Increased Peripheral Chemoreceptors Sensitivity and Exercise Ventilation in Heart Transplant Recipients

Agnieszka Ciarka, MD; Nicolas Cuylits, MD; Jean-Luc Vachiery, MD; Michel Lamotte, BSc; Jean-Paul Degaute, MD, PhD; Robert Naeije, MD, PhD; Philippe van de Borne, MD, PhD

Background—Heart failure is characterized by increased ventilation during exercise, which is positively related to increased peripheral and central chemoreceptor sensitivity. Heart transplantation does not normalize the ventilatory response to exercise, and its effects on the chemoreflex control of ventilation remain unknown. We tested the hypothesis that chemoreceptor sensitivity is increased in heart transplant recipients (HTRs) and linked to exercise hyperpnea.

Methods and Results—We determined the ventilatory, muscle sympathetic nerve activity (MSNA), and circulatory responses to isocapnic hypoxia and hyperoxic hypercapnia 1–2 years after transplantation in 19 HTRs with a normal left ventricular ejection fraction of 60±2%. Results were compared with those of 11 closely matched referent subjects. Sixteen patients and 10 referent subjects also underwent cycle ergometer exercise tests. HTRs compared with referent subjects presented higher MSNA (52±4 versus 34±3 bursts/min; P<0.01) and heart rates (83±3 versus 68±3 bpm; P<0.01) during room air breathing. The ventilatory response to hypoxia was higher in HTRs than in referent subjects (P<0.01, ANOVA). The increase in MSNA also was more marked during hypoxia in the HTRs than in the referent group (P<0.05, ANOVA). Responses to hyperoxic hypercapnia did not differ between the HTRs and the referent group. The ventilatory response to exercise, characterized by the regression slope relating minute ventilation to CO2 output, was steeper in HTRs than in referent subjects (38±2 versus 29±1 L/mm Hg; P<0.01). Exercise ventilation in HTRs was related to the ventilatory response to isocapnic hypoxia (r=0.57; n=16; P<0.05) and to the ventilatory response to hyperoxic hypercapnia (r=0.50; n=16; P<0.05).

Conclusions—Peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity is increased in HTRs and is related to exercise hyperpnea after heart transplantation. (Circulation. 2006;113:252-257.)

Key Words: receptors ■ heart failure ■ transplantation
normal left ventricular ejection fraction and in closely matched referent subjects.

**Methods**

**Subjects**
The study included 19 HTRs and 11 healthy referent subjects. Healthy referent subjects were recruited by panel advertisement in our hospital. The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of Erasme Hospital. All patients and referent subjects agreed to participate in the study.

**Measurements**
Patients and referent subjects were studied in supine resting conditions in a quiet experimentation room. All were instrumented to measure HR by continuous ECG recording (Siemens). BP was determined every minute by an automatic sphygmomanometer (Physiocontrol Collin BP-880). \( V\dot{E} \) (pneumotacometer) and end-tidal carbon dioxide partial pressure (Pet\( \text{CO}_2 \); M.E.C. capnometer) were assessed while subjects breathed through a mouthpiece with a nose clip, which guaranteed exclusive mouth breathing. Arterial blood oxygen was monitored continuously with a pulse oximeter (Nellcor). MSNA was recorded continuously with multunit recordings of postganglionic sympathetic activity, measured from a nerve fascicle in the peroneal nerve posterior to the fibular head.\(^{15} \)

Baseline recordings were obtained for 5 minutes once subjects had reached stable ventilation.

