Dietary protein intake impacts human skeletal muscle protein fractional synthetic rates after endurance exercise

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The effect of acute exercise on protein metabolism is well documented. The majority of investigations regarding protein metabolism and endurance exercise to date have examined whole body protein turnover. These findings suggest the protein turnover response during this mode of exercise is catabolic in nature (9, 25, 27, 35), with the postexercise environment being more anabolic (or at least less catabolic; see Refs. 12, 25, and 29). The majority of studies examining skeletal muscle protein turnover have focused on the effect of resistance exercise. Few published studies have directly assessed the effect of acute aerobic exercise on skeletal muscle protein synthesis in humans (10, 26, 29). Skeletal muscle protein synthesis [fractional synthetic rate (FSR)] is increased after resistance exercise; however, the simultaneous increase in breakdown [fractional breakdown rate (FBR)] results in a NET balance (FSR − FBR) that remains negative (3, 23). Leg protein kinetic data after a 60-min cycling bout indicates that a negative NET is noted after aerobic exercise in the fasted state (20). It is generally accepted that, in the fasted state, NET muscle balance will remain negative. However, the acute provision of nutrients (primarily amino acids) can influence skeletal muscle protein turnover, such that NET becomes positive. These studies provide substantial evidence that, when amino acids (alone or with carbohydrates) are administered immediately postexercise, a shift to a positive NET balance results (4, 5, 24, 28, 30, 33). A similar positive NET balance has been reported when a protein-containing supplement was consumed after endurance exercise (20). Therefore, provision of exogenous amino acids creates a more anabolic environment by increasing muscle protein synthesis and decreasing the reliance on amino acids from muscle protein breakdown.

No studies to date have determined whether or not postexercise skeletal muscle protein synthesis can be modulated in response to chronic consumption of increased dietary protein. Theoretically, increased or high protein intakes could expand the free amino acid pool, decreasing reliance on breakdown to supply the amino acids required for skeletal muscle protein synthesis. At this time, crucial questions remain largely unexplored. First, can the chronic consumption of different amounts of dietary protein impact skeletal muscle protein synthesis during recovery from an endurance exercise bout? The purpose of the present investigation was to establish whether the habitual consumption of varying levels of dietary protein would alter skeletal muscle protein synthesis after an acute aerobic exercise session in endurance athletes. We hypothesized that increased dietary protein intake would expand the free amino acid pool, thereby enhancing FSR postexercise.

METHODS

Participants. After project approval by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Connecticut, five male endurance athletes aged 22–29 yr were recruited from the University community and local health/running clubs to participate in the study. Each participant provided a complete medical history, training schedule, and a record of dietary intake. Subjects were required to be running a minimal of 56 km/wk for inclusion in the study. Individuals reporting metabolic or cardiovascular abnormalities, gastrointestinal disorders (i.e., lactose intolerance), use of nutritional/sports supplements or anabolic steroids, or who considered themselves...

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vegan were excluded from the study. Informed, written consent was obtained from all subjects.

Experimental design. This study was a crossover design, and volunteers served as their own controls. After an initial baseline testing period, volunteers were randomly assigned to a diet containing either 0.8 g protein (low protein; LP), 1.8 g protein (moderate protein; MP), or 3.6 g protein (high protein; HP) per kilogram of body weight (g/kg^{-1}day^{-1}) for 4 wk. After 3 wk of each diet intervention, 24-h nitrogen balance and substrate oxidation were assessed. After 4 wk, mixed-muscle protein FSR was determined postexercise. After an ∼2 wk “washout” period, athletes crossed over and consumed the other diets, and all measurements were repeated.

Preliminary measurements. Baseline testing included assessment of aerobic capacity (VO_{2peak}), anthropometry (height and weight), body composition (hydrostatic weighing), resting energy expenditure (REE-indirect calorimetry), 3-day diet records, and training records. Height and weight were measured on a balance beam scale (Health-o-meter, Bridgeview, IL) to the nearest 0.5 kg and 0.5 cm, respectively. Percent body fat was estimated through hydrostatic weighing, and values were calculated from body density according to equations by Brozek et al. (8). VO_{2peak} testing was conducted before the start of the study and was determined via breath by breath analysis of expired gases during testing using an open circuit respiratory apparatus (MedGraphics CPX/D; Medical Graphics, St. Paul, MN) on a treadmill (MedTrack ST55; Quinton, Bothell, WA) containing a ventilation flowmeter, oxygen analyzer, and carbon dioxide analyzer (15). Later, participants were asked to return to the treadmill for determination of appropriate workloads for exercise testing during the study. The speed was manipulated to elicit ∼70% of their calculated VO_{2peak}.

