Minimal Effect but No Cure for Alzheimer's with Antidiabetic Drugs

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Abstract

In this mini-review the available evidence for a favorable effect of antidiabetic drugs in Alzheimer's disease (AD) is discussed. Beneficial effects are mostly seen in animal studies. Clinical studies are small, have many methodological flaws and show inconsistent results Oxidative stress inflammation, insulin resistance, advanced glycation end-products and obesity all play a pivotal role. However research relies heavily on the amyloid hypothesis. It is obvious that antidiabetic drugs are not the new cure after the failure of all amyloid-beta trials in the last decades. Dementia risks seem similar for type 2 and type1 diabetes but limited research has been performed in type 1 diabetes. Hypoglycemic episodes are not the culprit indumenta and diabetes. Further research of Alzheimer's in type 1 DM is hampered by the low prevalence and the mixed nature of dementia in DM type 1.

Keywords: Antidiabetic; Oxidative stress; Insulin resistance; Glycation; Pivotal role; Amyloid hypothesis; Amyloid-beta

Abbreviations: AD: Alzheimer's Disease; IDE: Insulin Degrading Enzyme; ADDLs: Amyloid beta-Derived Diffusible Ligands; BBB: Blood Brain Barrier; GLUTs: Glucose Transporters; AGEs: Advanced Glycation End products; NFTs: Neurofibrillary Tangles; ROS: Reactive Oxygen Species; TNF: Tumor Necrosis Factor; MCI: Mild Cognitive Impairment; CRM: Caloric Restriction Mimetic; AMPK: Adenosine Mono Phosphate Kinase; PPAR: Peroxisome Proliferator Activated Receptor.

Introduction

As the population ages, dementia grows as a public health problem. In the absence of a cure primary prevention will have the largest effect on the reduction of dementia occurrence [1-10]. Diabetes mellitus is an established risk factor for dementia. Patients with diabetes have an increased risk for any dementia [2-5]. The exact mechanism of cognitive impairment in diabetic patient remains unknown. The main contributors to diabetes-associated cognitive decline include hyperglycemia decreased insulin secretion, obesity increased oxidative stress and inflammation. In addition patients with diabetes often have other co-morbidities such as high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease that may contribute to the development of dementia [4-8].

Several studies have examined the association of different antidiabetic medications and cognitive function as well in Alzheimer as in Parkinson's disease [9-11]. Central nervous insulin resistance in combination with inflammation and oxidative stress seem to contribute to the shared pathophysiological link. In this mini-review the

evidence on the mechanisms of action of antidiabetic drugs and their potential uses in Alzheimer's disease (AD) is discussed. The beneficial effects of antidiabetic drugs on cognition in Parkinson' disease is beyond the scope of this mini-review [10].

Diabetes and Alzheimer's Disease (AD)

Insulin signaling

Hyperinsulinemia and insulin resistance are two of the hallmarks of type2 DM, which have been shown to be important risk factors for elderly cognitive decline [12]. Indeed while an acute administration of insulin may improve memory domains dysfunctions in delayed memory processes can result from chronic administration [4,13]. Insulin signaling induces the brain to take up glucose and to produce insulin- degrading enzyme (IDE) in order to reduce its level. IDE is involved in both insulin and amyloid-beta (Abeta) degradation leading to amyloid accumulation [14]. Moreover in diabetes alteration of insulin signaling determines less IDE production resulting in reduction of Abeta (Amyloid-beta) degradation. This process definitely leads to abnormal beta accumulation. Therefore increasing insulin signaling in the brain might reduce Abeta accumulation in the brain. Insulin has also been reported to enhance Abeta clearance from the brain [15]. Furthermore soluble Abeta oligomers known as amyloid beta-derived diffusible ligands (ADDLs), contribute to insulin resistance in AD by modifying synapse confirmation. This altered shape confirmation is responsible for reduced affinity of synaptic insulin receptor for its ligand [13].