**Chemoreflex Activation**
The protocol used to test the chemoreceptor responses to isocapnic hypoxia and hyperoxic hypercapnia was the same as in previous studies.\(^{16,17} \) After a 5-minute baseline period of stable ventilation, peripheral chemoreceptors were activated for 3 minutes by exposure to hypoxia (10% \( \text{O}_2 \) in 90% \( \text{N}_2 \)); activation of central chemoreceptors was prevented during these 3 minutes by adding carbon dioxide to the inspired gas mixture. Central chemoreceptors were activated by hyperoxic hypercapnia (7% \( \text{CO}_2 \) and 93% \( \text{O}_2 \)) for 3 minutes, again after a 5-minute baseline period of stable ventilation; maintenance of hypoxia during central chemoreceptor stimulation minimized the activation of peripheral chemoreceptors. The sequence of central and peripheral chemoreflex activation was randomized in all subjects. A 15-minute rest period was ensured between the first intervention and the next 5-minute baseline period of stable ventilation.

Changes in the cardiorespiratory variables during central chemoreceptor testing are presented as means of the 3-minute exposures to hypoxia. During peripheral chemoreceptor testing, changes in cardiorespiratory variables are presented minute by minute during 3-minute exposure to hypoxia.

**Cardiopulmonary Exercise Testing**
Sixteen HTRs and 10 referent subjects underwent a maximum, symptom-limited exercise test on the cycle ergometer. They started with 1-minute unloaded pedaling; the load was subsequently increased by 10 W every minute.Expired gases were assessed in the mixing chamber and sampled with an \( \text{O}_2 \) and \( \text{CO}_2 \) analyzer while \( V\dot{E} \) was also recorded (SensorMedics Corp). Ventilation and gas concentrations were averaged over 30 seconds, and from these values, \( V\dot{E} \), the rate of oxygen uptake (\( V\dot{O} \)), the rate of carbon dioxide production (\( V\dot{CO}_2 \)), and the respiratory exchange ratio were derived.

HR was recorded by a continuously monitored ECG, and systolic and diastolic BPs were determined at the end of each workload by an automatic sphygmomanometer. Peak Vo was defined as the Vo during the last 30 seconds of peak exercise.

The adequacy of ventilation/perfusion matching was assessed by determining the ratio of physiological dead space to tidal volume ratio (\( V\dot{E}/V\dot{T} \)) at the beginning of the exercise (while subjects were pedaling 20 W for 30 seconds) and at peak exercise. \( V\dot{E}/V\dot{T} \) was calculated from the Bohr equation.\(^{18} \)

**Statistical Analysis**
All the data except variables during hyperoxic hypercapnia are presented as mean±SE. Variables during central chemoreceptor sensitivity testing were not distributed normally and are presented as medians (interquartile [IC]). Baseline quantitative variables were compared by unpaired \( t \) test. Responses to hypoxia were compared by ANOVA, with time (baseline versus intervention) and group as the factors. The group-by-time interaction was tested. Because the hypoxic ventilatory response correlates to the body surface area,\(^{2,20,21} \) changes in ventilation in response to hypoxia were normalized for body surface area and related to the ventilatory response to exercise (characterized by the regression slope relating ventilation to \( \text{CO}_2 \) output during exercise, \( V\dot{E}/V\dot{CO}_2 \) slope) through linear regression analysis.\(^{11} \)

Responses to hypercapnia were compared by a Mann-Whitney test. Ventilatory responses to hypercapnia at rest were related to the \( V\dot{E}/V\dot{CO}_2 \) slope during exercise with Spearman correlation coefficients. The level of statistical significance was fixed at \( P<0.05 \).

**Results**

**Subjects**
Nineteen (14 male) HTRs (age, 54±3 years; body mass index, 26±1 kg/m\(^2\)) and 11 (9 male) referent subjects (age, 50±4 years; body mass index, 25±1 kg/m\(^2\)) matched for age, gender, and body mass index took part in our study. The mean Figure 1. Changes in \( V\dot{E} \) (L/min), MSNA (percent baseline amplitude), and arterial blood oxygen saturation (Sat, %) in referent group (dotted line) and HTRs (straight line) during normoxia and 3 consecutive minutes of hypoxia. Comparisons by ANOVA repeated measurements with group and time as factors.
time from heart transplantation was 7.2±1.1 years (range, 1.0 to 16.5 years). HTRs had normal left ventricular ejection fraction estimated by echocardiography (60±2%; n=13) and/or by resting radionuclide ventriculography (59±3%; n=18). HTRs were on various combinations of immunosuppressive treatment and were receiving cyclosporine (n=17), azathioprine (n=1), and mofetil mycophenolate (n=3). Some HTRs also were taking calcium channel blockers (n=9), angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors (n=11), β-blockers (n=4), and diuretics (n=8). No patient suffered from acute allograft rejection at the time of the study. One patient was diabetic and was on oral antidiabetic treatment. For ethical reasons, medication was left unchanged in the HTRs. All referent subjects had a normal physical examination, and none was taking any medication.