Baseline dietary records. Three-day dietary records were collected from all study participants during the baseline period to assess initial nutrient intake for calories, carbohydrates, protein, and fat. All dietary records were analyzed using Nutritionist Pro Software (First Data Bank, version 1.1).

Training journals. All athletes kept training journals that detailed their daily and weekly totals for running mileage. The majority of the participants were distance runners at the University and were included in the study during their competitive season, thus ensuring consistent training patterns between the feeding interventions. These journals were collected and analyzed at the end of each dietary intervention.

Resting metabolic rate. REE was assessed at baseline and then after 3 wk of consuming each respective diet. REE at baseline was used to more accurately predict caloric needs and provide supplemental information to ensure weight stability and energy balance in these athletes. REE assessed during the dietary intervention phases at week 3 was used to determine the effect of the diets on substrate oxidation. Twenty-four-hour excreted nitrogen values were used in conjunction with indirect calorimetry for estimates of substrate oxidation.

REE was determined by indirect calorimetry using a metabolic cart (MedGraphics CPX/D; Medical Graphics). On the morning of testing, each participant was given a car ride to the laboratory to minimize physical activity. All testing was done after an overnight fast, and participants were in at least a 10-h postabsorbptive state.

Diet interventions. Protein intakes were set at either a “low,” “moderate,” or “high” protein intake level (0.8, 1.8, or 3.6 g·kg^{-1}·day^{-1}, respectively). Diet interventions were designed such that the percent of total calories contributed by the macronutrients approximated 60% carbohydrate, 30% fat, and 10% protein for the LP, 55% carbohydrate, 30% fat, and 15% protein for the MP, and 40% carbohydrate, 30% fat, and 30% protein, for the HP diet. The diets were eucaloric with an isoenergetic exchange between protein and carbohydrate. The predominant protein source at each meal was beef. Additionally, participants on the HP diet received two commercially available protein bars (Protein Plus; Met-Rx, Irvine, CA) per day that provided ∼300 kcal and 32 g protein (15 g carbohydrate, 8 g fat) to increase their protein intake to the prescribed level. Menus incorpo-
ring $^{2}H_{5}$-Phenylalanine

**Fig. 1.** Schematic depicting the infusion/biopsy protocol. After baseline blood collection for the determination of $[^{2}H_{5}]$phenylalanine background enrichment, the isotope infusion was initiated. Subjects began the 75-min run at 45 min. Biopsies were taken at 120 and 300 min. Blood draws were taken at regular time points indicated by stars.

**Table 1.** Baseline subject characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, yr</td>
<td>21.3 ± 0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height, cm</td>
<td>179.1 ± 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight, kg</td>
<td>70.6 ± 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body fat, %</td>
<td>8.7 ± 0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$V_{O2peak}$, ml·kg$^{-1}$·min$^{-1}$</td>
<td>70.6 ± 0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running distance, km·wk</td>
<td>56 ± 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are means ± SE; n = 5 subjects.

**Table 2.** Actual dietary intakes for LP, MP, and HP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>kcal</th>
<th>Carbohydrate, g</th>
<th>Fat, g</th>
<th>Protein, g</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LP</td>
<td>3,498 ± 33</td>
<td>584 ± 4*†</td>
<td>107 ± 3</td>
<td>64 ± 1*†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>3,463 ± 87</td>
<td>524 ± 13‡</td>
<td>98 ± 3‡</td>
<td>125 ± 3‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HP</td>
<td>3,347 ± 19</td>
<td>391 ± 10*‡</td>
<td>97 ± 2‡</td>
<td>220 ± 3‡</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are means ± SE. †P < 0.05. Data are expressed as means ± SE.
Muscle enrichment data are shown in Fig. 3. The plasma amino acid data for LP, MP, and HP are presented in Table 3. Although no significant differences in essential amino acids (EAA) were found between groups after 4 wk of feeding at baseline (t = 0), there was a strong trend for an increase in EAA with increasing protein intake. A similar trend was seen with branched-chain amino acids (BCAA); however, the only statistical difference was found between LP and MP. There was a significant positive correlation between dietary protein intake and both baseline BCAA and EAA concentrations and FSR after exercise (r = 0.55) and EAA (r = 0.51; P < 0.05). There was also a significant negative correlation between baseline BCAA and EAA concentrations and FSR after exercise (r = −0.7, P < 0.01 for both BCAA and EAA). Therefore, higher plasma amino acid concentrations at rest after 4 wk of dietary intervention were correlated with decreased FSR values postexercise.

