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Citation

Published Version
doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0055784

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Genetic and Pharmacological Modifications of Thrombin Formation in Apolipoprotein E-deficient Mice Determine Atherosclerosis Severity and Atherothrombosis Onset in a Neutrophil-Dependent Manner

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Abstract

Background: Variations in the blood coagulation activity, determined genetically or by medication, may alter atherosclerotic plaque progression, by influencing pleiotropic effects of coagulation proteases. Published experimental studies have yielded contradictory findings on the role of hypercoagulability in atherogenesis. We therefore sought to address this matter by extensively investigating the in vivo significance of genetic alterations and pharmacologic inhibition of thrombin formation for the onset and progression of atherosclerosis, and plaque phenotype determination.

Methodology/Principal Findings: We generated transgenic atherosclerosis-prone mice with diminished coagulant or hypercoagulable phenotype and employed two distinct models of atherosclerosis. Gene-targeted 50% reduction in prothrombin (FII2/WT-Apoe2/2) was remarkably effective in limiting disease compared to control ApoE2/2 mice, associated with significant qualitative benefits, including diminished leukocyte infiltration, altered collagen and vascular smooth muscle cell content. Genetically-imposed hypercoagulability in TMP2Pro/Apoe2/2 mice resulted in severe atherosclerosis, plaque vulnerability and spontaneous atherothrombosis. Hypercoagulability was associated with a pronounced neutrophilia, neutrophil hyper-reactivity, markedly increased oxidative stress, neutrophil intraplaque infiltration and apoptosis. Administration of either the synthetic specific thrombin inhibitor Dabigatran etexilate, or recombinant activated protein C (APC), counteracted the pro-inflammatory and pro-atherogenic phenotype of pro-thrombotic TMP2Pro/Apoe2/2 mice.

Conclusions/Significance: We provide new evidence highlighting the importance of neutrophils in the coagulation-inflammation interplay during atherogenesis. Our findings reveal that thrombin-mediated proteolysis is an unexpectedly powerful determinant of atherosclerosis in multiple distinct settings. These studies suggest that selective anticoagulants employed to prevent thrombotic events may also be remarkably effective in clinically impeding the onset and progression of cardiovascular disease.
Introduction

Blood coagulation and inflammation are evolutionary coupled host-defense mechanisms, which operate via common molecular and cellular pathways, serve as protection against infections or bleeding, promote wound healing and restore the integrity of injured tissues [1–3]. Atherosclerosis is a progressive chronic inflammatory vascular disorder, which can result in atherosclerotic plaque rupture and subsequent superimposed thrombus formation [4–6]. Besides the detrimental role of coagulation during the onset of acute atherothrombotic complications, there is evidence that local activation of hemostatic factors within early human atherosclerotic lesions may also be important in atherogenesis [7]. In addition to the overt leukocyte infiltration into the lesions and enhanced cell death, which are considered major markers for plaque instability, today’s concept of a vulnerable plaque suggests that repeated plaque microruptures and subclinical microthrombosis are critical processes to plaque growth and subsequent atherothrombosis [8–10]. Histopathological reports demonstrate that thrombi may exist prior to rupture [11,12]. Numerous in vitro studies indicate that key clotting proteases such as thrombin can also catalyze a wide range of cellular actions related to cardiovascular function and pathophysiology - e.g. vascular permeability, oxidative stress, migration and proliferation of vascular smooth muscle cells, leukocyte adhesion, chemotaxis, inflammation, and apoptosis [13]. Experimental studies demonstrate that administration of direct thrombin inhibitors in ApoE

Mouse Models of Atherosclerosis

In a spontaneous atherosclerosis model, female TMPro/Pro, ApoE

Pharmacological Interventions

Female TMPro/Pro, ApoE

Methods

Animals

TMPro/Pro mice, carrying a thrombomodulin (TM) gene mutation resulting in diminished TM-dependent generation of activated protein C (APC) [19], and prothrombin (FII) heterozygous mice with genetically imposed hypoprothrombinemia [20] were crossed into a pure C57BL/6 background for at least 8 generations and subsequently crossed breed to ApoE

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Competing Interests: The authors have the following interests. Boehringer Ingelheim GmbH provided Dabigatran etexilate-supplemented and placebo diets for this study and is the employer of Joanne van Ryn. Dr. ten Cate has received speaker fees from Bayer, Boehringer Ingelheim, GlaxoSmithKline and Leo Pharma. There are no further patents, products in development or marketed products to declare. This does not alter the authors’ adherence to all the PLOS ONE policies on sharing data and materials.

