Interleukin-6 Receptor Gene, Plasma C-Reactive Protein, and Diabetes Risk in Women

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Interleukin-6 Receptor Gene, Plasma C-Reactive Protein, and Diabetes Risk in Women

Lu Qi, Nader Rifai, and Frank B. Hu

OBJECTIVE—Recent genome-wide association studies (GWASs) related common variants in the interleukin-6 (IL-6) receptor (IL6R) gene to plasma C-reactive protein (CRP) concentrations. Because IL6R variants were previously associated with IL-6 levels, we tested whether the associations with CRP were independent of IL-6 and the interactions between IL6R variants and CRP in relation to diabetes risk.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS—Plasma CRP and IL-6 levels and 10 IL6R polymorphisms were determined in a nested case-control study of 633 diabetic and 692 healthy Caucasian women.

RESULTS—In both nondiabetic and diabetic women, IL6R polymorphisms were associated with plasma CRP levels, independent of IL-6 concentration. After adjustment of IL-6 levels, CRP concentrations in the genotype AA, AC, and CC of the GWAS polymorphism rs8192284 were 0.32, 0.26, and 0.24 pg/ml, respectively, among nondiabetic women (P for trend = 0.005; false discovery rate [FDR] = 0.01) and 0.63, 0.48, and 0.43 pg/ml among diabetic women (P for trend < 0.0001; FDR = 0.0001). Haplotypes inferred from polymorphisms within a linkage disequilibrium block including rs8192284 were also significantly associated with CRP levels (P = 0.0002). In an exploratory analysis, rs8192284 showed significant interactions with CRP levels in relation to diabetes risk (P for interaction = 0.026). The odds ratios across increasing quartiles of CRP were 2.19 (95% CI 1.42–3.36), 2.03 (1.27–3.23), and 2.92 (1.77–4.82) in the carriers of IL6R variants. For example, the odds ratios across increasing quartiles of CRP were 2.56, 2.03, and 1.42 among diabetic subjects (P for trend = 0.0001). The association of carriers of IL6R variants with plasma CRP was also significant across increasing quartiles of IL-6 levels and 10

CONCLUSIONS—IL6R variants were significantly associated with plasma CRP, independent of IL-6 levels. IL6R variants may interact with CRP in predicting diabetes risk. Diabetes 58:275–278, 2009

Chronic systemic inflammation can induce insulin resistance and is a key mechanism linking obesity and diabetes (1). As a nonspecific marker of systemic inflammation, C-reactive protein (CRP) is an acute-phase reactant synthesized in the liver in response to cytokines (2), especially interleukin-6 (IL-6) (3). In epidemiological studies, circulating CRP levels significantly predict the risk of type 2 diabetes (4–6).

In an earlier analysis (7), we found that the common variants in the IL-6 receptor (IL6R) gene, especially a single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) rs8192284, were significantly related to high-plasma IL-6 concentration. Similar associations between IL6R SNPs and IL-6 concentration were also observed in an admixture study (8). In a recent genome-wide association study (GWAS) on plasma CRP levels among 6,345 apparently healthy women, common SNPs in the IL6R gene including rs8192284 were associated with CRP concentration at genome-wide significance level (P < 5 × 10−8) (9). Because of the close relationship between IL-6 and CRP, we hypothesized that the IL6R gene–CRP associations observed in the GWAS might be secondary to the changes in circulating IL-6 levels.

