Increased Expression of Hypoxia-Inducible Factor-1α in the Internal Spermatic Vein of Patients With Varicocele

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Purpose: Varicocele is recognized as a cause of male infertility. Testis hypoxia may be one of the possible mechanisms of varicocele. We examined whether tissue hypoxia occurred in the ISV of patients with varicocele by detecting the expression of HIF-1α.

Materials and Methods: The study group consisted of 8 patients with grade 3 left varicocele. The control group consisted of 6 volunteers with left indirect inguinal hernia. Using a left inguinal surgical incision, a 1 cm section of ISV was resected from each patient in both groups as specimens for immunoblotting and immunohistochemical staining of HIF-1α. Results were analyzed using Student’s t test.

Results: HIF-1α immunoblots from both groups revealed a single band. The relative intensity of the HIF-1α protein band was 10.92 ± 2.70 in the control group and 73.15 ± 8.93 in patients with varicocele (ie 7-fold higher).

Conclusions: HIF-1α expression in the ISV of patients with varicocele was significantly higher than in the control group. This directly shows that hypoxia related pathophysiological changes have occurred in the ISV of patients with varicocele and that hypoxia may have also occurred in the testicular tissue. Thus, it would be of interest to investigate whether decreasing HIF-1α activation and testis hypoxia could reduce the recurrence of varicocele. To our knowledge, this is the first report on HIF-1α expression in human ISV. Additional studies will be necessary to clarify the relationship between testis hypoxia and male infertility in patients with varicocele.

Key Words: hypoxia-inducible factor 1, alpha subunit, varicocele, infertility, male

Varicocele is an engorgement and dilatation of the pampiniform plexus above the testis. Varicocele is found in 15% to 20% of men, with the left side being the most commonly affected.1,3 Pampiniform plexus veins drain into the ISV on the left side, which then drains into the renal vein. Varicocele is the most common cause of male infertility in adults. Approximately 30% to 40% of men evaluated for infertility have varicocele.3–6 Several hypotheses have been postulated to explain the effects of varicocele on testicles such as testis hypoxia,2 scrotal hyperthermia,3 retrograde flow of adrenal blood,3,4 pituitary-gonadal hormonal dysfunction,3,4 negative impact of reactive oxygen species on testicular function4,7 and germ cell apoptosis.6,8 Hypoxia regulates various physiological responses including vasodilatation, angiogenesis, erythropoiesis and glycolysis.9–16 These physiological responses have been found in a model of varicocele in rat testes.9

Hypoxia is partially regulated by transcription factors of the hypoxia-inducible factor family. HIF-1 is considered the master regulator of the response to hypoxia.9–11 Active HIF-1 is a heterodimer consisting of α and β subunits.10–14 The activity of HIF-1 is mainly determined by HIF-1α,11–16 while the HIF-1β subunit is constitutively produced and not regulated by oxygen tension. HIF-1 subunits are widely distributed in mammalian tissues from nearly all organs.11–16 When intracellular oxygen reaches a critically low threshold, HIF-1α subunits are rapidly protected from proteasomal degradation, allowing HIF-1α and HIF-1β subunits to associate and form an active HIF-1. Under hypoxia, HIF-1 binds to hypoxia response genes to restore oxygen homeostasis by activating hypoxia sensitive genes involved in vasodilatation, angiogenesis, erythropoiesis and glycolysis. The HIF response is one of the most important adaptive mechanisms occurring in tissues subjected to hypoxia.9–16

To determine whether hypoxia occurs in varicocele, the ISV from patients with varicocele was collected during surgery and HIF-1α expression was measured. This first report analyzing HIF-1α expression in human ISV samples provides new insights on the relationship between hypoxia of the testis, varicocele and male infertility.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Patients and tissue samples. The study group consisted of 8 patients (20 to 25 years old) with grade 3 left varicocele who underwent evaluation for varicocele by physical examination and color flow Doppler sonography.17–19 Varicocele were graded according to Dubin and Amelar as grade 1—varicocele palpable only during the Valsalva maneuver, grade 2—varicocele palpable in standing position and grade...
secondary antibodies for immunoblots were AP conjugated. The upper and lower blots were incubated with antibodies used in the present study were HIF-1 antibodies purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, California. The 2 primary antibodies were heated at 100°C for 5 minutes and fractionated by sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel performed at 140 V for 3.5 hours. Gels were then stained with 192 mM glycine and 20% (V/V) methanol. Electrophoresed proteins were transferred onto nitrocellulose membrane (blot) was cut into upper and lower parts at 90 kDa. The upper and lower blots were incubated separately at room temperature for 2 hours in blocking buffer and then for 3.5 hours with HIF-1α antibody (upper blot) and α-tubulin antibody (lower blot) diluted 1:200 for each antibody in antibody binding buffer (100 mM Tris-HCl pH 7.5, 0.9% [W/V] NaCl, 0.1% [V/V] Tween-20 and 1% [W/V] fetal bovine serum). Blots were washed 3 times in blotting buffer, and incubated in AP conjugated goat anti-rabbit IgG (upper blot) and AP conjugated goat anti-mouse IgG (lower blot) for 1 hour (diluted 1:1000 for each antibody in binding buffer). Blots were washed 3 times in blotting buffer for 10 minutes and signals were developed with nitroblue tetrazolium, 5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl-phosphate (Chemicon, Temecula, California). Immunoblots were scanned and the relative intensity of the immunoreactive bands was measured.