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For an expanded Methods section, please see the online supplement of the article (Methods S1).

Statistical Analysis
All statistics were performed using Prism, version 6.00 (GraphPad Software Inc., San Diego, CA, USA) and IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0 (SPSS Japan Inc., an IBM company, Tokyo, Japan). Data sets were assessed for normality using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test or Bartlett’s test for homogeneity of variance. Data were compared using unpaired 2-tailed t test or one-way ANOVA, followed by Newman-Keuls posthoc test for multiple comparisons. In case of non-normal distribution, non-parametric tests such as Mann-Whitney or Kruskall-Wallis test with Dunn’s post hoc analysis were used as appropriate. Data are expressed as mean ± SD, unless otherwise stated. A 2-tailed p<0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results
We first generated transgenic cross breeds with genetically imposed variations in coagulation potential. Homozygous prothrombin (FII) deficiency in mice results in embryonic and neonatal lethality due to severe hemorrhagic phenotype and loss of vascular integrity [20]. Therefore, we employed uniformly viable FII heterozygous ApoE⁻/⁻ mice (characterized by hypoprothrombinemia and diminished FVII and thrombin generation but...
Figure 2. Morphometrical analysis of periadventitial cuff-induced atherosclerosis in mice with genetically imposed alterations in blood coagulation potential. (A) Representative hematoxylin and eosin (H&E)-stained sections of carotid arteries of FII−/−:ApoE−/−, TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/−, and TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice (top row). Necrotic lesions were stained by using toluidine blue (TB) staining (second and third row). (B, C) Whereas hypocoagulable mice were significantly protected against plaque progression (26.5 ± 12.6*10^3 in FII−/−:ApoE−/− vs. 69.2 ± 18.4*10^3 μm² in ApoE−/− control mice, n = 10 per group, p < 0.0001), pro-thrombotic mice developed severe and occlusive atherosclerotic burden (144.6 ± 52.7*10^3 in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− vs. 53.9 ± 27.0*10^3 μm² in ApoE−/− control mice, n = 10 per group, p = 0.0001). The degree of stenosis in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− reached an average of 88.6 ± 8.1% (vs. 62.2 ± 16.1% in ApoE−/− mice, n = 10 per group, p = 0.0002), whereas it was substantially lower in FII−/−:ApoE−/− mice (36.8 ± 11.9% vs. 64.9 ± 9.6% in ApoE−/− mice, n = 10 per group, p = 0.0001). (A, D) Pearson’s chi-squared test (χ²) detected a significant difference in the number of advanced atherosclerotic lesions (presence of fibrous cap atheroma [54]) formed between FII−/−:ApoE−/− (4 out of 10) and TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice (10 out of 10) (p = 0.0108). In fact, the necrotic area within the lesions of the hypercoagulable mouse was significantly increased: 56.2 ± 10.8% of the total plaque area, as compared to 29.0 ± 17.7% in the control ApoE−/− group (n = 10 per group, p = 0.0024). (E) Hypocoagulable mice showed more stable advanced lesions, as indicated by the significantly thicker fibrous caps in comparison to ApoE−/− mice (n = 10 per group, p = 0.0081). (F) Intima/media ratio was significantly increased in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice, whereas profoundly decreased in FII−/−:ApoE−/− mice. Of note, the average outer diameter of the common carotid artery is 0.36 mm [21], thus suggesting that TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− atherosclerotic plaques undergo a dramatic outward remodeling as indicated in panel (G). p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Error bars represent mean ± SD. Arrows indicate examples of positive staining/fibrous cap thickness. Abbreviations: H&E – hematoxylin and eosin; AL – advanced atherosclerotic lesion.

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0055784.g002

no spontaneous bleeding risk; Table S1A) in comparative studies with control, prothrombin-sufficient ApoE−/− mice. TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice carry a point mutation in the thrombomodulin (TM) gene, which impairs TM-dependent generation of the natural anticoagulant activated protein C (APC) [19]. TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice demonstrated a profound hypercoagulable state with substantially increased plasma thrombin generation and fibrinogen levels, but also significantly higher factor VIIa, FX, and FVIII levels (Table S1A).