Baseline Room Air Breathing
HTRs had higher MSNA (52±4 versus 34±3 bursts/min; P<0.01) and faster HRs (83±3 versus 68±3 bpm; P<0.01) than the referent subjects. Mean arterial BP of 107±3 mm Hg was higher in the HTRs than in the referent subjects (98±3 mm Hg), but the difference was not significant. Both groups had nearly identical arterial blood oxygen saturations (96.4±0.3% versus 96.2±0.4% in the HTRs and referent group, respectively; P=NS). V̇E was slightly larger (6.8±0.2 versus 6.5±0.2 L/min) in HTRs than in the referent subjects, but the difference was not significant (P=NS). Petco2 was lower (35±1 versus 39±1 mm Hg; P<0.01) in the HTRs than in the referent group.

Isocapnic Hypoxia
The increases in V̇E in response to the 3 minutes of hypoxia were more marked in the HTRs than in the referent subjects (P<0.01, ANOVA) despite identical reductions in arterial oxygen saturation (Figure 1 and Figure 2). The enhanced ventilatory response to hypoxia was also paralleled by a larger rise in MSNA in the HTRs (P<0.05, ANOVA) (Figure 1 and Figure 2). Mean BP and Petco2 changes were comparable in the 2 groups (P=NS, ANOVA), whereas the increase in HR was less marked in the HTRs (P<0.01, ANOVA).

Hypercapnic Hypoxia
Baseline values of V̇E (HTRs, 6.9 L/min [IC, 1.3 L/min]; referent group, 6.4 L/min [IC, 0.8 L/min]; P=NS) and oxygen saturation (HTRs, 97.0% [IC, 1.1%]; referent group, 98.3% [IC, 1.0%]; P=NS) were not different between HTRs and referent subjects before central chemoreceptor testing. Mean BP was higher in HTRs than in the referent group, but the difference did not reach significance (108 mm Hg [IC, 46 mm Hg] versus 96 mm Hg [IC, 15 mm Hg]; P=NS). Petco2 during room air breathing was lower in HTRs than in the referent subjects (36 mm Hg [IC, 4 mm Hg] versus 39 mm Hg [IC, 3 mm Hg]; P<0.001). Although the increase in Petco2 was larger in HTRs than in the referent group during hypercapnia, the increases in mean BP, HR, ventilation, MSNA, and oxygen saturation were similar in the 2 groups (Table 1).

**Figure 2.** Recordings show ECG, MSNA, HR, V̇E, and arterial blood oxygen saturation (Sat) in referent subject (top) and HTR (bottom) during baseline and the third minute of hypoxia. Hypoxia increased MSNA and minute ventilation in both the referent subject and HTR. Despite a similar decrease in arterial blood oxygen saturation, hypoxia produced a greater increase in MSNA and V̇E in the HRT than in the referent subject.