Immunohistochemistry for HIF-1α. Formalin fixed and paraffin embedded sections (4 µm) of ISV were stained with hematoxylin and eosin. For HIF-1α immunohistochemistry, sections were dehydrated and immersed in 10³ M sodium citrate buffer (pH 6.0). Sections were then heated at 60°C for 10 minutes. An avidin-biotin-peroxidase complex was used to detect HIF-1α. Endogenous peroxidase was inactivated by incubating sections with 3% hydrogen peroxide, and nonspecific reactions were blocked by incubating sections in a solution containing 5% normal horse serum and 1% normal goat serum. Sections were incubated with the primary antibody overnight at 4°C. Rabbit serum was used for negative control (data not shown). HIF-1α expression was assessed using peroxidase conjugated rabbit polyclonal antibody IgG (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, California, dilution 1:100). After 3 rinses with phosphate buffered saline, sections were incubated with diaminobenzidine substrate for 5 minutes. Finally, sections were rinsed with distilled water and counterstained with hematoxylin. Sections were observed using an Olympus BX50 light microscope and photographed with a Nikon CP5000 digital camera. Statistical analysis was conducted using Student’s t test (SPSS® software) and significance was established at p < 0.05.

RESULTS

The immunoblots revealed a single band of HIF-1α protein (at 121 kDa) in all patients (fig. 1). The relative intensity of the HIF-1α band was approximately 7-fold higher in patients with varicocele than in the control group (73.15 ± 8.93 vs 10.92 ± 2.70, see table and fig. 1). Thickening of the smooth muscle layer of the ISV was found in patients with varicocele (fig. 2, A) compared to the ISV muscle layer of the control group (fig. 2, B). Moreover, expression of HIF-1α in

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<th>Table 1. Relative HIF-1α expression</th>
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Values of HIF-1α expression are normalized relative to α-tubulin expression, p < 0.01.
HIF-1α aids cells in adapting to hypoxia by enhancing cell survival and proliferation.9–16 The relationship between HIF-1α induction, VEGF expression and angiogenesis has been previously studied in experimental varicocele of the testis in rats.9

In the present study we demonstrate that HIF-1α is expressed at a higher level in the ISV of patients with varicocele (compared to control patients) and that HIF-1α expression is predominantly located in the smooth muscle layer of the ISV. These findings directly show that hypoxia occurs in the ISV of patients with varicocele and indirectly suggest hypoxia of testicular tissues in these patients. Thus, hypoxia may be a major factor causing hypospermatogenesis in patients with varicocele, causing male infertility. To our knowledge this is the first report describing the expression of HIF-1α in the ISV of patients with varicocele. These findings may open new avenues to prevent the formation or recurrence of varicocele by inhibiting HIF-1α expression and/or reducing hypoxia in the testes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study shows a high HIF-1α expression in the ISV of patients with varicocele. This demonstrates that hypoxia related pathophysiological changes have occurred to adapt to hypoxic stress in the ISV of patients with varicocele, and suggests the occurrence of hypoxia in the testicular tissue. Thus, it would be of interest to investigate whether decreasing HIF-1α activation and testis hypoxia could reduce the recurrence of varicocele. Additional studies are also needed to clarify the relationship between testis hypoxia and male infertility in patients with varicocele.

**Abbreviations and Acronyms**

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<th>AP</th>
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<td>HIF-1α</td>
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<td>hypoxia-inducible factor-1α</td>
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<td>ISV</td>
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<td>internal spermatic vein</td>
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<td>VEGF</td>
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**REFERENCES**


EDITORIAL COMMENT
Lee et al describe an increase in HIF-1 expression in smooth muscle cells of the ISV in men with varicocele. They suggest that decreasing HIF-1 activation could reduce the occurrence of varicocele. This is an interesting hypothesis, however another more plausible hypothesis is that activation of HIF-1 is beneficial to varicocele. Chronic hypoxia activates HIF-1, resulting in an increase in the expression of vascular endothelial growth factor (stimulates angiogenesis), erythropoietin (stimulates erythropoiesis), glycolytic enzymes and glucose transporters. Thus, activation of HIF-1 is a compensatory mechanism for hypoxia. The observation that HIF-1 is increased in men with varicocele is not surprising and indicates that cells of the ISV are adapting to a low oxygen environment. Decreasing HIF-1 may only make matters worse. Lee et al further suggest that infertility associated with varicocele may be due to hypoxia of the testis. Indeed, the testis has been described as functioning on the brink of hypoxia and changes in oxygen levels may adversely affect spermatogenesis. It is interesting to note that in the normal murine testis HIF-1 has been described in spermatocytes and Leydig cells, suggesting a role in testicular homeostasis.

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