Coagulation Phenotype is a Key Factor in Atherosclerotic Plaque Growth and Phenotype Determination

We then assessed the extent, as well as the phenotype of the atherosclerotic plaques formed in the aortic arch in experimental cohorts of mice following 35 weeks on a regular chow diet. FII−/−:ApoE−/− mice with a genetic deficit in prothrombin exhibited highly attenuated atherosclerotic lesion formation relative to control ApoE−/− mice (Figure 1A,B). Macrophage infiltration (MAC-2* cells) and α-smooth muscle actin (SMA; α-SMA* cells) content were unaffected in FII−/−:ApoE−/− mice compared to ApoE−/− control mice (Figure 1A,C,D). However, hypoprotrombinemia was also linked to a significant decrease in neutrophil recruitment (Figure 1A,E), abundant collagen deposition (Figure 1A,F), thus showing a more fibrotic appearance, stable plaque phenotype and decreased number of advanced atherosclerotic lesions formed. In sharp contrast, pro-thrombotic TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice displayed severe atherosclerosis development with remarkably increased total plaque area (Figure 1A,B). TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice showed unstable lesions (Figure 1A,B), associated with markedly decreased α-SMA and collagen content (Figure 1A,C,F), and significantly higher neutrophil (Ly6G* cells) infiltration (Figure 1A,E). These effects were independent of plasma lipid levels (Table S1B) and could not be attributed to an increased uptake of modified lipoproteins by macrophages (Figure S1A,B,C,D). Hypercoagulable TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice showed significantly increased spontaneous mortality rates, albeit of the exact cause of death could not be pinpointed (Figure 1G).

Hence, to further verify the net effects of underlying alterations in clotting potential on plaque phenotype, we also studied the impact of both genetic perturbations on collagen-induced carotid artery atherosclerosis [21]. High-fat diet fed FII−/−:ApoE−/− mice displayed significantly decreased plaque volume, degree of stenosis, intima/media ratio and expansion of the arterial wall, 6 weeks after bilateral peripheral carotid collar placement (Figure 2A,B,C,F,G). Furthermore, hypercoagulability ameliorated plaque stability, testified by a significantly increased mean fibrous cap thickness (Figure 2A,E). Conversely, TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice lesions were substantially larger, accompanied by significantly increased luminal stenosis, intima/media ratio and outward remodeling (Figure 2A,B,C,F,G). Similar to spontaneous atherosclerosis, collagen-induced carotid artery plaques in FII−/−:ApoE−/− mice presented a stable pro-fibrotic phenotype, whereas TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− lesions showed pronounced features of plaque vulnerability, including larger necrotic cores (Figure 2A,D), thin fibrous caps (Figure 2A,E) and significant decrease in collagen content (Figure 3A,B). Immunofluorescence microcopy analyses for caspase-3 revealed enhanced apoptosis within the lesions of the procoagulant ApoE−/− mice (data not shown). High plaque vulnerability in hypercoagulable mice was also associated with a pro-inflammatory plaque phenotype, signs of intraplaque hemorrhage, plaque dissection, but also spontaneous atherothrombosis (Figure 4E, Figure 5), whereas fibrin deposits were extensively distributed throughout ruptured TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− lesions (Figure 5). Intraplaque accumulation of macrophages and neutrophils was significantly diminished in hypercoagulable mice (Figure 4A,B,C), indicating that deficiency in prothrombin results in a less inflammatory plaque profile. In contrast, in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− advanced carotid artery lesions were abundantly infiltrated with neutrophils when compared to ApoE−/− control mice, whereas no changes were observed in terms of macrophage content (Figure 4A,B,C). A pronounced Ly6G* cell intraplaque recruitment was also observed during early stages of atherosclerosis in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice (Figure 4D). To provide further understanding into how alterations in blood coagulation potential affect the thrombogenicity of the arterial vessel wall, we pursued complementary studies of vessel occlusion following ferric chloride injury of healthy arteries. Times to occlusion and cessation of blood flow as a result of thrombus formation were significantly shortened in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice relative to control ApoE−/− mice, whereas occlusion times in FII−/−:ApoE−/− animals was comparable to control ApoE−/− cohorts (Figure S2).

