepatic factors as an explanation. In fact, in past years, evidence has accumulated on the importance of an extensive paracrine network within the liver that exerts a potent glucoregulatory role. The prominent paracrine mediators are adenosine, prostaglandins, thromboxane A2, and cytokines (9). These substances have many interactions with the classical hormones and with each other in exerting their effects on glucose metabolism. This complex paracrine signaling system seems to operate between Kupffer cells, hepatic endothelial cells, and hepatocytes (9). Kupffer cells are the major producer of prostaglandins and cytokines (9, 14). Malaria induces changes in Kupffer cells by loading them with malarial pigment and inducing hyperplasia (40). This raises the possibility that these pathological changes in malaria could influence the intrahepatic pathways of glucose metabolism. At least in nonsevere malaria it has been shown that prostaglandins could be involved in this regulation (13).
During short-term starvation, the rate of lipolysis increases over time with an increase in plasma FFA concentration (5, 21, 30). The plasma FFA levels in the healthy Vietnamese subjects showed this expected pattern. A remarkable absence of an increase in the FFA levels over time in the malaria patients. It seems to be a characteristic finding in malaria, as similar observations are made in adults with cerebral malaria (38), pregnant patients with malaria (37), and children with malaria (20). The mechanism responsible for this finding is unknown. Lipolysis is stimulated by catecholamines and inhibited by insulin. Insulin and catecholamine levels were not different between the patients and controls and are therefore no explanation for this observation. However, in vitro data point to a unique metabolic effect of malaria toxin. These data show that, in rat adipocytes, malaria toxin acts synergistically with insulin to inhibit lipolysis (35).

In conclusion, in *P. falciparum* malaria, FFAs are not involved in the regulation of glucose production, gluconeogenesis, or glycogenolysis.

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