It is not surprising that a recent hypothesis suggested AD might be a neuro-endocrine disorder a so called "type 3 diabetes" [16,17]. Impaired insulin signaling has been critically involved in the development of both type2 DM and AD. However other abnormalities common to both pathologies include glucose dysmetabolism mitochondrial dysfunction, oxidative stress or deposition of amyloidogenic proteins [18].

Advanced glycation end products (AGEs)

Under physiological conditions glucose metabolism is critical for proper brain function and its neuronal connections. As neurons are unable to store and synthesize glucose, this is transported across the blood-brain barrier (BBB) via glucose transporters (GLUTs) with GLUT-1, GLUT-3 and GLUT-4 constituting the most abundant isoforms [19]. However under chronic glucose dysmetabolism as in type2 DM, brain damaging effects may arise with the formation and accumulation of advanced glycation end-products (AGEs) constituting one of the most deleterious ones [20]. AGEs are formed by a

sequence of events originally identified as the end products of the Maillard reaction during which reducing sugars (e.g. glucose and fructose) react with amino groups from proteins that become auto-oxidized and form cross-linked complexes and unstable compounds [17]. Besides their massive formation in diabetic patients AGEs were also found in retinal vessels peripheral nerves, kidneys and CNS of aged patients without DM [21]. Moreover the extent of Abeta peptide glycation by AGEs has been correlated with its aggregation into senile plaques as well as with tau protein hyperphosphorylation and the subsequent formation of neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) ultimately leading to the abnormal accumulation of both AD neuropathological hallmarks [17,18].

AGEs may also react with free radicals promoting oxidative damage and further cellular injury [22]. Therefore as type2 DM exacerbates the production of such deleterious molecules it is not surprising that AGEs production and eventually the vicious cycle of oxidative stress may create another putative biochemical link between type 2 DM and increased risk of AD.

Oxidative stress

Regarding oxidative stress mitochondria are one of the major sources and targets of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and have been increasingly demonstrated to have a pivotal role in AD and diabetes pathogenesis [23]. They are primarily responsible for several crucial cellular processes being also the main coordinators of energy metabolism by generating over 90% of cellular ATP [18]. Conversely given the mitochondria's high susceptibility to oxidative stress-mediated injury together with the neurons extreme sensitivity to alterations in their mitochondrial pool it is acceptable that the mitochondrial functional impairment can be correlated with AD and diabetes [24,25]. Over production of ROS and the general increase in oxidative stress are characteristic of DM. Oxidized protein accumulation has also been demonstrated in the hippocampus frontal and temporal lobes of mild cognitive impairment patients, suggesting an early impact of oxidative damage in AD development [24].

Inflammation

Both type2 DM and AD are largely related to inflammatory processes. Insulin resistance is associated with elevated levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as C-reactive protein tumor necrosis factor -alpha (TNF-alpha) interleukins (IL-1) and IL-6 [26]. All these cytokines are considered an indirect sign of the immunological dysfunction that leads to insulin resistance [27]. Likewise IL-6 and C-reactive protein are connected to Abeta plaque deposition and progression and on the other side a reduced AD incidence has been reported in

patients under chronic non-steroidal anti-inflammatory therapy [28]. Another relevant aspect is represented by the pro-inflammatory role of astrocytes and microglia surrounding Abeta plaques that are responsible of neuronal irreversible damage as a consequence of complement activation [29]. Interestingly insulin seems to have anti-inflammatory effects directly suppressing pro-inflammatory cytokines and inducing anti-inflammatory mediators as demonstrated in both preclinical and clinical studies [30].

Central obesity

Central obesity may result in the metabolic syndrome a well known risk factor for the development of insulin resistance. The role of obesity in AD has been explored in many studies and although the underlying mechanisms of this intervention are not yet known AD risk is correlated with insulin resistance, oxidative stress, AGEs and hyperglycemia [31]. Epidemiological data suggest that insulin resistance is associated with increased risk of cognitive impairment [32]. And PET studies have demonstrated that greater insulin resistance is associated with an AD-like pattern of reduced cerebral glucose metabolism [33]. Thus it is not surprising that insulin could be an effective treatment for AD by increasing neuronal glucose uptake and cellular ATP levels [34].

