The Effect of “Sympatholytic” Drugs on the Cardiovascular Responses to Epinephrine and Norepinephrine in Man

By Edward D. Freis, M.D., J. Calvin MacKay, M.D., and William F. Oliver, M.D.

Under controlled conditions the effects of various “sympatholytic” agents on the cardiovascular responses to epinephrine and norepinephrine were compared in man. The dosages of the sympatholytic drugs administered approximated those usually employed clinically. Such basic data are given for the following agents: Dibenamine, the imidazoline derivatives [Priscoline and Regitine (C-7337)], the dihydrogenated alkaloids of ergot (D.H.K. and C.C.K.), L-hydrizinophthalazine (C-5968), tetraethylammonium, and hexamethonium (C6).

In recent years a variety of agents have been introduced which inhibit the motor activities of the sympathetic nervous system. Determination of the mode of action of such drugs has not been clarified completely especially in man. According to Nickerson1 “adrenergic blockade” refers only to compounds which specifically inhibit the responses of effector cells to both epinephrine and sympathetic nervous impulses. Thus, adrenergic blocking agents such as Dibenamine should be differentiated from drugs which inhibit transmission through the sympathetic nervous system either in the ganglia, such as tetraethylammonium2 or the central nervous system, such as pentaquine,3 but do not block the pressor effects of epinephrine.

The present investigation was designed to determine under controlled conditions the effects of the various “sympatholytic” drugs on the pressor responses to an excess of circulating epinephrine in man. In addition, it seemed of interest to test the effectiveness of such drugs in inhibiting the hypertension associated with an excess of circulating norepinephrine. This substance has assumed greater importance since it has been found in mammalian chromaffin tissues4 and in human pheochromocytomas5 and since the hypertension produced by norepinephrine in man resembles essential hypertension in many respects.6 Finally, a systematic study in which various drugs are tested under identical conditions in doses customarily used clinically seemed worthwhile in order to supply basic data as to the comparative value of these compounds as adrenergic blocking agents in man.

Materials and Methods

The subjects were young or middle-aged adult men admitted to the wards of the Veterans Administration Hospital, Washington, D. C. All were convalescing from nonfebrile illnesses at the time of testing and none exhibited cardiovascular abnormalities.

Commercial epinephrine in a concentration of 1 μg. per cc. in saline and norepinephrine in a concentration of 1.5 μg. per cc. were infused intravenously. The rate of infusion was controlled by an adjustable clamp and calibrated Murphy drip bulb. With the patient reclining in the supine position an infusion of isotonic saline was introduced through an antecubital vein. The needle used in this infusion was connected to a three way stopcock to permit introduction of the norepinephrine and epinephrine solutions as well as the blocking agents studied without disturbing the patient. The arterial pressure was measured in the opposite arm with an arm cuff and mercury manometer while the heart rate was counted at the wrist.

In the control period, after the arterial pressure
and heart rate had become stabilized, the epi-
nephrine solution was introduced through the three
way stopcock and the rate of infusion regulated by
adjusting the clamp of the Murphy drip. The re-
sponses of arterial pressure and heart rate were
measured at both low and high infusion rates of
epinephrine. Following these control determinations
using epinephrine, the three way stopcock was
turned so that saline was again infused. After the
arterial pressure and heart rate had returned to
basal values the norepinephrine infusion was con-
ected and the responses to this agent measured at
low and high infusion rates. It should be noted that
the dose ranges of both epinephrine and norepi-
nephrine were considerably lower in these studies
on human subjects than the dosages of such sub-
stances usually employed in investigations in ani-
mal.

Following the control determinations the par-
ticular blocking agent under study was given through
the intravenous tubing of the saline infusion follow-
ing which epinephrine and norepinephrine again
were infused at the same rates as had been admin-
istered during the control period. An exception to
this procedure was used in testing the adrenergic
blocking action of benzodioxane. Because of its
fleeting action, this drug was given during the in-
fusions of epinephrine and the dose was repeated
again during the infusion of norepinephrine.