**TABLE 1.** Comparison of the Increases in Mean Arterial BP, HR, V̇E, MSNA, Petco2, and Arterial Blood Oxygen Saturation Between HTRs and the Referent Group During Hypercapnic Hypoxia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Referent Group (n=11)</th>
<th>HTR (n=19)</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ΔMean BP, mm Hg</td>
<td>11.2 (6.0)</td>
<td>8.1 (11.3)</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔHR, bpm</td>
<td>1 (11)</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔV̇E, L/min</td>
<td>5.3 (3.5)</td>
<td>6.5 (4.8)</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔMSNA, % of baseline</td>
<td>33 (26)</td>
<td>35 (32)</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔPetco2, mm Hg</td>
<td>9 (2)</td>
<td>12 (3)</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ΔSat, %</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>2 (1)</td>
<td>0.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sat indicates saturation. Values in parentheses are IC. Despite the larger increase in Petco2 in HTR, all other variables increase similarly in both groups.
The VD/VT ratio at the workload of 20 W did not differ between minutes of hypercapnia (RSpearman = 0.57, P < 0.0001), but it was not related to peak Vd/Vt (r = 0.25, P = 0.36).

Discussion
The original finding of this study is that peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity is increased in HTRs and may contribute to abnormally increased Ve during exercise in HTRs. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to assess chemoreflex control after cardiac transplantation.

Previous studies have shown that patients with congestive heart failure present with a high Ve/VCO2 ratio during exercise,11 and this is associated with a poor prognosis.22 The increase in the Ve/VCO2 ratio during exercise in congestive heart failure is explained by altered ventilation/perfusion matching23 and by early lactic acidosis,23 but also by increased chemoreceptor gain for both PaO2 and PaCO2.12,22,24 This augmented exercise-induced increase in ventilation in congestive heart failure is related to impaired autonomic and baroreceptor control as manifested by increased MSNA,17 decreased HR variability, and increased BP variability with predisposition to arrhythmia and sudden death.25 Our present study shows that heart transplantation does not restore normal peripheral chemoreceptor function.

Peripheral Chemoreflex Sensitivity
The increased peripheral chemoreflex sensitivity we observed in our HTRs cannot be explained by differences in resting oxygen saturation between the HTRs and referent subjects or by left ventricular systolic dysfunction in the patients. The trend toward a larger baseline Ve and lower PetCO2 in the presence of identical oxygen saturations in HTRs suggests that these patients also present with increased chemoreflex sensitivity under resting normoxic conditions. These results are in keeping with our previous observation that HTRs compared with controls present with higher resting peripheral chemoreceptor drive with increased sympathetic nervous system tone under normoxic conditions,26 which further suggested altered chemoreflex control in HTRs. Hyperventilation inhibits the sympathetic nerve response to chemoreflex activation through activation of pulmonary stretch afferents.27 Our observation of increased sympathetic nerve response to hypoxia in the presence of increased Ve supports the importance of peripheral chemoreflex enhancement of MSNA after cardiac transplantation. It is unlikely that the lower PetCO2 in the HTRs can explain our findings. If anything, the slightly lower PetCO2 would have hampered the ventilatory and sympathetic response to hypoxia in the HTRs.

There are several possible explanations for the enhancement of peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity in HTRs. First, denervation of the transplanted heart and associated cardiopulmonary baroreceptor dysfunction could increase peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity by a mechanism similar to the cardiopulmonary baroreceptor unloading by changes in body position in healthy subjects.28 Second, impairment of arterial baroreceptor sensitivity by chronic cyclosporine intake29 may attenuate inhibitory stimuli toward peripheral chemoreceptors30 and result in a net increase in the sensitivity to hypoxia. Third, systemic arterial hypertension may enhance peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity.

### Table 2. Comparison of Exercise Test Variables in the Referent Group and HTRs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Referent Group</th>
<th>HTRs</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RER</td>
<td>1.4±0.3</td>
<td>1.4±0.3</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak load, W</td>
<td>195±19</td>
<td>89±7</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak VO2, mL·kg⁻¹·min⁻¹</td>
<td>31.1±2.7</td>
<td>17.8±1.1</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak Ve, L/Min</td>
<td>92±7</td>
<td>63±5</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak oxygen pulse, mL/beat</td>
<td>14.5±1.1</td>
<td>10.2±0.7</td>
<td>&lt;0.0001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak Ve/No2</td>
<td>39.1±1.7</td>
<td>48.0±3.0</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak Ve/No2</td>
<td>30.2±1.2</td>
<td>36.7±1.6</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RER indicates respiratory exchange ratio; AT, anaerobic threshold.

