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<tr>
<td>Citation</td>
<td>Archives Of Disease In Childhood, 2007, v. 92 n. 1, p. 43-47</td>
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<tr>
<td>Issued Date</td>
<td>2007</td>
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<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10722/45208">http://hdl.handle.net/10722/45208</a></td>
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<tr>
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Relationship between carotid intima-media thickness and arterial stiffness in children after Kawasaki disease

Y-f Cheung, S J Wong and M H K Ho

Arch. Dis. Child. 2007;92;43-47; originally published online 4 Jul 2006; doi:10.1136/adc.2006.096628

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Relationship between carotid intima-media thickness and arterial stiffness in children after Kawasaki disease

Y-f Cheung, S J Wong, M H K Ho

Background: Evidence of premature atherosclerosis and systemic arterial stiffening in patients after Kawasaki disease is accumulating. Aim: To test the hypothesis that carotid intima-media thickness (IMT), a surrogate marker of atherosclerosis, is associated with systemic arterial stiffness in children after Kawasaki disease.

Methods: A cohort of 72 patients was studied, comprising 26 patients with Kawasaki disease and coronary aneurysms (group I), 24 patients with Kawasaki disease and normal coronary arteries (group II) and 22 healthy age-matched children (group III). The carotid IMT, carotid artery stiffness index, brachioradial pulse wave velocity (PWV), fasting total cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol were determined and compared among the three groups.

Results: The carotid IMT was related to indices of arterial stiffness, and significant determinants of carotid IMT were identified by multivariate analysis. The mean (standard deviation (SD)) carotid IMT of both group I (0.41 (0.04) mm) and group II (0.39 (0.04) mm) was significantly greater than that of group III (0.36 (0.04) mm; p<0.001 and p=0.008, respectively). For the entire cohort, carotid IMT correlated positively with LDL cholesterol (r = 0.31, p = 0.009), carotid artery stiffness index (r = 0.40, p = 0.001) and brachioradial PWV (r = 0.28, p = 0.016), but not with age, body mass index, systemic blood pressure, and HDL and total cholesterol. Multiple linear regression analysis identified carotid artery stiffness index (β = 0.25, p = 0.028) and subject grouping (β = −0.39; p = 0.001; model R² = 0.29) as significant correlates of carotid IMT.

Conclusion: The increased carotid IMT in children after Kawasaki disease is associated with systemic arterial stiffening.

Assessment of arterial stiffness

The carotid artery stiffness was assessed by calculating the stiffness index as reported previously. Briefly, a 7–15 MHz linear-array transducer, interfaced to a Hewlett-Packard Sonos 5500 ultrasound machine (Hewlett-Packard Corp, Andover, MA, USA), was used to image the right carotid artery at about 1 cm proximal to the carotid bifurcation. The systolic and diastolic diameters were measured between the intima of the...
near and far walls. Three measurements each of systolic and
diastolic diameters were averaged for the calculation of
stiffness index according to the formula:

\[ \ln \left( \frac{SBP}{DBP} \right) \frac{\sigma}{D/D}, \]

where ln denotes natural logarithm, SBP systolic blood
pressure, DBP diastolic blood pressure, \( \sigma \) the difference
between systolic and diastolic diameters, and D the mean
diameter.

The brachioradial artery stiffness was assessed by measuring
the pulse-wave velocity (PWV), using the previously reported
photoplethysmographic technique.\(^7\) PWV is related to the
square root of elastic modulus according to the Moens–
Korteweg equation.\(^8\) Hence, the stiffer the artery, the faster
the PWV. The transit time required for the pulse to travel from
the brachial artery at the elbow to the radial artery at the wrist
was determined from the time delay between the foot of the
corresponding brachial and radial pulse waves. The average of
three readings was taken. PWV was calculated by dividing the
surface distance between the two sites of pulse wave recording
by the transit time.

Carotid IMT

The right carotid artery was similarly imaged using the linear
array transducer as aforementioned at about 1 cm proximal to
the carotid bifurcation. The IMT of the common carotid artery
far wall was measured using the electronic callipers of the
ultrasound machine as described previously.\(^4\) All the measure-
ments were carried out by a single investigator (SJW), blinded
to the status of the participants and the stiffness indices. The
average of three measurements was used for subsequent
analyses.

Blood investigations

The fasting total cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein (HDL)
cholesterol and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels
were determined. Plasma total cholesterol level was determined
enzymatically using a Hitachi 912 analyzer (Roche Diagnostics,
GmbH, Mannheim, Germany). HDL cholesterol was measured
using a homogeneous method with polyethylene glycol-
cyclodextrin, and LDL cholesterol was calculated by the Friedewald
equation.