FSR. The postexercise skeletal muscle FSR data are presented in Fig. 2. Habitual consumption of HP resulted in a significantly lower FSR postexercise (P < 0.05) compared with MP and LP, with no difference noted between these latter two interventions (0.052 ± 0.009, 0.078 ± 0.006, and 0.082 ± 0.006%/h for HP, MP, and LP, respectively). Plasma and muscle enrichment data are shown in Fig. 3.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this investigation was to determine if habitual changes in dietary protein intake could modulate skeletal muscle protein synthesis after an acute aerobic exercise session in runners. Data were obtained across a wide range of protein intakes reflective of the current dietary reference intakes (DRIs) (14a). The highest level reflects the amount of protein in contemporary diet plans (i.e., the 40:30:30 macronutrient composition), whereas the middle level was based on recommendations for protein intake for endurance athletes (16–19). The lowest level represents the current recommended dietary allowance for this age group. Because consistent participation in moderate- to high-intensity endurance exercise of prolonged duration could be considered catabolic with regard to protein utilization, we hypothesized that habitual consumption of dietary protein in excess of that recommended for these young men would enhance the skeletal muscle protein synthetic response after an endurance exercise bout. This investigation marks the first study to demonstrate that variations in habitual protein intake can directly impact skeletal muscle protein synthesis in the fasted state after endurance exercise. Postexercise FSR was significantly higher for both the LP and MP diets compared with the HP diet.

To date, no investigations have examined the impact of varying levels of dietary protein in humans on skeletal muscle protein synthesis after an endurance exercise bout. Furthermore, few published studies have assessed changes in skeletal muscle protein synthesis after acute aerobic exercise in humans (10, 26, 29). Direct comparisons between these studies and the present investigation are not warranted, given the differing objectives of the studies. The purpose of the previous studies was to determine the effect of a single aerobic exercise session on skeletal muscle protein synthesis by examining FSR at rest and immediately after exercise. In the present study, we did not determine FSR at rest, as the primary focus was instead to evaluate the impact of variations in habitual protein intake on skeletal muscle protein synthesis during the recovery from exercise. Therefore, comparisons of our findings with existing scientific literature are limited to investigations that have examined either the effect of endurance exercise and dietary manipulation on whole body protein turnover (7, 13, 21) or those studies that have examined the effects of an acute

### Table 3. Plasma amino acid data at baseline (0 min)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NEAA (μM)</th>
<th>EAA (μM)</th>
<th>BCAA (μM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LP</td>
<td>1,536±63</td>
<td>694±35</td>
<td>348±16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MP</td>
<td>1,247±63</td>
<td>752±30</td>
<td>402±7*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HP</td>
<td>1,318±95</td>
<td>876±106</td>
<td>470±68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are means ± SE. NEAA, nonessential amino acids; EAA, essential amino acids; BCAA, branched-chain amino acids. *Statistically different compared with LP, P < 0.05.

**Plasma amino acids.** The plasma amino acid data for LP, MP, and HP are presented in Table 3. Although no significant differences in essential amino acids (EAA) were found between groups after 4 wk of feeding at baseline (t = 0), there was a strong trend for an increase in EAA with increasing protein intake. A similar trend was seen with branched-chain amino acids (BCAA); however, the only statistical difference was found between LP and MP. There was a significant positive correlation between dietary protein intake and both baseline BCAA and EAA concentrations and FSR after exercise (r = 0.55) and EAA (r = 0.51; P ≤ 0.05). There was also a significant negative correlation between baseline BCAA and EAA concentrations and FSR after exercise (r = −0.7, P < 0.01 for both BCAA and EAA). Therefore, higher plasma amino acid concentrations at rest after 4 wk of dietary intervention were correlated with decreased FSR values postexercise.

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nutritional intervention on skeletal muscle protein utilization after exercise (all but one after resistance training; see Refs. 4, 5, 20, 22, 24, 28, 30, 31).

Several studies have examined the ability of habitual protein intake to modulate the whole body protein metabolism response to endurance exercise. Collectively, no significant differences have been found between rates of whole body synthesis and breakdown in the fasted state when protein intakes ranged from 0.9 to 2.5 g·kg⁻¹·day⁻¹, before, during, or after exercise (7, 9, 13). The only consistent response is an increase in leucine oxidation with higher protein intakes (7, 13).