### Cardiopulmonary Exercise Testing
HTRs and referent subjects achieved the same respiratory exchange ratio, but HTRs had lower peak VO2, lower peak load in Watts, lower anaerobic threshold, lower peak Ve, lower peak oxygen pulse, higher peak Ve/Vo, and higher peak Ve/VCO2 (Table 2). HTRs compared with referent subjects presented with a larger ventilatory response to exercise, as evidenced by a steeper Ve/VCO2 slope (38±2 versus 29±1 L/mm Hg; P < 0.01). The Ve/Vt ratio at the workload of 20 W did not differ between referent subjects and HTRs (0.33 versus 0.31; P = 0.66). No difference was observed in the Ve/Vt ratio at peak load between the 2 groups (0.22 versus 0.25; P = 0.20).

### Chemosensitivity and the Ventilatory Response to Exercise
The Ve/Vo slope during exercise in the HTR patients was positively correlated to peripheral chemosensitivity at rest, expressed as the ratio between the rise in ventilation and the reduction in oxygen saturation during the 3 minutes of hypoxia normalized for body surface area, as shown in Figure 3 (r = 0.57; n = 16; P = 0.05). The Ve/VCO2 slope during exercise in HTRs was also directly related to central chemosensitivity at rest, expressed as the ratio between Ve and PetCO2 during the 3 minutes of hypercapnia (Rسpearman = 0.50, P < 0.05).

![Figure 3. Linear regression between the ventilatory responses to exercise expressed as the slope between Ve and VCO2 during exercise (slope Ve/VCO2) and peripheral chemosensitivity at rest (expressed as ventilation per saturation, normalized for body surface area) in HTRs.](image-url)
to an extent similar to that in patients with essential hypertension. Finally, mechanisms associated with increased peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity in heart failure could have a lingering effect on chemoreceptor function in patients after cardiac transplantation.

Central Chemoreflex Sensitivity
This study also demonstrates that HTRs have a normal ventilatory and MSNA response to hypercapnia while maintaining an abnormal response to isocapnic hypoxia. It is interesting to speculate why central chemoreceptor sensitivity is normalized while peripheral chemosensitivity remains altered in this group of patients. One possible cause of this apparent discrepancy may relate to the inhibitory interaction between the arterial and cardiopulmonary baroreceptors and the peripheral chemoreceptors. In HTRs, cardiac baroreceptor afferents are cut and become dysfunctional. Arterial baroreceptor sensitivity is impaired because of chronic cyclosporine uptake. The close proximity of baroreceptor and chemoreceptor neurons in the solitary and paramedian reticular nuclei in the medulla could explain the interactions between these reflexes; however, such an interference between baroreceptors and central chemoreceptors has not been described. Thus, although the surgical procedure improves cardiac function, which may favor normalization of central chemoreceptor sensitivity, it also alters inhibitory loops and necessitates drug treatments, which may suppress baroreflex restraint on peripheral chemoreflex control. This issue requires further investigation.

Exercise Hyperpnea
Our results are consistent with observations that cardiac transplantation does not normalize exercise hyperpnea after cardiac transplantation. The exact mechanisms of the increased ventilatory response to exercise in HTRs remain unclear. Ventilation perfusion abnormalities resulting in increased dead space ventilation from an attenuated cardiac chronotropic response to exercise, respiratory muscle weakness, and hypoperfusion have been suggested to explain exercise hyperpnea in HTRs. Our HTRs disclosed a dead space ventilation ratio similar to that of the referent group at the beginning and end of the ergospirometry. However, because the use of PetCO2 instead of PaCO2 may lead to underestimation of Vd/Vt, we cannot exclude that increased Vd/Vt contributed to exercise hyperpnea in our HTRs. Nevertheless, we believe that the Vd/Vt contribution to exercise hyperpnea is likely to be of minor importance in HTRs. This is based on the following observations. First, we estimated PaCO2 in HTRs and control subjects using the following formula: PaCO2 = 5.5 + (0.9 × PetCO2) − (0.0021 × Vt), as suggested by Jones et al. This method of PaCO2 estimation is used in clinical studies on heart failure patients when only end-tidal PetCO2 is measured. Afterward, we recalculated Vd/Vt using PaCO2 in the Bohr equation. Although we observed a small difference between Vd/Vt in the patients and control subjects at rest, we still could not find a significant difference between the 2 groups at peak exercise (P = 0.84). Second, the Vt/VCO2 slope correlated strongly with peak PetCO2, but it was not related to peak Vd/Vt in HTRs. This further suggests that increased ventilation during exercise in HTRs is an integral part of deranged cardiorespiratory control rather than an impaired ventilation/perfusion matching in the lungs.