Data analysis

Data are presented as mean (SD). One-way analysis of variance
was used to compare differences in the variables among the
groups, with retrospective comparisons using the Bonferroni test. For categorical variables, \( \chi^2 \) test was carried
out. Pearson’s correlation analysis was used to assess for
 correlations between carotid IMT and demographic variables,
systemic blood pressure and indices of arterial stiffness.
Stepwise multiple linear regression was used to identify
significant determinants of carotid IMT. Values of \( p < 0.05 \)
were considered to be significant. All statistical analyses were carried
out using SPSS V.11.5.

RESULTS

Participants

We studied a total of 72 participants. Group I comprised 26
patients with Kawasaki disease, half of whom had persistent
coronary aneurysms, whereas group II comprised 24 patients
with Kawasaki disease. None had symptoms of myocardial
ischaemia and none required coronary artery interventions. All
but five of the patients with Kawasaki disease had received
intravenous immunoglobulin treatment during the acute phase
of illness and 13 were maintained on long-term oral low-dose
aspirin treatment. Group III comprised 22 age-matched
controls.

Table 1 summarises the demographic variables, systemic
blood pressure and lipid profiles of the participants. The three
groups did not differ markedly with regard to age at the time of
study, sex distribution, body mass index, systemic blood
pressure, total cholesterol level and HDL cholesterol level.
However, group I patients had higher LDL cholesterol level, as
reported previously.\(^4\)

Arterial stiffness

The carotid artery stiffness index \((p = 0.004)\) and brachioradial
PWV \((p = 0.011)\) differed significantly among the three groups.
The differences remained significant even after adjusting for
the differences in LDL cholesterol among groups. The mean
(SD) stiffness index of group I, II and III was 4.72 (1.20), 4.22
(0.64) and 3.77 (0.92), respectively. The respective mean (SD)
brachioradial PWV was 7.22 (1.67), 6.73 (1.88), and 5.77
(1.25) m/s. Post-hoc analyses showed that group I had a
significantly greater stiffness index \((p = 0.003)\) and faster
brachioradial PWV \((p = 0.009)\) than group III. Therefore, a

![Table 1: Demographic data, blood pressure and lipid profiles of participants in the three groups](https://www.archdischild.com)
dose–response relationship between the degree of coronary artery involvement and arterial stiffness indices was hence suggested.

**Carotid IMT**
The carotid IMT similarly differed significantly among the three groups ($p < 0.001$; fig 1). Post-hoc analyses showed that the mean (SD) carotid IMT of group I (0.41 (0.04) mm, $p = 0.001$) and group II (0.39 (0.04) mm, $p = 0.008$) was significantly greater than that of group III (0.36 (0.04) mm).

For the entire cohort, carotid IMT correlated positively with LDL cholesterol ($r = 0.31$, $p = 0.009$), carotid artery stiffness index ($r = 0.40$, $p = 0.001$) and brachioradial PWV ($r = 0.28$, $p = 0.016$; fig 2), but not with age, body mass index, systemic blood pressure, or HDL and total cholesterol. Multiple stepwise linear regression analysis of the entire cohort was used to identify significant correlates of carotid IMT. The dependent variables included were age, sex, body mass index, subject grouping, systolic and diastolic blood pressures, total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol, carotid artery stiffness index and brachioradial PWV. Significant correlates were subject grouping ($\beta = -0.39$, $p = 0.001$) and carotid artery stiffness index ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = 0.028$; model $R^2 = 0.29$). When only the patients (group I and II) were analysed, with addition of duration since onset of Kawasaki disease as a covariate into the multivariate model, total cholesterol level ($\beta = 0.29$, $p = 0.03$) and carotid artery stiffness index ($\beta = 0.53$, $p < 0.001$) (model $R^2 = 0.35$) were found to be significant.

**DISCUSSION**
Increase in carotid IMT has been reported in patients with Kawasaki disease and coronary artery lesions. Our study extends this finding to patients without documented coronary sequelae. Furthermore, to our knowledge, this is the first study to show a significant association between carotid IMT and systemic arterial stiffness in children after Kawasaki disease. After adjustment of the potential confounding influence of age, sex, systemic blood pressure and serum cholesterol levels, the significant correlates of carotid IMT in patients with Kawasaki disease are carotid artery stiffness index and total cholesterol level.

Carotid IMT has been regarded as a valid surrogate marker of atherosclerosis in adults and is associated with cardiovascular events. In high-risk children with obesity, hypercholesterolaemia, type 1 diabetes mellitus and a family history of premature myocardial infarction, carotid intima-media thickening has likewise been seen. In children with coronary aneurysms complicating Kawasaki disease, Noto et al reported carotid intima-media thickening, although patients without coronary artery lesions were not included in their study. A recent Japanese study, however, reported no differences in carotid IMT among patients with varying severity of coronary artery lesions and between patients and controls. Nonetheless, these findings have to be interpreted with caution as the number of patients studied in each group is too small to provide adequate statistical power, and controls were significantly older than patients. As age-dependent physiological thickening of the carotid IMT begins in childhood, a comparison of the findings with those of age-matched controls is essential.