Results

Effect of Epinephrine and Norepinephrine Alone

At low infusion rates (below 0.10 μg. per
Kg. per minute), epinephrine frequently re-
sulted in a decrease rather than an increase in
the mean ((systolic + diastolic)/2) arterial pres-
sure. This was due primarily to a reduction in
diastolic blood pressure although systolic pres-
sure frequently was depressed as well. As the
mean pressure fell, the cardiac rate increased.
With higher infusion rates of epinephrine (0.10
microgram per Kg. per minute or above) the
mean arterial pressure usually rose. This ele-
vation was due to the fact that the percent-
age increase in systolic pressure was greater
than the percentage decrease in diastolic pres-
sure. However, there was considerable variation
in response among different patients, some ex-
hibiting very little depressor response, while
others showed depressor responses exclusively
even at the high infusion rates. Following ces-
sation of the epinephrine infusion, the cardio-
vascular responses disappeared rather slowly
over a period of 2 to 10 minutes.

In contrast, the responses to norepinephrine
were uniform in all patients. Immediately fol-
lowing infusion of an effective dose (0.1 to 0.2
microgram per Kg. per minute) both the sys-
tolic and diastolic pressure rose and the heart
rate decreased. These cardiovascular responses
disappeared in one to three minutes after the
infusion was discontinued.

Effects of Dibenamine

Dibenamine was administered to 4 subjects
in doses of 170 to 360 mg. (2.3 to 6 mg. per
Kg.). In every case the pressor responses to
epinephrine were reversed even with doses of
epinephrine as high as 0.5 microgram per Kg.
per minute (table 1). The hypertension that
resulted from the infusion of norepinephrine
was 90 to 100 per cent abolished. In 2 subjects
complete abolition occurred at low rates of
norepinephrine infusion but not at high in-
fusion rates. Nevertheless, marked inhibition
of the norepinephrine hypertension occurred
even at high infusion rates (0.5 to 1.0 μg. per
Kg. per minute of norepinephrine).

Dibenamine tended to exaggerate the tachy-
cardia which accompanied the infusion of epi-
nephrine, while in 3 of the 4 cases it completely
abolished the bradycardia that occurred dur-
ing norepinephrine infusion.

Effect of Benzodioxane

Benzodioxane was administered to 3 subjects
in doses of 10 to 20 mg. during the infusions of
epinephrine and norepinephrine. Two subjects
received 10 mg. intravenously during the in-
fusion of epinephrine. No significant inhibition
of the pressor response occurred although there
was an increased tachycardia in one of the
cases. These 2 subjects received an additional
10 mg. of benzodioxane during the norepi-
nephrine infusion. Thirty-one and 54 per cent
inhibition of the norepinephrine hypertension
resulted. However, this inhibition was quite
fleeting, lasting only one to two minutes.

The third subject (W. S.) received 20 mg. of
benzodioxane during the infusion of epinephrine
with resulting “reversal” which was of less
extent and of much briefer duration (four min-
utes) than was observed in the subjects who
received Dibenamine. An additional dose of 20
### Table 1

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Pt.</th>
<th>Wt. Kg</th>
<th>Arterial Press. mm. Hg</th>
<th>Heart Rate/ min.</th>
<th>Drug</th>
<th>Dose mg</th>
<th>Epinephrine Dose %</th>
<th>Norepinephrine Dose %</th>
<th>Change Rate %</th>
<th>Change %</th>
<th>Inhibition %</th>
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<td>62</td>
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<td>+15</td>
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<td>0.10</td>
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<td>+19</td>
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</table>

*M.A.P. = "Mean" Arterial Pressure = \[
\text{Systolic + Diastolic} \div 2
\]

†% Inhibition = Control B.P. Change - After Drug B.P. Change

"% Change = Control B.P. Change}
mg. of benzodioxane was also administered during the infusion of a minimal pressor dose of norepinephrine (0.1 microgram per Kg. per minute) with a resulting 75 per cent inhibition of the hypertensive response. The duration of the inhibiting effect was only two minutes. It is of interest that one week previously the same patient had received Dibenamine in a dose of 6 mg. per Kg. (table 1). Following Dibenamine the norepinephrine pressor response was completely abolished even with infusion rates of norepinephrine which were four times greater than those used during the benzodioxane experiments.