Another important finding of our study is that exercise hyperpnea, assessed by the Vt/VCO2 slope, is related to chemoreceptor sensitivity to hypoxia after transplantation. This is in accordance with previous observations that peripheral chemoreceptors, which sense the oscillations in H+−PaCO2, K+, catecholamines, and body temperature, play an important modulatory role in the regulation of ventilation during exercise. The ventilatory response to exercise in normal humans, as well as in patients with heart failure, is positively related to chemosensitivity determined in resting conditions. Our study extends this observation to HTRs and suggests that increased peripheral chemoreflex sensitivity and exercise hyperpnea share common pathophysiological mechanisms in these patients.

The last interesting finding is that central chemosensitivity at rest is also related to ventilatory response to exercise in HTRs. The ventilatory response to hypercapnia correlates to the ventilatory response to exercise in normal subjects and athletes; we extend this observation to patients after heart transplantation. However, the ventilatory response from central chemoreceptors was strictly normal in these HTRs. Thus, central chemoreceptor sensitivity contributes to ventilation during exercise but cannot explain the exercise hyperpnea.

In conclusion, our study is the first to demonstrate increased peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity in HTRs. The increased ventilatory response to exercise observed in HTRs is related to resting peripheral chemoreflex hypersensitivity.

Study Limitations
A positive correlation between the ventilatory response to hypoxia and exercise Vt/VCO2 does not necessarily imply a cause-effect relationship because of the complex pathophysiology that sustains exercise hyperpnea. Other potential limitations to our study are the fact that the data analysis was not performed in a blinded fashion; the possibility that hypertension, almost always accompanying heart transplantation, may have contributed to our findings; and, as discussed above, the absence of PaCO2 measurements.

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Disclosures
None.

References


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**CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Heart failure is characterized by decreased exercise capacity and abnormally increased ventilatory response to exercise. The ventilatory response to exercise, however, remains comparable to that of patients with moderate heart failure after successful heart transplantation. Several mechanisms such as chronotropic incompetence, increased dead space ventilation in the presence of ventilation-perfusion abnormalities, and abnormal muscle reflex regulation can account for this observation. Pulmonary function also can affect pulmonary gas exchange and increase ventilation once the critical value of lung diffusion capacities is attained. We tested the hypothesis that exercise hyperpnea is related to an abnormal chemoreceptor regulation after transplantation. Our study demonstrates that HTRs have an increased peripheral chemoreceptor sensitivity and that this hypersensitivity is related to exercise hyperpnea. Central chemosensitivity was not increased but was similarly related to exercise hyperpnea. These findings reveal that chemoreflex regulation and exercise intolerance are linked by common regulatory mechanisms. The clinical impact of this finding is that it calls for further research on therapeutic interventions that may affect chemoreflex sensitivity and improve exercise tolerance. Whether exercise training, specific cardiovascular medications, or the treatment of associated conditions can improve chemoreceptor sensitivity in HTRs is not known. Whether improvements in chemoreflex control can translate into less exercise intolerance after transplantation also needs further investigation. This research may enable clinicians to better choose among different treatment modalities to become more successful in improving exercise tolerance after transplantation.
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