Hypercoagulability Triggers Initiation and Progression of Atherosclerotic Lesions in a Neutrophil-Dependent Manner

There was a strong positive association between the number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood and the extent of atherosclerotic plaque burden (Figure 4B). No significant correlation was observed between the number of peripheral blood monocytes and plaque size. Because of the increased neutrophil counts observed in hypercoagulable TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice after 35 weeks on a regular chow diet (Table S1C), and the abundant infiltration of neutrophils within vulnerable-appearing atherosclerotic lesions (Figure 4A,C), we explored the impact of
hypercoagulability on neutrophil function and hematopoiesis in the context of atherosclerosis. Intravital microscopy studies revealed that neutrophils were significantly more adherent to atherosclerotic lesions in the common carotid artery of TMPro/Pro:ApoE<sup>2/-</sup> compared to ApoE<sup>2/-</sup> control mice after 6 weeks on a high-fat diet (Figure 4G,H,I,J). These data consolidated our histological findings (Figure 4A,C,D), suggesting that hypercoagulability can promote initiation and progression of atherosclerotic lesions in a neutrophil-dependent manner.

Hypercoagulability and Its Effects on Systemic Inflammation and Hematopoiesis: Enhanced Accumulation of Reactive Oxygen Species in Neutrophils

Consistent with this view, hypercoagulability promoted a significant increase in plasma CCL2 and CXCL1 levels (Table S2). TMPro/Pro:ApoE<sup>2/-</sup> mice showed significantly higher IL-6 plasma levels after 35 weeks on regular chow diet. Although there were trends toward increased IL-1β, expression of other key pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α, IFN-γ, IL-5 and IL-12 were not statistically different between hypercoagulable and control ApoE<sup>2/-</sup> mice, indicating that TMPro/Pro:ApoE<sup>2/-</sup> mice...
exhibited a pro- but not hyper-inflammatory systemic profile (Table S2). In addition, the higher plasma expression levels of granulocyte-colony stimulating factor (G-CSF) in TMpro/Pro:ApoE+/− mice raises the possibility that the loss of TM function not only impacts on thrombin activity but also affects granulopoiesis in the bone marrow. However, we did not detect major changes in hematopoiesis between hypercoagulable and control ApoE+/− mice after 10 weeks on regular chow diet (Figure S3), including any preferential differentiation towards granulocytic-type colonies. Despite a minor but significant increase in the common myeloid progenitor (CMP) cells, lineage-negative (LK, LS, LSK), granulocyte-macrophage progenitor (GMP) and erythroid/megakaryocyte progenitor (EMP) populations in TMpro/Pro:ApoE+/− mice, respectively; n = 10 per group; p = 0.0127). (D) Representative sections of early atherosclerotic lesions in external carotid artery of a TMpro/Pro:ApoE+/− mouse (left), abundantly infiltrated by Ly-6G+ cells (Ly-6G, red color), suggesting that hypercoagulability triggers lesion formation in a neutrophil-dependent manner. ApoE+/− control mice are shown on the right hand side. (E) The panel represents an atherosclerotic dissection with superimposed thrombus formation in a TMpro/Pro:ApoE+/− mouse at 6 weeks after carotid collar placement. Using Perls’ Prussian blue stain (blue color), we detected free ferric ions deposited within the sites of plaque dissection, indicating areas of intraplaque hemorrhage. Whereas the carotid lesions in 5 out of 10 TMpro/Pro:ApoE+/− mice were associated with either rupture, dissection or intraplaque hemorrhage, none of the control ApoE+/− mice plaques had any signs of severe plaque vulnerability (Pearson’s chi-squared test (χ²), n = 10 per group, p = 0.0325). Statistical analysis including all experimental groups indicated that the number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood was strongly correlated to the extent of atherosclerotic plaque burden (F). Using intravital microscopy, we confirmed that the relative number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood was strongly correlated to the extent of atherosclerotic plaque burden (F). Using intravital microscopy, we confirmed that the relative number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood was strongly correlated to the extent of atherosclerotic plaque burden (F). Using intravital microscopy, we confirmed that the relative number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood was strongly correlated to the extent of atherosclerotic plaque burden (F). Using intravital microscopy, we confirmed that the relative number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood was strongly correlated to the extent of atherosclerotic plaque burden (F). 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Using intravital microscopy, we confirmed that the relative number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood was strongly correlated to the extent of atherosclerotic plaque burden (F). Using intravital microscopy, we confirmed that the relative number of circulating neutrophils in peripheral blood was strongly correlated to the extent of atherosclerosis (Figure S6A). Of interest, another consequence of chronic hypercoagulability was enhanced accumulation of reactive oxygen species in neutrophils and not monocytes, as assessed by DHR fluorescence, the latter considered a measure of neutrophil senescence (Figure S6D,E).
Administration of Direct Thrombin Inhibitor Dabigatran Etxilate (DE) or rmAPC Substantially Decreases Systemic Inflammation, Aborts Atherosclerosis, Promotes Plaque Stability And Prevents Against Atherothrombosis in Hypercoagulable Mice