To test this hypothesis, we examined the associations between IL6R gene variants and CRP concentrations in healthy and diabetic women, controlling for IL-6 levels. We also assessed the interactions between IL6R SNPs and plasma CRP levels in predicting the risk of type 2 diabetes.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The Nurses’ Health Study began in 1976 with the recruitment of 121,700 female registered nurses (aged 30–55 years). Between 1989 and 1990, 32,826 women provided blood. The medical history and lifestyle information were updated every 2 years using a questionnaire (10). Samples for the present study were selected from women who provided a blood sample and were free from diabetes, cardiovascular disease, stroke, or cancer at the time of blood collection. Incident cases of type 2 diabetes were defined as self-reported diabetes confirmed by a validated supplementary questionnaire and diagnosed at least 1 year after blood collection. We used National Diabetes Data Group criteria (11) to define diabetes, because our subjects were diagnosed before the release of the American Diabetes Association criteria in 1997. The validity of this method has been confirmed (12). We used the American Diabetes Association diagnostic criteria for diagnosis of diabetes cases after the 1998 cycle (13). The incident cases were matched to control subjects who did not report physician-diagnosed diabetes on age, month and year of blood draw, and fasting status (14,15). In total, 1,325 European Caucasian women (633 diabetic patients and 692 control subjects) with plasma IL-6 and CRP measures were included.

Assessment of plasma levels of CRP and IL-6 and of covariates. Blood sample collection (between 1989 and 1990) and processing were previously described (14,16). The assays were performed in 2003 using the stored blood samples (in the vapor phase of liquid nitrogen freezers; the highest temperature is ~130°C). Frozen plasma aliquots from cases and control subjects were selected for simultaneous analysis. Study samples were analyzed in randomly ordered case-control pairs to further reduce systematic bias and interassay variation. CRP levels were measured via a high-sensitivity latex-enhanced immunonephelometric assay on a BN II analyzer (Dade Behring, Newark, DE). Plasma concentrations of IL-6 were measured using a quantitative sandwich enzyme immunoassay technique (Quantikine HS Immunoassay kit). The coefficient of variation was 3.8% for CRP and 5.9% for IL-6 (7,16). BMI was calculated as weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in meters. Physical activity was expressed as metabolic equivalent task (MET) hours based on self-reported types and durations of activities over the previous year.

SNPs selection and genotype determination. DNA was extracted from the buffy coat fraction of centrifuged blood using the QiAmp Blood kit (Qiagen, Chatsworth, CA). Ten linkage disequilibrium tagging SNPs (rs4845618,

From the Department of Nutrition, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, Massachusetts; the Channing Laboratory, Department of Medicine, Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts; and the Department of Laboratory Medicine, Children’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts.

Corresponding author: Dr. Lu Qi, nli@channing.harvard.edu.

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Using the THESIAS program (19). All haplotype analysis was conducted based on the Stochastic-EM algorithm for the analyses on the polymorphisms by the method of Benjamini and Hochberg (17) to adjust for the multiple testing. The FDRs for all of these associations were <0.05. In most cases, similar associations between IL6R and CRP were observed in the diabetic patients.

In nondiabetic women, the three SNPs rs6684439, rs4845622, and rs8192284, which were in strong linkage disequilibrium, were significantly associated with low plasma CRP levels after adjusting for IL-6 and other covariates (Table 2). SNPs rs12083537 and rs4329505 were associated with high plasma CRP levels. We calculated FDR by the method of Benjamini and Hochberg (17) to adjust for the multiple testing. The FDRs for all of these associations were <0.05. In most cases, similar associations between IL6R polymorphisms and CRP levels were observed in the diabetic patients.

To account for multiple statistical testing, we calculated false discovery rate (FDR) for the analyses on the polymorphisms by the method of Benjamini and Hochberg (17) using SAS procedure PROC MULTTEST. FDR estimates the proportion of results declared positive that are actually false (18). The SAS statistical package was used for the analyses (SAS, version 8.2 for UNIX). Haplotype analysis was conducted based on the Stochastic-EM algorithm using THESIAS program (19). All P values are two sided.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 shows age and age-adjusted baseline characteristics according to rs8192284 genotypes for women with both CRP and IL-6 measurements available. IL-6 levels were higher in women with AC and CC genotypes compared with those with AA genotype. The genotypes were not associated with any other characteristics.