Antidiabetic Drugs and Alzheimer's Disease (AD)

Insulin

Insulin resistance plays a crucial role in the development and progression of AD [35,36]. Several landmark studies have revealed reduced brain insulin receptor sensitivity and insulin expression in post-mortem AD [37-39]. In addition a recent meta-analysis of longitudinal population studies (n=1.746.777) revealed that the risk of AD is some 50% higher in diabetics as compared to the general population [40]. Extensive research has been performed to the specific pathways underlying this connection [41-44]. So there is enough indirect evidence to support insulin resistance as a primary feature of AD.

Animal studies have shown that insulin can be transferred along olfactory and trigeminal pathways by the intranasal route without compromising its biological properties [45-48]. For that reason intranasal insulin has been mostly studied in cognition research. The effects of acute and long-term administration of intranasal insulin on cognition were studied in young healthy adults. A single dose of nasal insulin was already sufficient to improve cognitive performance [49]. Novak et al. [50] showed that a single dose of intranasal insulin improved visiospatial

memory and verbal fluency functions. If intranasal insulin influences tau metabolism and Abeta peptides turnover in healthy individuals is not known.

Studies on the plasma biomarker A beta42 are conflicting [51,52]. Therefore caution is needed to conclude that reduced plasma concentrations of Abeta 42 after intranasal insulin administration provide evidence for the putative neuroprotective effects of nasal insulin. Clinical trials for intranasal insulin in patients with amnestic MCI (mild cognitive impairment) and AD mostly show that both acute and chronic administration of various insulin formulations improve several aspects of cognition as verbal memory, memory savings and selective attention. There are unexplained APOE-related treatment differences in these trials as well as for results regarding AD biomarkers [53-59].

Never the less these studies indicate that AD is hallmarked by impaired brain insulin signaling. They also show that intranasal insulin reaches physiological concentrations in the brain. Intranasal insulin improves AD symptomatology but gender, genotype and formulation modify patient response. However most studies are small with less than 50 participants.

Metformin

The evidence for its use in AD is controversial. Preclinical data suggest that orally administered Metformin rapidly crosses the BBB and accumulates in different CNS regions [60]. In vitro studies showed that Metformin can resensitize insulin signaling and prevent the molecular and pathological changes observed in AD neurons [61]. Metformin reduced tau phosporylation in tau transgenic mice which is also a hallmark of AD [62]. The exact mechanisms of action of Metformin are not fully understood. It is also unsure what levels of Metformin are needed and in which brain region. Furthermore the bioavailability is poor (40-60%) and therefore pro-drug approaches have been tried to improve its oral absorption [63-65].

Metformin has been associated with reduced rates of dementia [66,67]. Metformin is also known as a caloric restriction mimetic (CRM) as its effect on AMPK (adenosinemono phosphate-kinase), which reduces gluconeogenesis in the live rafter activation, is similar to that produced by caloric restriction. Both caloric restriction and Metformin have been found to slow the aging process in animals and extend life span [68-70]. In addition caloric restriction has been shown to improve memory in older people [71]. Two clinical trials (MILES NCT02432287 and TAME are underway to investigate the effect of Metformin on aging and cognition in humans.

They should show if Metformin is beneficial as an effective prophylactic or as an early intervention for AD in older people who do not have diabetes.

However some evidence suggests that metformin can be detrimental to the cognitive health of older people with diabetes with one study finding an increased rate of AD and another finding lower cognitive function [72,73]. The study that identified lower cognitive function suggested that this could be due to vitamin B12 deficiency induced by Metformin [74,75]. The question if Metformin protects or harms cognitive health in older people has been unresolved until now [76].

Thiazolidinediones

These drugs are agonists of the peroxisome proliferator-activated-receptor-gamma (PPAR-gamma) [77]. Currently only pioglitazone is approved in DM therapy. Rosiglitazone has been withdrawn from the market due to a high incidence of cardiovascular events. Both drugs have been tested as potential treatment in AD with inconclusive results. PPAR-gamma has shown an increased expression in AD temporal cortex compared to controls [78]. In preclinical studies PPAR-gamma agonists have been shown to ameliorate AD-related pathology by reducing the expression of inflammatory genes and decreasing amyloid plaques [79].