To study the role of thrombin in modulating atherogenesis in vivo, we administered either the specific oral thrombin inhibitor DE or a recombinant form of the natural anti-coagulant APC for 6 weeks after carotid collar placement in hypercoagulable TM\textsuperscript{pro/pro}:ApoE\textsuperscript{2/2} mice on high-fat diet regimen. Remarkably, both interventions completely rescued plaque formation, as evident by the decreased degree of stenosis, intima/media ratio and positive outward remodeling. Whereas in the placebo group 5 out of 10 animals had plaques with overt signs of plaque vulnerability (defined as, i.e. plaque dissection, intraplaque hemorrhage or superimposed thrombus formation), oral DE or rmAPC treatments limited the occurrence of plaque destabilization and atherothrombotic phenomena, and resulted in substantially reduced leukocyte recruitment and enhanced plaque stability. In addition, both interventions led to a pronounced decrease in thrombin generation, suggesting that even TM\textsuperscript{pro/pro}:ApoE\textsuperscript{2/2} mice exerted a low-grade hypercoagulable state.

**Discussion**

**Major Findings**

These studies provide strong evidence directly documenting that thrombin and other hemostatic system components are powerful determinants of inflammatory vessel wall disease, and even capable of superseding other pro-atherosclerotic insults. We here...
demonstrate that thrombin activity can influence onset, progression and qualitative properties of atherosclerotic plaques. In two distinct experimental setups (spontaneous and collar-induced atherosclerosis), we show that genetically-imposed 50% reduction in prothrombin (FII/+/+) in atherosclerosis-prone ApoE2/2 mice remarkably diminishes lesion formation and promotes plaque stability. In contrast, mice with genetically impaired anticoagulant function of TM, crossed on ApoE2/2 background, develop severe atherosclerotic disease. We here for the first time demonstrate the importance of neutrophils in the coagulation-inflammation interplay during atherogenesis. The principal finding of this study is that hypercoagulability induces enhanced mobilization of neutrophils from the bone marrow into the circulation, accompanied with neutrophil hyper-reactivity, increased oxidative stress, apoptosis and abundant intraplaque neutrophil infiltration, thus promoting unstable atherosclerotic plaque phenotype and spontaneous atherothrombosis. Administration of either the synthetic specific thrombin inhibitor DE or a recombinant form of the natural anticoagulant APC, counteract the pro-inflammatory, pro-atherogenic and pro-thrombotic phenotype of hypercoagulable TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice, resulting in plaque stability and preventing atherothrombosis.

Coagulation and Inflammation in Atherosclerosis

Given the multifactorial nature of atherosclerosis and the well-known capacity of coagulation proteases and their receptors (protease-activated receptors, PARs) and substrates to control inflammatory and reparative processes [18], one would anticipate that hemostatic factors might contribute, at least incrementally, to plaque development. In fact, various pro-thrombotic states have been associated with enhanced atherosclerosis progression in mice in vivo [23–29]. Nevertheless, the mechanisms through which clotting contributes to atherosclerosis progression remain unclear to date. Thrombin is a central coagulation protease, which through the activation of PAR-1 is known to promote numerous pro-atherogenic actions in vitro such as endothelial permeability, migration and proliferation of VSMC, platelet activation, leukocyte adhesion and recruitment, cytokine and chemokine production, vascular calcification, angiogenesis and apoptosis [13]. Similar effects can also be triggered via both TF-FVIIa complex or FXa [18]. In contrast, APC counteracts inflammation through PAR-1 signaling at multiple levels such as enhancing the endothelial barrier integrity, attenuating TF and TNF-α release by monocytes, inhibiting cytokine production, leukocyte endothelial transmigration and NF-κB pathways [30,31].

