BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Red hair, MC1R variants, and risk for Parkinson’s disease – a meta-analysis

Xiqun Chen1,2, Danielle Feng1, Michael A. Schwarzschild1 & Xiang Gao3

1MassGeneral Institute for Neurodegenerative Disease, Department of Neurology, Harvard Medical School, Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston, 02129 Massachusetts
2Shanghai 10th Hospital, Tongji University School of Medicine, Shanghai, China
3Department of Nutritional Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, 16802 Pennsylvania

Introduction

Although there is a general inverse association between cancer and Parkinson’s disease (PD), the one exception of melanoma has been well-documented, not only in patients themselves but also in their relatives. Little is known regarding mechanisms underlying the reciprocally increased risk of the two disparate diseases. However, efforts have been made in recent years to investigate potential genetic intersections and common pathological pathways. Melanoma is strongly tied to red hair/fair skin, a phenotype of loss-of-function of the melanocortin-1 receptor gene (MCIR), the key pigmentation gene. Our initial investigation based on more than 120,000 US men and women demonstrated that red hair color and red hair-associated MCIR p.R151C variant of the MCIR gene, both of which confer high melanoma risk. We performed a meta-analysis of six publications on red hair, MCIR, and Parkinson’s disease. We found that red hair (pooled odds ratios = 1.68, 95% confidence intervals: 1.07, 2.64) and p.R151C (pooled odds ratios = 1.10, 95% confidence intervals: 1.00, 1.21), but not p.R160W, were associated with greater risk for Parkinson’s disease. Our results support potential roles of pigmentation and its key regulator MC1R in the pathogenesis of Parkinson’s disease.
analyses of studies that examined the association between red hair color, \textit{MC1R} p.R151C or p.R160W, two most studied \textit{MC1R} loss-of-function polymorphisms, and PD risk.

**Methods**

**Literature search and data extraction**

We searched all published literature in MEDLINE via PubMed up to July 2016 that reported PD associations with hair color, \textit{MC1R} variants, and amino acid changes. For inclusion in \textit{MC1R} variant analyses, all studies must have reported the specific variants or amino acid changes of interest, and the relative risks (RRs) or odds ratios (ORs). We extracted information on year of study, study type and population, cases and controls population size, country origin, focus of study, PD ascertainment method, variant of interest, lower and upper confidence intervals (CIs), minor allele frequency (MAF) in PD patients and controls, model or test type, and adjustment covariates.

**Statistical analyses**

We used Q statistic to examine heterogeneity among the studies and the significance level was set at 0.1. We used fixed-effects models to calculate the summary ORs as no significant heterogeneity was identified ($P$-heterogeneity $\geq 0.2$ for all analyses). We did not adjust for multiple comparison because the current analyses were hypothesis-driven. Publication bias was examined with the Begg and Egger tests.

**Results**

We identified six publications based on eight study cohorts in total from 2009 to 2016, all with study focus on hair color or \textit{MC1R} p.R151C or p.R160W polymorphisms (Table 1).\textsuperscript{5-11} PD cases were of US, French/
Figure 1. Pooled relative risks and their 95% confidence intervals (95% CIs) for Parkinson’s disease (PD) according to red hair color status (A; 1347 PD cases), MC1R p.R151C (rs1805007) (B; 8454 PD cases), and p.R160W (rs1805008) (C; 14934 PD cases) polymorphisms. HPFS = the health professionals follow-up study; NHS = the nurses’ health study; PAGE = Parkinson’s genes and environment; IPDGC = International Parkinson’s Disease Genomics Consortium.
French-Canadian, UK, German, Greek, Dutch, and Spanish origins, overall representing white populations. 5,7–11 PD diagnosis was generally ascertained by a neurologist or clinician according to the United Kingdom Parkinson’s Disease Society Brain Bank Criteria.

