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ARTICLE *in* SCHIZOPHRENIA RESEARCH · OCTOBER 2014

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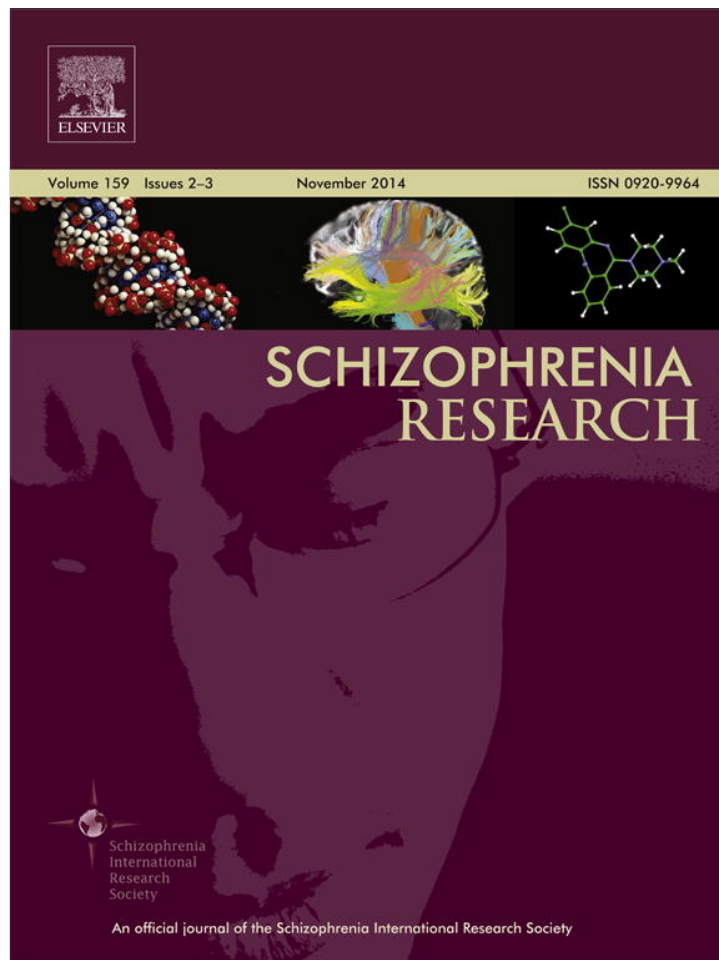
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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Schizophrenia Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/schres

Low Vitamin D levels predict clinical features of schizophrenia



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 May 2014

Received in revised form 22 August 2014

Accepted 26 August 2014

Available online 11 October 2014

Keywords:

Schizophrenia

Vitamin D

Hypovitaminosis D

Telomere length

Aggression

Negative symptoms

ABSTRACT

Vitamin D plays crucial roles in neuroprotection and neurodevelopment, and low levels are commonly associated with schizophrenia. We considered if the association was spurious or causal by examining the association of Vitamin D with Leukocyte Telomere Length (LTL), a marker of cellular aging. Vitamin D levels in 22 well-characterized schizophrenia cases were examined with respect to symptoms, cognition, and functioning. LTL was assessed using quantitative polymerase chain reaction (qPCR). The results showed that 91% (20) had deficient or insufficient Vitamin D levels, which were associated with excitement and grandiosity, social anhedonia, and poverty of speech. Sex-specific analyses showed strong associations of hypovitaminosis D to negative symptoms and decreased premorbid adjustment in males, and to lesser hallucinations and emotional withdrawal, but increased anti-social aggression in females. In females LTL was furthermore associated with Vitamin D levels. This study demonstrates a relationship of low vitamin D levels with increased cellular aging in females. It is also the first study to demonstrate potential sex-specific profiles among schizophrenia cases with hypovitaminosis.

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1. Introduction

An estimated one billion individuals worldwide have classifiable Vitamin D deficiency (serum levels less than 25–50 nmol/L) or insufficiency (<75 nmol/L) (Holick, 2007). Within the central nervous system, Vitamin D is involved in neurotransmitter synthesis, neuroprotection from injury and inflammation, regulation of circadian rhythms and sleep, and key roles in neurodevelopment (Eyles et al., 2013). Psychiatric and neurological diseases with potential connections to Vitamin D deficiency (hypovitaminosis D) include schizophrenia, autism, Parkinson's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, and multiple sclerosis (Deluca et al., 2013).

Ties between Vitamin D and schizophrenia include a “season-of-birth effect” in which a greater proportion of individuals with schizophrenia are born in late winter and early spring and thus exposed to lower levels of Vitamin D in their prenatal and perinatal periods. There is also an increased incidence and prevalence of schizophrenia

at latitudes farther from the equator (Deluca et al., 2013). Individuals with darker skin are particularly more vulnerable to schizophrenia when they live at higher latitudes (Kinney et al., 2009).