Figure 6. Hypercoagulability induces oxidative stress in granulocytes within the bone marrow compartment. Granulocytes and monocytes cell fractions in the bone marrow were significantly increased in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− as compared to ApoE−/− control mice after 8 weeks on a regular chow diet (Granulocytes: 26.3 ± 3.6% vs. 22.9 ± 3.4%; n = 12 per group, p = 0.0292) (Monocytes: 12.3 ± 0.6% vs. 8.8 ± 0.7%; n = 12 per group, p<0.0001) (A, B). The significant increase in monocytes can be explained by the higher relative numbers of Ly6CHIGH monocyte cells in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice bone marrow (Ly6CHIGH cells: 9.4 ± 1.3% vs. 6.3 ± 0.8%; n = 12 per group, p = 0.0002) (C). Using DHR123 FACS analysis, we analyzed the amount of oxidative burst activity in granulocytes and monocytes in the bone marrow after PMA stimulation. The monocytes did not show any differences in DHR signal and thus ROS activity, whereas in the granulocytes of the TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice, a significant increase was observed in the DHR signal when compared to ApoE−/− mice, indicating enhanced oxidative stress upon PMA stimulation in the TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− granulocytes present in the bone marrow (D, E). *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Error bars represent mean ± SD. Abbreviations: DHR123–Dihydrorhodamine 123; ROS–Reactive Oxygen Species; PMA–Phorbol 12-Myristate 13-Acetate.
Our data strongly suggests that increased thrombin generation due to diminished APC production in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice may be mechanistically-coupled to the pro-atherosclerotic phenotype. Previous studies have indicated that hypercoagulability can have beneficial effects on plaque stenosis during the intermediate phases of progression by promoting positive vascular remodeling [17]. Importantly, our data shows that plaques of prothrombotic mice had profound composition changes, with overt features of plaque vulnerability at later stages of disease development (at 35 weeks on regular chow diet), characterized by the presence of large necrotic cores, thin fibrous caps, significantly increased neutrophil intraplaque infiltration and apoptosis, decreased collagen and VSMC content, occlusive stenosis and spontaneous atherothrombosis. Despite that we show a significant association between hypercoagulability and high rate of spontaneous mortality in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice, further studies are needed to precisely determine the underlying cause of this observation.

There are numerous pathways, which have been implicated to play a role in the complex interplay between coagulation and inflammation in various pathologic conditions [30]. Here, for the...
first time, we show the strong potential of the coagulation system (in particular thrombin) to regulate inflammation in atherosclerosis as highlighted by the effects of direct thrombin inhibition therapy on leukocyte counts, chemokine and cytokine levels. Neutrophils represent another intriguing cellular interface between blood coagulation and inflammation [3,32]. Although the importance of neutrophils in atherosclerosis remains to be defined in detail, several studies have highlighted their pro-atherogenic potential and proposed role in atherosclerotic plaque destabilization [18,33–38]. Our data demonstrate that hypercoagulability promotes enhanced accumulation of reactive oxygen species in neutrophils and, thus triggering enhanced neutrophil senescence. Systemic inflammation involving activated neutrophils is associated with unstable coronary artery disease and considered an independent predictor for cardiovascular outcome in patients [39]. Our data indicate increased neutrophil rolling and arrest on early carotid atherosclerotic plaques in TMPRO/PRO:ApoE<sup>2/2</sup> mice. In addition, the significantly higher neutrophil intraplaque infiltration, consolidated by striking correlations between neutrophil counts and the amount of plaque burden, suggest a key role for neutrophils in this coagulation-inflammation interplay in atherosclerosis. The increased number of circulating pro-atherogenic neutrophils in TMPRO/PRO:ApoE<sup>2/2</sup> mice can be in part explained by enhanced mobilization from the bone marrow as a result of exuberant plasma G-CSF, CCL-2 and CXCL-1 expression. G-CSF is an essential regulator of the neutrophil mobilization from the bone marrow. Numerous experimental and human studies have shown an association between higher G-CSF plasma levels, neutrophil activation, endothelial dysfunction, enhanced oxidative stress, hypercoagulability and platelet aggregation [40–42].