**Effect of the Imidazoline Derivatives, Priscoline and C-7337**

Two subjects received 25 to 125 mg. of Priscoline while 3 others received 25 to 50 mg. of C-7337. All doses were given intravenously. The effects of both drugs were essentially similar. In all cases epinephrine reversal occurred even at relatively high infusion rates (case S. P., table 1). The tachycardia that resulted from epinephrine infusion was exaggerated. However, in contrast to the results obtained with Dibenamine, the imidazoline compounds only partially inhibited (0 to 76 per cent; average 60 per cent inhibition) the pressor response to norepinephrine.

**Effect of Tetraethylammonium (TEA) and Hexamethonium (C6)**

Since both of these drugs inhibit transmission through autonomic ganglia they are considered together. It was more convenient to study the effects of ganglionic blocking agents using C6 since this drug has a longer duration of action than TEA. Three subjects received 35 to 50 mg. of C6 intravenously. In all of these cases the pressor effects of both epinephrine and norepinephrine were intensified (table 1). The results were similar in 2 subjects who received 350 and 400 mg. respectively of TEA intravenously.

**Effect of L-Hydrazinophthalazine**

Three subjects were given L-hydrazinophthalazine (C-5968) in doses of 18 to 30 mg. (0.31 to 0.37 mg. per Kg. body weight) intravenously. A fall in arterial pressure occurred in one case and an increase in heart rate developed in 2 cases approximately 15 minutes after the drug was administered. Twenty minutes after C-5968 was given the responses to epinephrine and norepinephrine were tested.

No consistent effects were observed in regard to the epinephrine response. In one instance there was slight inhibition of the epinephrine pressor response and in 2 cases there was slight potentiation. The degree of tachycardia was uninfuenced in 2 cases and slightly inhibited in the other. The pressor response to norepinephrine, however, was moderately reduced in all instances (12 to 45 per cent inhibition). In addition, there was almost complete abolition of the bradycardia accompanying the norepinephrine induced hypertension. This marked inhibition of heart rate occurred despite elevation of mean arterial pressure as high as 30 to 45 per cent above the basal values.

**Effect of the Dihydrogenated Alkaloids of Ergot**

Previous studies utilizing the same technics have demonstrated that the dihydrogenated alkaloids of ergot were very weak adrenolytic agents in the dosages customarily used in man. For the sake of completeness, however, and to test the effects of these drugs on the cardiovascular responses to norepinephrine, 2 patients were studied before and after the intravenous administration of the dihydrogenated alkaloids. One case was given 0.5 mg. of dihydroergokryptine while the other received 0.3 mg. of the combined dihydrogenated alkaloids (C. C. K.). In neither instance was significant inhibition of the cardiovascular responses to either epinephrine or norepinephrine observed.

**DISCUSSION**

The effects of the various "sympatholytic" drugs on the pressor response to epinephrine appear to be similar in both man and animals. Thus, in animals, epinephrine reversal has been demonstrated after Dibenamine, Priscoline, C-7337 and benzodioxane. In addition, inhibition of epinephrine induced hypertension has been demonstrated in man after Dibenamine, Priscoline and benzodioxane. However, it was apparent from this study that the
epinephrine reversal produced by therapeutic
doses of Dibenamine, Priscoline and C-7337
was more complete and lasting than that pro-
duced by similar doses of benzodioxane. The
fleeting adrenolytic effect of benzodioxane has
been noted previously by Prunty and Swan.\textsuperscript{15}

In contrast, the effects of these agents on the
hypertension resulting from norepinephrine has
not been extensively investigated. In the pre-
sent study Dibenamine produced the most com-
plete inhibition of norepinephrine hypertension
while Priscoline and C-7337 produced only par-
tial inhibition. Benzodioxane also produced par-
tial blockade, but, as with epinephrine, its action was fleeting, lasting less than two min-
utes.

It seems remarkable that benzodioxane
which has such fleeting and relatively weak
adrenolytic effects should be so reliable in pre-
dicting the presence of pheochromocytoma.\textsuperscript{14}
The results of this investigation suggest that
a small dose of 15 to 20 mg. of Priscoline or
C-7337 might be as reliable or perhaps more
reliable than benzodioxane since such small
doses of the imidazolines seldom produce sig-
ificant reduction of basal arterial pressure; yet they would be expected to have a hypoten-
sive effect in the presence of an excess of cir-
culating epinephrine.