Based on the findings of these investigations, it does not appear that dietary protein intake can impact rates of whole body protein synthesis and breakdown in the fasted state, either before or after endurance exercise. However, it is important to note that these studies used whole body assessments of protein utilization, which are not likely to reflect skeletal muscle protein metabolism (1, 3, 10, 29). Indeed, the present study is unique in that it is the first investigation to document that variations in habitual protein intake can impact skeletal muscle protein synthesis during recovery from endurance exercise.

The major finding of the current study was that the highest protein intake resulted in decreased FSR in the postexercise period. This is in contrast to our original hypothesis that mixed-muscle FSR would be enhanced with higher intakes of protein. Feeding higher levels of dietary protein appeared to increase free amino acid availability, as suggested by the plasma amino acid data. Although significant differences were noted only in BCAA between LP and MP, the observed augmentation of EAA and BCAA concentrations may be of important physiological significance. Indeed, there was a significant negative correlation between increased plasma concentrations of EAA and BCAA and decreases in FSR postexercise. An increase in amino acid availability could potentially influence protein turnover in one of two ways: 1) increasing the protein synthetic response postexercise, similar to what has been documented with acute amino acid feedings after resistance training (4, 5, 28), or 2) limiting the body’s reliance on endogenous sources of these free amino acids, thereby limiting proteolysis during exercise (32). This scenario is analogous to previous research where infusion of amino acids stimulated protein synthesis postexercise without a simultaneous increase in muscle protein breakdown (4).

It is plausible that the increase in BCAA and EAA on the HP diet may have attenuated protein breakdown during exercise. Similarly, the increase in carbohydrate intakes on LP and MP may have enhanced glycogen availability and attenuated amino acid oxidation during the endurance bout. Nonetheless, we propose that skeletal muscle proteolysis was reduced during exercise and diminished the magnitude of the anabolic response postexercise, and this may offer insight regarding the observed decrease in FSR postexercise when subjects were habitually consuming the highest level of protein. Although we have no measurements during the exercise bout, we determined FBR in the postexercise period. Unfortunately, the low number of subjects (i.e., 2–3/diet) for whom these calculations were completed required that these observations be considered preliminary since statistical power was not sufficient. However, these preliminary findings provide supportive evidence that a stepwise decrease in FBR postexercise may exist with increasing levels of dietary protein (0.169, 0.134, and 0.068%/h for LP, MP and HP, respectively). Without question, further studies are needed to determine if habitual consumption of different levels (i.e., increased) of dietary protein intake can modulate endogenous proteolysis during exercise and recovery.

Overall, findings from this study support the proposal that rates of protein synthesis are, in part, dependent on the availability of free amino acids (20, 32). Amino acids are taken from the free amino acid pool to be used for promoting protein synthesis. In turn, amino acids are needed to replenish this pool. In the fasted state, these amino acids are solely available from endogenous protein breakdown. Therefore, the increase in protein breakdown that results from exercise can be viewed as necessary, to provide the free amino acids required to elicit the concurrent increase in synthesis. The habitual provision of exogenous amino acids may act to augment this free amino acid pool, thereby allowing synthesis to continue without a corresponding increase in breakdown.

The fact that FSR was significantly lower on the HP diet is in direct contrast to our original hypothesis. Based on previous findings that acute protein feedings immediately following resistance and aerobic training stimulated protein synthesis to a greater extent than that noted with exercise alone (4, 5, 20, 22, 24, 28, 30, 31), we assumed that the habitual consumption of higher protein would lead to a chronic expansion of the free amino acid pool, thereby allowing for a greater synthetic response postexercise, even in the fasted state. When the FSR data are examined alone, this was not the case. Further detailed investigations examining FBR with increased levels of dietary protein are necessary to fully elucidate skeletal muscle protein turnover under these conditions.

In summary, the present investigation provides the first comprehensive analysis of postexercise skeletal muscle protein synthesis in response to varying degrees of dietary protein intake. The fact that habitual variation in protein intake was associated with changes in skeletal muscle protein synthesis in the fasted state supports the notion that protein intake plays a direct role in regulating skeletal muscle protein metabolism. These findings reinforce the need to implement long-term, well-controlled diet interventions that reflect habitual intake to further characterize the relationships between protein intake, endurance exercise, and skeletal muscle protein turnover.

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References