Figure 8. The effects of direct and indirect inhibition of thrombin activity on plaque fibrosis. Picrosirius red-stained sections assessed by light (A, top row) and polarized light (A, second row), indicate no significant changes in collagen content in TMPRO/PRO:ApoE<sup>2/2</sup> mice after 6-week treatment with either Dabigatran etexilate or mouse rAPC, as compared to placebo (B). Administration of oral Dabigatran etexilate led to a significant increase in a-smooth muscle actin intraplaque content in TMPRO/PRO:ApoE<sup>2/2</sup> mice vs. placebo treatment (20.6 ± 7.4% vs. 6.8 ± 3.8% of total plaque area, n = 10 per group, p < 0.05) (A, C). rAPC therapy did not have an effect (6.2 ± 7.1% of total plaque area, n = 10 per group, p > 0.05) (A, C). *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001. Error bars represent mean ± SD. Arrows indicate examples of positive staining. Abbreviations: SR – (Picro)sirius red; a-SMA – a-smooth muscle actin; HFD – high-fat diet; VSMC – vascular smooth muscle cells; rAPC – recombinant mouse activated protein C. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0055784.g008
and CXCL-1 are chemokines recognized for their potent neutrophil chemotactic activity and capacity to promote vascular inflammation [32], but also known to be critical players in recruitment of monocytes and neutrophils to sites of chronic inflammation [39,43,44]. Thrombin acts as a secretagogue, promotes endothelial dysfunction and induces the release of P-selectin, which is stored in the Weibel-Palade bodies [45]. P-selectin is a powerful mediator of neutrophil adhesion to the endothelium, but also plays an important role in athogenesis [29,45]. Thrombin is among one of the most potent platelet activators [18]. One may also assume that part of the proatherogenic effects observed in the hypercoagulable mice can be also mediated via platelet activation, known for their crucial role in atherosclerosis progression [46,47]. Platelets interact with a variety of cellular partners such as monocytes, neutrophils, endothelial cells, endothelial progenitor cells, and others, thus induce key inflammatory responses including leukocyte adhesion, migration, proteolysis, thrombosis, but also facilitate the differentiation of macrophages to foam cells [48]. Although we did neither detect any significant correlation between the number of peripheral monocytes and atherosclerotic plaque burden, nor changes in the number of macrophages infiltrating the lesions in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− versus control mice, this also does not rule out a role of monocytes in atherogenesis. Neutrophils can rapidly undergo apoptosis as a result of the enhanced oxidative stress. The abundant number of pro-apoptotic leukocytes within the lesions of TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice can overload the phagocytic clearance capacity of the macrophages, thus promoting enhanced macrophage death and subsequent plaque necrosis [49]. In fact, the necrotic core areas and apoptotic indices within the lesions of hypercoagulable mice were substantially increased.

Conclusions and Potential Clinical Implications

Steadily increasing thrombin-antithrombin plasma levels, considered a sensitive marker of thrombin formation in vivo, were independently associated with the presence and severity of coronary atherosclerotic plaques, as defined by coronary computed tomographic angiography (CCTA) [50]. In conclusion, we here provide substantial new evidence showing that controlling coagulation via thrombin inhibition is a potential new therapeutic target to treat atherosclerosis. Given the promising safety profile and significant clinical benefits, which selective anticoagulants may offer over traditional anticoagulant therapy [51,52], including the reduction of risk of stroke and all-cause mortality after acute coronary syndromes, the potential clinical importance of these findings allows the unique opportunity to study if and how administration of novel classes of anticoagulants modifies atherosclerosis phenotype in patients. Nevertheless, due to the large heterogeneity in humans, the multifactorial nature of atherosclerosis, the dual-faceted character that many coagulation factors can exert, and their beneficial roles under normal physiological conditions, one should consider long-term specific coagulation inhibition with caution [53]. There is an urgent need of clinical trials to fully assess the overall benefit and risk balance of long-term therapy with novel oral anticoagulant agents.

Supporting Information

Figure S1 Hypercoagulability in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice does not alter lipid uptake in bone marrow-derived macrophages (BMM). (A) There were no significant differences found in the lipid uptake in BMM derived from TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− and control ApoE−/− mice, as determined by flow cytometry analysis. (B, C, D) In addition, we also used high performance thin layer chromatography to test the free cholesterol, cholesterol esters and triglycerides accumulation in BMM in response to LDL and oxidized LDL loading and there were no significant differences detected between BMM obtained from TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− and control ApoE−/− mice. Error bars represent mean ± SD. Abbreviations: HP-TLC - high performance thin layer chromatography; BMM - Bone marrow-derived macrophages; LDL - low-density lipoprotein; oxLDL - oxidized low-density lipoprotein.