Red hair was associated with significantly higher risk of PD, relative to black hair (pooled OR = 1.68; 95% CI: 1.07, 2.64; P = 0.02; PD case number = 13475–7) (Fig. 1A). When we further examined two MC1R red hair color alleles, we found that p.R151C variant was associated with marginally increased risk of PD (pooled OR = 1.101; 95% CI: 1.002, 1.210; P = 0.046; PD case number = 14934)7–11 (Fig. 1B). However, we did not find significant association between p.R160W and PD risk (pooled OR = 1.019; 95% CI: 0.956, 1.087; P = 0.57; PD case number = 14,934)7–11 (Fig. 1C). There was no strong evidence of publication bias based on the Beg and Egger tests (P > 0.05 for all).

**Discussion**

In this meta-analysis of six publications, totaling eight study cohorts,5,7–11 we found that red hair color was significantly associated with higher risk for PD. Red hair-associated MC1R variant p.R151C had a significant association with PD risk. Another red hair color variant, p.R160W, was not associated with PD risk.

The associations of red hair color and MC1R p.R151C with PD risk are consistent with our initial report.5 Skin/hair color is determined by relative production of brown–black eumelanin and yellow–red pheomelanin. Binding to its ligand α-melanocyte-stimulating hormone, the G protein-coupled MC1R induces synthesis of eumelanin through cAMP cascade.6,12 Loss-of-function MC1R variants including p.R151C facilitate pheomelanin formation and are associated with red hair/fair skin and increased risk of melanoma.6,12,13 MC1R is also involved in the regulation of other cellular functions independent of pigmentation.12 Evidence supports a critical role of pheomelanin as a prooxidant in MC1R melanomagenesis,6 and involvement of red hair pigmentation in PD is supported by our original report5 and the present meta-analysis. Other studies have also implicated a potential role of general pigmentation in PD. For example, primary skin cultures from individuals with red hair color showed deregulation of genes involved in neurodegenerative diseases such as PD.14 A clinical study reported a correlation between light pigmentation phenotype and increased echogenicity of the substantia nigra.15 Furthermore, a GWA study identified melanogenesis as significant pathways for PD.16 However, it is not clear whether skin/hair pigmentation accounts all or in part for MC1R p.R151C–PD association.

Interestingly, despite limited knowledge about its biosynthetic pathway and its exact role in dopaminergic neuron degeneration, neuromelanin, the third melanin in humans in fact has a pheomelanin core and a eumelanin surface.17 This finding has led to a hypothesis that thinning eumelanin surface and exposing pheomelanin core may be responsible for the selective vulnerability of pigmented dopaminergic neurons in PD.18 Although early evidence supports expression of MC1R in brain,19 and MC1R has been proposed to be neuroprotective,8 it remains to be determined whether MC1R signaling plays any role in the synthesis and functions of neuromelanin and how neuromelanin is related to peripheral pigmentation, that is, skin/hair color.

MC1R p.R160W, another red hair–associated polymorphism that was associated with higher PD risk in one study with a Spanish population,8 did not show a significant positive association in our meta-analysis. One of the difficulties in ascertaining the association stems from the relatively low MAF and penetrance of MC1R in both PD and non-PD patients5,7–11 compared to other PD predisposing genes such as those of the family of PARK genes, though the frequency of MC1R mutations is comparable to those of melanoma cases.6,12 Furthermore, the frequency of minor alleles differs between populations,20 and possible differential biological mechanisms and environmental interactions contributing to the mixed evidence for the association with PD should be clarified.

Although our original findings5 are generally supported by this meta-analysis, larger, prospective cohorts with different ethnic backgrounds are needed to verify the associations between hair color, p.R151C, and possibly other MC1R red hair variants and PD risk. In addition, laboratory studies would provide critical insight into the mechanistic roles of MC1R and pigmentation in dopaminergic neuron degeneration in PD.

**Acknowledgments**

The authors are supported by the Michael J. Fox Foundation (9908 to X. C.), National Institute of Health (1R21NS090246-01A1 to X. C., 5R21NS087235-02 to X. G.), and National Natural Science Foundation of China (81471293 to X.C.).

**Author Contributions**

X.C., D.F., and G.X. designed the study, acquired and analyzed data, and wrote the paper. M.A.S. provided critical comments on the study design and revised the manuscript.
Conflicts of Interest
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References