As has been observed in animal experiments
ganglionic blocking agents such as TEA and
C6 exaggerated rather than suppressed the hy-
pertensive effects of both epinephrine and nor-
epinephrine. It appears\textsuperscript{16, 17} that this intensified
response is due to blockade of the cardiovascular “moderator” reflexes of the autonomic
nervous system, especially those reflex arcs
originating in the carotid sinus and aortic arch.

Although the number of cases studied was
small, there seemed to be a consistent quanti-
tative difference in the action of Dibenamine
as compared with the imidazoline compounds,
Priscoline and C-7337. Although all of these
agents produced epinephrine reversal, there was
more complete inhibition of the effects of nor-
epinephrine following Dibenamine than follow-
ing the imidazolines. These results apparently
were not due to dosage differences since the
degree of norepinephrine blockade was greater
than after relatively large doses of Priscoline
and C-7337. These data suggest, therefore, that
Dibenamine is an active blocking agent for
both epinephrine and norepinephrine whereas
the imidazoline compounds, while qualitatively
similar, are potent blocking agents for epineph-
rine but are less active against norepineph-
rine. In this regard it may be of interest that
in animals the dosages of Priscoline and C-7337
required to produce epinephrine reversal are
far less than the amount required to block
sympathetic nerve stimulation,\textsuperscript{11} whereas with
Dibenamine this difference in dosage is less.\textsuperscript{1}

The action of L-hydrazinophthalazine (C-
5968) differs from that of any of the other
agents. In animals given larger doses than those
used clinically in man the drug moderates but
does not block epinephrine and norepinephrine
hypertension nor does it produce epinephrine
reversal.\textsuperscript{18–20} In the present study there ap-
tered to be slight inhibition of the norepineph-
mine but not the epinephrine pressor response.
However, the most striking observation was the
marked inhibition of the bradycardia induced
by norepinephrine. The significance of this ob-
ervation is not clear; since the bradycardia
probably is reflex in nature, it may be that
C-5968 interrupts the reflex arc at an unknown
point.

The present study demonstrates the diffi-
culty in classifying autonomic blocking agents
according to a simple schema. The concept of
central, ganglionic and peripheral blocking
agents is a useful but crude approximation.
Thus, Dibenamine, the imidazolines and L-
hydrizinophthalazine all appear to exhibit dis-
tinctive differences in their ability to inhibit the
cardiovascular effects of epinephrine and nor-
epinephrine. This suggests that each of these
drugs may act at different points in the chain
of reactions involved in the activation of effec-
tor cells.

**Summary**

The effects of various “sympatholytic” drugs
on the pressor responses to epinephrine and
norepinephrine were investigated under con-
trolled conditions in man. The dosages used
approximated those customarily employed clini-
cally.
1. Following Dibenamine there was “reversal” of the pressor response to epinephrine and complete or nearly complete abolition of the pressor response to norepinephrine.

2. The imidazolines (Priscoline and C-7337) also produced epinephrine reversal but only partially inhibited the hypertension induced by norepinephrine.

3. Benzodioxane irregularly produced epinephrine reversal and only partially inhibited the pressor response to norepinephrine. The adrenergic effect was of fleeting duration.

4. L-hydrizinophthalazine failed to affect epinephrine responses, slightly inhibited the norepinephrine pressor response and almost completely blocked the bradycardia induced by norepinephrine.

5. Ganglionic blocking agents such as tetraethyl ammonium and hexamethonium intensified the pressor effects of both epinephrine and norepinephrine.

6. Clinical doses of the alkaloids of ergot had little or no inhibiting affect of epinephrine and norepinephrine pressor responses.

7. Although, in general, agents which inhibit or reverse epinephrine hypertension also modify the norepinephrine pressor response, there appear to be quantitative differences in the degree of inhibition obtained with different agents.

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The Effect of "Sympatholytic Drugs on the Cardiovascular Responses to Epinephrine and Norepinephrine in Man"

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Circulation. 1951;3:254-259
doi: 10.1161/01.CIR.3.2.254

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