Gut Microbe-Generated Trimethylamine N-Oxide From Dietary Choline Is Prothrombotic in Subjects

We previously showed gut microbial production of trimethylamine N-oxide (TMAO) from dietary nutrients like choline, lecithin, and L-carnitine is linked to the development of cardiovascular diseases.\(^1\sim3\) We also recently reported that plasma TMAO levels are associated with incident thrombotic event risk in subjects, and that TMAO both enhances platelet responsiveness to multiple agonists by augmenting stimulus-dependent Ca\(^{2+}\) signaling and heightens thrombosis potential in animal models.\(^4\) Specifically, a role for TMAO and gut microbiota in transmitting heightened thrombosis potential in vivo was supported by both direct TMAO infusion and microbial transplantation studies.\(^4\) A Western diet, rich in choline, is associated with heightened thrombosis risk; however, the effect of dietary choline on TMAO and platelet hyperresponsiveness in human subjects has not yet been reported.

We prospectively recruited healthy vegans/vegetarians (n=8) and omnivores (n=10) with no preceding (1-month) history of antibiotics or probiotics. This single-center study was approved by the Cleveland Clinic Institutional Review Board. After informed consent, subjects (46±5 years of age, 40% male, nonsmokers without hypertension, diabetes mellitus, or cardiovascular disease) were given oral choline supplementation (choline bitartrate 500 mg twice daily, \(\approx 450\) mg total choline/day) for 2 months with monthly blood testing after overnight fast. Both vegan/vegetarian and omnivore alike showed significant >10-fold increases in plasma TMAO levels at both 1- and 2-month periods (\(P<0.01\) each; Figure, A), with corresponding enhanced platelet aggregation responses to submaximal adenosine diphosphate (5\(\mu\)M) after choline supplementation (Figure, A). Moreover, a striking dose-dependent association was observed between plasma TMAO levels and platelet function (Figure, B). Similarly, among all subjects in the study, a significant association was noted between change from baseline in TMAO level and change from baseline in platelet aggregation (Spearman rho=0.38, \(P=0.03\)).

We next tested whether platelet hyperresponsiveness associated with choline supplementation and elevated TMAO was observed in the presence of aspirin. Omnivores previously examined in the absence of aspirin had a choline supplement-free washout period of at least 1 month and then were started on aspirin (81 mg each evening) for 1 month before a baseline evaluation, followed by 2 months of choline supplementation. Compared with baseline, choline again increased both fasting plasma TMAO levels and adenosine diphosphate-dependent platelet aggregation responses at 1 and 2 months of supplementation; however, both the degree of TMAO elevation and platelet hyperresponsiveness were attenuated by aspirin therapy (Figure, C).

These studies show for the first time a direct prothrombotic effect of dietary choline and elevated levels of the gut microbial metabolite TMAO in humans. They also suggest the platelet hyperresponsiveness mediated by elevated TMAO can be attenuated by a low dose of aspirin. It is important to note that they suggest elevated levels of the gut microbe-generated metabolite TMAO may overcome the antplatelet effects of low-dose aspirin—a hypothesis that warrants further investigation.

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Key Words: cardiovascular disease □ diet □ thrombus

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particularly in subjects at high cardiovascular risk. An
unanticipated finding was that low-dose aspirin partially
reduced choline supplement-dependent rise in TMAO.
Although the mechanism for this result is unknown, as-
pirin has been reported to alter the composition of the
gut microbial community. Finally, aspirin use in primary
prevention subjects has recently been debated. The
present studies, coupled with published studies linking
heightened TMAO levels with thrombotic event risk, sug-
gest studies are warranted to explore if low-dose aspirin
is beneficial among subjects with elevated TMAO and no
clear contraindications to aspirin.

**DISCLOSURES**

Drs Hazen and Wang are named as coinventors on pending
and issued patents held by the Cleveland Clinic relating to car-
diovascular diagnostics and therapeutics. Dr Hazen is a paid
consultant for Esperion and P&G; has received research funds
from P&G, Pfizer Inc., Roche Diagnostics, and Takeda; and
also reports he may receive royalty payments for inventions or
discoveries related to cardiovascular diagnostics or therapeu-
tics from P&G, Cleveland HeartLab, Siemens, Esperion, and
Frantz Biomarkers, LLC. Dr Wang reports he may receive roy-
alty payments for inventions or discoveries related to cardio-
vascular diagnostics or therapeutics from Cleveland HeartLab.
The other authors report no conflicts of interest.

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**Figure.** Oral choline supplementation increases fasting trimethylamine N-oxide (TMAO) levels, enhances platelet
tagregation, and attenuates the antplatelet effect observed with aspirin.

**A,** Plasma TMAO levels and platelet aggregation in response to submaximal adenosine diphosphate (5 µM) in vegan/vegetarian
and omnivore groups. **B,** Correlation between plasma TMAO and platelet aggregation responses among the indicated groups.
Spearman correlations and P values shown. **C,** Effect of choline supplementation on TMAO and platelet aggregation responses
in omnivores in the absence versus presence of aspirin (ASA). All data shown are mean (±SEM) with the indicated number of
subjects. Asterisks shown represent P<0.05 for comparison of aggregation responses off versus on ASA for the corresponding
time point. P values were calculated with Wilcoxon rank sum test for two-group comparisons and Wilcoxon signed rank test for
pairwise comparisons.
Prothrombotic Effects of Trimethylamine N-Oxide

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FOOTNOTES

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REFERENCES


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Circulation. 2017;135:1671-1673
doi: 10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.116.025338
Circulation is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0009-7322. Online ISSN: 1524-4539

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
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