Galimberti and Scarpine performed a literature search for pioglitazone and AD trials. A phase 2 study in AD showed that pioglitazone is safe and well tolerated. So far two large phase 3 trials are ongoing but there are no preliminary results yet on a possible beneficial effect on cognition in patients with AD [80]. Heneka et al. [81] analyzed the data of a cohort (n=145.928) using pioglitazone and looked at the association of pioglitazone and the incidence of dementia. All subjects were > 60 years. Long-term pioglitazone use was associated with a lower dementia incidence. Relative to non-diabetics the cumulative long-term use of pioglitazone reduced the dementia risk by 47% (RR=0,53;p=0.029). If diabetic patients used pioglitazone <8 quarters the dementia risk was comparable to nondiabetics (RR=1,16; p=0,317) and diabetics without pioglitazone treatment had a 23% increase in dementia risk (RR=1,23;p<0,001). They concluded that prospective trials are needed to evaluate a possible neuroprotective effect.

GLP-1 receptor agonists

GLP-1(glucagon like peptide- 1) seems to have favorable effects within the CNS, where activation of GLP-1 receptors protects against apoptosis. Several preclinical studies in transgenic mice and rats showed favorable results [82,83]. Gejl *et al.* [84] performed a 6-month RCT with liraglutide in AD patients (n=38) and measured cerebral glucose metabolism as a parameter of AD progression. They concluded that in AD patients with longstanding disease 26 weeks of liraglutide treatment prevented the expected decline in cerebral glucose metabolism. They found no significant differences for this parameter between the liraglutide and the placebo group. A larger trial with liraglutide (ELAD) is ongoing and a trial with exanatide (n=60) showed some beneficial effects in motor symptoms in Parkinson patients treated for 60 months [10].

Type 1 DM and dementia

There has been a paucity of work in type 1diabetes and dementia because only recently have they been living longer and living long enough to be at risk for an age-related neurocognitive dysfunction. Whitmer et al. [85] evaluated dementia risk in older people with type 1 diabetes. They followed the health histories of 490. 344 people in the Kaiser Permanente Health system during 12 years. The patients were older than 60 with no prior dementia. The investigators identified 334 patients with type 1 diabetes n that group and 53 (6,5%) of these patients received diagnosis of dementia.

Patients in late life have an approximately increased risk of dementia compared with patients who do not have dementia. The risk appears similar to that for those with type 2 DM [85]. With a prevalence of 5% -10% type 1 DM is a rare disease for studying dementia in diabetes compared to type2 diabetes. Patients with type 1 DM are three times more likely to have had hypoglycemic episodes than type 2 DM patents [86]. Both hyperglycemic and hypoglycemic events increased dementia risk (139% Vs 47%)-(88). So hypoglycemiceisodes are not the culprit. Patients with type 1 DM have more micro vascular risk factors than those with type 2 DM and have less adiposity and concomitant insulin resistance. In contrast patients with type 2 DM are more likely to have macro vascular risk factors such as end-stage renal disease or retinopathy and or a relatively high risk for stroke. Dementia in type 1 DM will be mostly mixed of nature, a combination of cerebrovascular disease and Alzheimer's [87]. This will complicate the study of Alzheimer's in type 1 DM due to the low prevalence in type 1 DM.

Conclusion

It may be obvious from this mini-review that following the failure of all Alzheimer amyloid trials antidiabetic drugs will not be the new cure for AD. Favorable results are usually present in animal studies, predominantly in transgenic mice a mankind created model. It is always

easier to fix a problem you created yourself. Clinical studies with antidiabetic drugs are small have many methodological flaws and show inconsistent and unexplained results probably related to differences in genotype gender and differences in drug formulations.

Research on antidiabetic drug in AD also relies heavily on the amyloid-beta-tau hypothesis. However it may be concluded that we don't understand this disease [88]. In an editorial in the New England Journal of Medicine Murphy wrote "the field is clearly in need of innovative ideas and we are very well be nearing the end of the amyloid hypothesis rope" [89].

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