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We inferred the haplotypes from the polymorphisms within the linkage disequilibrium block (including SNPs rs6684439, rs4845622, rs8192284, rs4329505, rs4240872, and rs2229238). Five common haplotypes accounted for nearly 100% allele variance of the linkage disequilibrium block (rs4845618, rs4329505, rs4240872, and rs2229238). Five common haplotypes accounted for nearly 100% allele variance of the linkage disequilibrium block. Haplotypes 21122 (P = 0.039; 1, the common allele; 2, the minor allele) and 11221 (P = 0.0006) were associated with 0.13 (0.01–0.26) and 0.23 (0.10–0.37) pg/ml higher CRP levels, respectively, compared with the most common haplotype 12111, adjusting for IL-6 and other covariates (Fig. 1). The

**Table 1**

Clinical characteristics of nondiabetic women according to the genotypes of SNP rs8192284

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<tr>
<th>Participants (n)</th>
<th>rs8192284</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AA</td>
<td>AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>234</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (kg/m²)</td>
<td>55 ± 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical activity (MET h/week)</td>
<td>12.9 ± 15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol consumption (g/day)</td>
<td>6.3 ± 11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family history of diabetes</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current smoker</td>
<td>14.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmenopausal status</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL-6 (ng/ml)</td>
<td>1.84 ± 1.97</td>
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Data are percent or means ± SD.
found that *IL6R* variants are significantly related to IL-6 levels (7). The same association was also observed in the Health ABC study (8). Our data from the present study suggest that the association between *IL6R* variants and CRP levels is unlikely due to the changes in IL-6 levels, because the *IL6R* gene–CRP association was independent of IL-6 levels.

Because CRP and IL-6 are not the direct products of the *IL6R* gene, the associations between *IL6R* variants and these biomarkers are likely mediated by other metabolic changes. SNP rs8192284 in the *IL6R* gene has been associated with soluble IL6R levels (8). These data suggest that *IL6R* variant may primarily affect IL6 levels and that the changes in CRP and IL-6 are likely secondary.

The precise mechanisms underlying the opposite associations of *IL6R* variant (rs8192284) with IL-6 and CRP are not clear. The differing associations are particularly puzzling considering that IL-6 may stimulate the product of CRP in the liver. However, the data from our study are highly consistent with the GWAS and previous studies (8,9,20). We suspect that the genotype-related changes in CRP and IL-6 levels may be parallel changes, rather than sequential events, both induced by the alterations in IL6R products.

Subclinical systemic inflammation is now considered an important mechanism leading to insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes (23). Epidemiological studies have documented that circulating inflammatory markers, including CRP, significantly predict diabetes risk (4–6). Previous studies indicate that polymorphisms affecting CRP levels may also influence the risk of type 2 diabetes (24). Although *IL6R* SNPs were not significantly associated with the incidence of diabetes in our study sample (7), the exploratory analysis indicated that the genetic variant might modify the association between CRP levels and diabetes risk. The associations between CRP and increased risk of type 2 diabetes are more evident in women carrying the wild-type genotype AA of rs8192284 compared with those carrying the minor allele C. This observation reflects a synergic effect of *IL6R* genotype and CRP levels on the development of diabetes. The observed interaction needs to be confirmed in future studies.

Several limitations need to be considered. SNP rs4129267 reported by the GWAS (9) was not typed in the present study. However, this SNP is in near perfect linkage disequilibrium with rs8192284 (D’ = 1 and r2 = 0.96; HapMap, CEU). Population stratification arising from ethnic admixture may cause spurious associations. However, the present study was less likely to be influenced by population stratification because the study populations were highly homogeneous, including only European Caucasians. In addition, our analyses were restricted to women and therefore may not be generalized to men.

In summary, we demonstrated that the *IL6R* variants are significantly associated with plasma CRP levels, independent of IL-6 levels. In addition, *IL6R* variant interacts with CRP in relation to diabetes risk. Further research is warranted to elucidate the potential mechanisms underlying the associations between *IL6R* variants and the opposite changes in CRP and IL-6 levels.

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REFERENCES