Our finding of carotid intima-media thickening not only in patients with Kawasaki disease but also in those without coronary artery lesions is perhaps not surprising. Even in regressed coronary artery aneurysms and angiographically normal coronary arterial segments, long-term functional
abnormalities have been described. Systemic arterial endothelial dysfunction has also been shown years after Kawasaki disease, even in patients without coronary artery involvement. Fatal cases of Kawasaki disease, related to extensive fibrointimal thickening of the coronary arterial wall, occurring years after apparent resolution of vascular inflammation and in the absence of early detectable coronary artery abnormalities, have also been reported. Patients without coronary artery lesions do not, therefore, seem to be immune from the hypothesised risk of premature atherosclerosis.

Stiffening of the aorta, carotid artery and brachioradial artery have been reported in children after Kawasaki disease. Senzaki et al measured the aortic input impedance during cardiac catheterisation in patients with Kawasaki disease and found increased characteristic impedance, lower total peripheral arterial compliance and greater indices of arterial wave reflection, regardless of the persistence of coronary artery lesions. Their findings provide further evidence of central and peripheral arterial stiffening after Kawasaki disease. Although the underlying mechanisms of the disease remain speculative, arterial stiffening has been attributed to structural changes and the subsequent reparative process during the acute illness, and changes in the vascular tone secondary to endothelial dysfunction. Our group has further provided evidence of ongoing low-grade inflammation late after the acute phase of Kawasaki disease, which may have a role in increasing systemic arterial stiffness.

The finding of an association between increased carotid IMT and systemic arterial stiffness in this study is consistent with previous studies in animal models, postmortem specimens, adults with various levels of cardiovascular risk, patients with hypertension and adults with atheromatous plaques in the thoracic aorta owing to various pathologies. Results of other studies are nonetheless conflicting. The recent evidence suggesting that IMT may reflect atherosclerosis only beyond a certain level may perhaps partly explain the controversy. Alternatively, the association may not be as obvious in early changes as that in advanced atherosclerotic changes in the arterial wall. In young adults, the weak positive association becomes stronger in patients with a worse cardiovascular risk profile. The adverse cardiovascular risk profile in patients with Kawasaki disease may perhaps have some significance in this regard.

The coexistence of and association between a marker of atherosclerosis, the carotid IMT, and systemic arterial stiffness in this study may partly reflect common aetiologic factors relating to Kawasaki disease. Although these may be independent processes that reflect two separate entities of vascular damage in Kawasaki disease, several lines of evidence favour the hypothesis of a self-perpetuating process. Experimental studies in monkeys fed on an atherogenic diet, spontaneously hypercholesterolaemic rabbits, and LDL-receptor deficient hypercholesterolaemic rabbits suggest that atherosclerosis leads to stiffening of the aorta. Stiffening of the arterial wall, on the other hand, may increase intraluminal stress secondary to an increase in pulse pressure, which may predispose to vascular damage and atherosclerosis. Increased pulse pressure has indeed been shown to augment atherogenesis in primate models. It is intriguing, therefore, to find that only local carotid artery stiffness, rather than brachioradial artery stiffness, is a significant correlate of carotid IMT by multivariate analysis. The possibility of establishing a feedback loop owing to structural and functional abnormalities of the arteries in patients with Kawasaki disease may be hypothesised, although further longitudinal studies are undoubtedly needed to determine the temporal sequence of carotid intima-media thickening and arterial stiffening after Kawasaki disease.

What is already known on the topic

- Increased carotid intima-media thickness has been reported in patients with Kawasaki disease and coronary artery lesions.
- Central and peripheral arterial stiffening occurs in children after Kawasaki disease.

What this study adds

- Carotid intima-media thickness (IMT) is increased even in patients with Kawasaki disease without coronary sequelae.
- A significant association is found between carotid IMT and systemic arterial stiffening in children after Kawasaki disease.

Even in patients without coronary artery lesions, a proatherogenic lipid profile, endothelial dysfunction, systemic arterial stiffening and increased carotid IMT have been found. Ongoing counselling on cardiovascular risk factor reduction is therefore important. Periodic assessment of the cardiovascular risk factors every 3–5 years has been suggested for this group of patients with Kawasaki disease in the recently revised American Heart Association recommendations. Whether strategies to reduce arterial stiffness and ways to improve endothelial function would benefit patients with Kawasaki disease in the long term are topics for further research.

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Competing interests: None declared.

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Carotid IMT and arterial stiffness