The disease process of schizophrenia is associated with activation of cell-mediated and inflammatory pathways. Strong associations between schizophrenia and smoking, obesity, sleep disorders, and poor oral health may further augment this inflammation (Berk et al., 2013). Leukocyte Telomere length (LTL) is a marker of oxidative stresses that shorten telomere length to eventually trigger earlier cell senescence and apoptosis (von Zglinicki, 2002; Epel et al., 2004). As Vitamin D has documented modulatory effects on reduction of oxidative stress and inflammation (Jain et al., 2013), the relationship of Vitamin D to telomere length, particularly in schizophrenia, is an important avenue to pursue as a biomarker for neuroprotection that may have therapeutic implications. A significant relationship between vitamin D and LTL would suggest that the association is not simply spurious, resulting from decreased outside activity, but that it could play a role in pathogenesis.

This pilot study explored the association between Vitamin D levels and illness features in schizophrenia cases, including sex-stratified analyses. We hypothesized that in individuals with schizophrenia, Vitamin D levels would be in the deficient range, inversely correlate to the severity of symptoms, and be associated with telomere length.

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2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Patients ($N = 22$, males = 59.1%) with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder were recruited from inpatient and outpatient research centers of Bellevue Hospital Psychiatric services, with informed consent obtained. All cases were clinically stable for at least one month with no changes in medication. Mental health professionals performed all procedures, diagnostic interviews, and assessments of symptoms and functioning. The Diagnostic Interview for Genetic studies (DIGS) (Nurnberger et al., 1994) was used to assess psychiatric diagnoses, as well as to obtain demographic information about sex, age, education, duration of illness, and current and past Global Assessment of Symptoms (GAS).

2.2. Measures

Vitamin D measurements were determined at the NYU Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI) blind to subject classification. The Premorbid Adjustment Scale (PAS) assessed social accessibility, peer relationships, ability to function outside the family, education, and capacity to form socio-sexual ties across four periods of patient lives (Cannon-Spoor et al., 1982). Verbal, physical, and anti-social aggression was measured with The Life History of Aggression (LHA) (Brown et al., 1979) rating instrument, modified by Coccaro et al. (1997). Current (state) symptoms were assessed with the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS) (Kay et al., 1987), and trait symptoms were measured using the Schedule for the Deficit Syndrome (SDS) (Kirkpatrick et al., 1989). Telomere length was assayed using qPCR, as recently reported (Malaspina et al., 2014).

2.3. Statistics

Descriptive statistics and distributions of all measures, whether continuous or categorical, were examined along with measures of non-normal distribution, outliers, and skewness. Cross-tabulations with chi-square statistics were used to examine the categorical variables. All measures and scales were examined for sex differences among the patients using the t -test statistic. Correlation coefficients were calculated among Vitamin D levels, the aforementioned measurements, and continuous LTL lengths for the entire sample and then in sex stratified analyses.

3. Results

3.1. The sample

The mean Vitamin D level for individuals with schizophrenia was 17.3 ± 8.87 (females vs. males: 18.4 ± 7.5 vs. 16.5 ± 9.9 , ANCOVA [age as covariate] $F = 0.09$, $p = .770$), classified as deficient, and levels and status did not differ significantly by sex (Table 1). PANSS and SDS also did not differ by sex, other than an excess of certain PANSS negative symptoms in males, including emotional withdrawal ($t = 2.76$, $p = .013$) active social avoidance ($t = 2.32$, $p = .040$), and diminished sense of purpose ($t = 2.64$, $p = .032$).

3.2. Vitamin D levels and illness features

Vitamin D levels were unrelated to age, ethnicity, parental ages, or mood symptoms. Vitamin D levels were significantly inversely associated with PANSS positive symptoms of excitement ($r = -.447$, $n = 20$, $p = .048$) and grandiosity ($r = -.466$, $n = 20$, $p = .038$), as well as an increased SDS poverty of speech ($r = .614$, $n = 12$, $p = .037$). Among males with schizophrenia, low Vitamin D levels predicted a greater PANSS negative symptom total ($r = -.680$, $n = 11$, $p = .021$), and worse premorbid adjustment ($r = .928$, $n = 6$, $p = .008$). Among females with schizophrenia, those with decreased levels of Vitamin D had less hallucinations ($r = .878$, $n = 9$, $p = .002$) and less emotional withdrawal ($r = .704$, $n = 9$, $p = .034$), but showed increased anti-social aggression ($r = -.772$, $n = 9$, $p = .015$). Additionally, among females, increased Vitamin D was associated with an increased telomere length ($r = .729$, $n = 9$, $p = .029$).

4. Discussion

It was of note that 20 of the 22 patients with schizophrenia had Vitamin D levels in the deficient or insufficient range. This deficit is consistent with a recent mini meta-analysis showing lower Vitamin D levels in individuals with psychotic disorders, particularly schizophrenia, as compared to healthy controls (Belvederi Murri et al., 2013). The association between low Vitamin D and neuropsychiatric illness is also observed in multiple sclerosis and major depression (Eyles et al., 2013). Preliminary studies have demonstrated significant improvement in depressive symptomatology following Vitamin D administration (Zanetidou et al., 2011; Mozaffari-Khosravi et al., 2013), and Vitamin D levels in the early course of multiple sclerosis have been found to be strongly predictive of disease progression, with increased Vitamin D levels protective of new lesions and disability (Ascherio et al., 2014).