**Figure S2** 20% FeCl3-induced arterial injury in hyper- and hypocoagulable atherosclerosis-prone mice. Time to occlusion (TTO) and closing times (CT) were established. TTO is defined as the time after FeCl3 application required for the blood flow to decline to 90%, whereas CT represents the time from the start of flow reduction to a complete occlusion of the carotid artery. (A, B) Both TTO and CT were significantly shortened in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− compared to ApoE−/− control mice (TTO: 4.4±0.9 vs. 14.1±1.1 min., respectively; n = 10 per group, p = 0.0010) (CT: 1.2±0.8 vs. 11.3±13.0 min., respectively; n = 10 per group, p = 0.0010), suggesting for a pro-thrombotic arterial vessel wall phenotype. In contrast, hypercoagulability in FII−/−ApoE−/− mice had no effect on thrombus formation during FeCl3-induced arterial injury. Of note, all 10 out of 10 of the TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− mice formed an occlusive thrombus (animals depicted at 30 min. represent all mice, which did not induce occlusive thrombus formation, indicated by an arrow). *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Dotted lines represent mean.

**Figure S3** The effects of hypercoagulability on hematopoiesis. Using a CFU-C (colony forming unit in culture) assay, we established that there were no significant differences in the amount of total colonies produced by TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− as compared to ApoE−/− control mice after 8 weeks on a regular chow diet (A). Furthermore, we could not find any changes in the composition, as determined by the CFU subset analysis, indicating that hypercoagulability does not affect hematopoiesis in the bone marrow compartment (B); FACS analysis of the bone marrow (H, I). *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Data are presented as mean ± SD. Abbreviations: ETP - Endogenous

Table S1 Coagulation profile (A), body weight, lipid profile (B) and complete blood counts (C), assessed after 35 weeks on regular chow diet in FII−/−ApoE−/−, TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− and control ApoE−/− mice (n = 10 per group), *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Data are presented as mean ± SD. Abbreviations: ETP - Endogenous

Table S2 Cytokine and chemokine profile assessed after 35 weeks on regular chow diet in FII−/−:Apoe−/−, TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− and control ApoE−/− mice (n = 10 per group). *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001. Data are presented as mean ± SD. Abbreviations: IL – interleukin; TNF-α – tumor necrosis factor-alpha; IFN-γ – Interferon-gamma; G-CSF - Granulocyte colony-stimulating factor; MCP-1 - monocyte chemotactic protein-1; MIP-1α – Macrophage inflammatory protein-1α; MIP-1β - Macrophage inflammatory protein-1β; RANTES - Regulated upon Activation, Normal T-cell Expressed, and Secreted; KC - keratinocyte chemoattractant; APC – Activated Protein C.

Table S3 Coagulation profile (A), lipid profile (B) and complete blood counts (C), assessed at 6 weeks after carotid collar placement in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− on high-fat diet and treated with placebo, oral Dabigatran etexilate or mouse recombinant APC (n = 10 per group). *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 (Intervention groups compared to placebo group). Data are presented as mean ± SD. Abbreviations: TAT – Thrombin-Antithrombin Complex; HDL – High-Density Lipoprotein; LDL – Low-Density Lipoprotein; CBC – Complete Blood Count; RBC – Red Blood Cells; WBC – White Blood Cells; Hgb – Hemoglobin; Hct – Hematocrit; APC – Activated Protein C.

Table S4 Cytokine and chemokine profile assessed at 6 weeks after carotid collar placement in TMPro/Pro:ApoE−/− on high-fat diet and treated with placebo, oral Dabigatran etexilate or mouse recombinant APC (n = 10 per group).

References

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Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge Diane Fens, Patricia Puijmen, and Mathijs Groeneveld for their skillful help in processing and measuring specimens. We also thank Dr. Karl Wagner for developing and producing Dabigatran etexilate-supplemented chow. This study was supported by a Marie Curie fellowship (MEST-CT-2003-020706) from the European Commission (to Dr. J.I. Borisoff) and a NesterNem grant (to Cardiovascular Research Institute Maastricht (CARM)). Dr. J.I. Borisoff is a recipient of a Kootstra Talent Fellowship (2011) from Maastricht University and is supported by a Rubicon fellowship (825.11.019), granted by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). Dr. Oliver Soehnlein is supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (SFB763/3-1 and SFB763/6-1). Dr. Hugo ten Cate is the recipient of a Gutenberg Research College Fellowship (Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany).

Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: JIB EALB SH MJAPD HMS HtC. Performed the experiments: JIB JJTO PL. Contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools: KH TMH MJAPD JLD. Analyzed the data: JIB JJTO PL. Wrote the paper: JIB HMS HtC.