Table 1
Demographic measures, Vitamin D level, leukocyte telomere length (LTL), PANSS five symptom factors, and premorbid adjustment compared between male and female schizophrenia patients. Test statistics: t -test and ANCOVA.

	Males		Females		t-test	p
	Mean	sd	Mean	sd		
	N = 13		N = 9			
Current age	44.3	(7.2)	41.9	(9.6)	0.68	.501
Onset age	20.6	(8.3)	19.0	(3.7)	0.54	.593
Education (years)	11.2	(3.8)	12.8	(2.9)	1.08	.294
Vitamin d	16.5	(9.9)	18.4	(7.5)	$F[1/19] = 0.09$, $p = .770$	Age is co-varied
	N = 9		N = 9			
Ltl	1.94	(.427)	1.60	(.527)	1.52	.149
Positive	10.9	(5.8)	10.1	(4.0)	0.35	.729
Negative	15.7	(3.1)	14.8	(4.9)	0.53	.604
Dysthymia	13.8	(6.1)	11.0	(3.6)	1.22	.238
Activation	8.8	(1.8)	8.2	(3.5)	0.50	.627
Autistic preoccupation	10.8	(3.3)	9.0	(2.9)	1.29	.214
	N = 6		N = 3			
Premorbid adjustment	.35	(.28)	.37	(.123)	0.12	.909

Low Vitamin D in males with schizophrenia was associated with increased overall negative symptoms and decreased premorbid adjustment. A recent study also found an association between increased negative symptom severity and low Vitamin D levels among 20 individuals with schizophrenia (Graham et al., in press); together, our findings suggest that, especially in males, low Vitamin D may be one of the factors responsible for the burden of increased negative symptoms.

Among females, decreased Vitamin D was associated with lesser hallucinatory behavior and emotional withdrawal, but did predict higher anti-social aggression. Increased aggression is seen among women with schizophrenia, though is not a ubiquitous finding. In a study of admitted patients with schizophrenia, 53% of women were noted to exhibit aggressive behavior, compared to 75% of men (Steinert et al., 1999). Should further analyses corroborate this correlation, Vitamin D may be considered as a potential therapy in women who present with aggressive manifestations of schizophrenia.

Importantly, the associations of Vitamin D with illness features of the disease, particularly in females, do not appear to be spurious, as Vitamin D levels were significantly correlated with LTL in female cases. A recent analysis demonstrated increased LTL in schizophrenia (Nieratschker et al., 2013), and our own study showed that the increase was explained by a family history of schizophrenia and, in male cases, later paternal age (Malaspina et al., 2014). Despite the evidence for lengthened LTL in some cases with the disease, it is compelling to note that shortening of LTL might occur in response to decreased vitamin D. This is consistent with literature showing shorter LTL in other cases with severe, treatment-refractory schizophrenia (Kao et al., 2008; Yu et al., 2008; Fernandez-Egea et al., 2009). A robust link between increased Vitamin D concentration and longer LTL was also shown in a large population-based cohort of female twins (Richards et al., 2007). Vitamin D supplementation, particularly in women with schizophrenia, may provide valuable neuroprotective effects as a buffer of oxidative stress.

This is the first study to demonstrate potential sex-specific symptom and feature profiles among individuals with schizophrenia and hypovitaminosis D, in addition to a relationship of low Vitamin D with more rapid cellular aging. A major limitation of this study was the lack of comparison of our findings to a matched control population. Additionally, the sample size for this study remained rather small, at 22 individuals. However, taken on its own, this data from a cohort of individuals rigorously diagnosed with schizophrenia has demonstrated mean decreased Vitamin D levels from what is considered optimal for the general population, as well as significant differences between sex and symptomatology with respect to hypovitaminosis D. Additional lifestyle factors including diet and outdoor activity level were not assessed in this exploratory analysis, and likely interact with both mental illness and levels of vitamin D. Further studies should be conducted with larger samples to investigate these preliminary findings and to advance toward an ultimate goal of intervention recommendation.

Role of the funding source

This research was supported by RC1MH088843-02 and the NYU CTSa grant UL1TR000038 from the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS), NIH.

Contributors

Authors Kristina Cieslak and Dolores Malaspina were responsible for study conception and design. Daniel Antonius, Julie Walsh-Messinger, Roberta Draxler, Mary Rosedale, Nicole Aujero, David Keefe, Deborah Goetz, and Dolores Malaspina performed data collection and management. Kristina Cieslak, Jordyn Feingold, Raymond Goetz, and Dolores Malaspina were responsible for analysis and interpretation of data. Drafting of the manuscript was completed by Kristina Cieslak, Jordyn Feingold, and Dolores Malaspina. All authors were responsible for revising the manuscript critically for important intellectual content and final approval.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgments

None.

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