April 2019

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Tariq Moatter
Aga Khan University, tariq.moatter@aku.edu

Aysha Habib Khan
Aga Khan University, aysha.habib@aku.edu

Lena Jafri
Aga Khan University, lena.jafri@aku.edu

Areeba Siddiqui
Aga Khan University

Ghazala Naureen
Aga Khan University

See next page for additional authors

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Available at: https://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_fhs_mc_pathol_microbiol/1169
Authors
Tariq Moatter, Aysha Habib Khan, Lena Jafri, Areeba Siddiqui, Ghazala Naureen, and Howard Morris

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INTRODUCTION

The production of vitamin D in the skin is a two-step process. Ultraviolet B component of sunlight breaks down B ring of 7-dehydrocholesterol forming pre-vitamin D, which then isomerises to vitamin D in a thermo sensitive process. The other three main steps in vitamin D metabolism including 25 hydroxylation, 1, and 24-hydroxylation are regulated by cytochrome P450 mixed-function oxidases CYP27A1 and CYP2R1 for 25 hydroxylase, CYP27B1, and CYP24A1 for 1 alpha and 24 alpha-hydroxylase enzymes, respectively.

Vitamin D binding protein (DBP) is a product of the group-specific component of DBP (GC gene), which is located on chromosome 4. It performs the transport of vitamin D to target tissues. The DBP-bound vitamin is relatively unavailable to target tissues; thus, level or change in the affinity of DBP could lead to change in vitamin D bioactivity, resulting in differences in the functional status of vitamin D between individuals having same 25(OH)D concentrations. This variation has been linked to alteration in bone mineral density (BMD) in several populations. However, the precise role of DBP in vitamin D actions is still incompletely understood.

Polymorphisms in the GC Gene for Vitamin D Binding Protein and Their Association with Vitamin D and Bone Mass in Young Adults

Aysha Habib Khan1, Lena Jafri1, Areeba Siddiqui1, Ghazala Naureen1, Howard Morris2 and Tariq Moatter1

ABSTRACT

Objective: To identify DBP gene rs4588 and rs7041 polymorphisms and associate with participants' serum 25(OH)D and BMD levels.

Study Design: Cross-sectional descriptive study design.

Place and Duration of Study: Section of Chemical Pathology and Molecular Pathology, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, The Aga Khan University, Karachi, from July 2014 to September 2015.

Methodology: Blood samples from 98 young adults, out of 101 samples collected, were genotyped for GC rs4588 and rs7041 polymorphisms by polymerase chain reaction-based restriction fragment length polymorphism assay. Questionnaires were administered to obtain information on demographics and anthropometric characteristics, BMD was assessed with heel ultrasound and 25(OH)D was measured using a Chemiluminescence immunoassay.

Results: High prevalence of vitamin D deficiency was noted in the study population n=87 (86.1%) having median (IQR) 25(OH)D levels of 14.9 (20.9) ng/ml, in males and 12.1 (51.8) ng/ml in females. The C/C genotype of SNP rs4588 had the highest proportion n=50 (51%), whereas for rs7041 genotype G/T was most frequently observed n=53 (54%) in subjects. Higest 25(OH)D levels were observed within the homozygous genotypes C/C median 25(OH)D 14.0 (49.6) and G/G (median 25(OH)D 14.9 (37.1) ng/ml. Statistically significant relationship was noted between rs7041 genotype G/T and BMD (p 0.037).

Conclusion: Hypovitaminosis D was frequently found in young adults. Furthermore, G/T variant of rs7041 polymorphism was associated with lower 25(OH)D serum levels.

Key Words: Vitamin D deficiency, Single nucleotide polymorphism, GC gene, BMD, 25(OH)D, Pakistani population, Vitamin D binding protein, PCR, Genotype, Allele.
Iqbal et al. did not find any association between vitamin D levels and VDBP genotypes surveyed in the pregnant women and neonates of urban and rural areas in Pakistan. In another study, an association was found between GC 1-2 genotype of VDBP gene and risk to T2DM in a Pakistani population, while hypovitaminosis D appeared not to have any relationship with T2DM. So far, no study in Pakistan has been conducted on GC; gene polymorphisms in normal healthy individuals. This study was conducted to explore association between two non-synonymous SNPs in GC gene, specifically rs4588 and rs7041 with 25(OH)D and BMD in healthy Pakistani young adults.

**METHODOLOGY**

A cross-sectional descriptive study was conducted at the Chemical Pathology Section, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, The Aga Khan University (AKU), Karachi, Pakistan, between July 2014 and September 2015. The study was reviewed and approved by the Institution’s Ethical Review Committee (ERC approval number: 2155-Path-ERC-12). Each participant was allotted an identifying serial number to maintain confidentiality.

Apparently 101 healthy students, enrolled at the Medical College of AKU, were invited to participate in this study and a written informed consent was obtained. Inclusion criteria included all those students who were not on any calcium and vitamin D supplements for the last six months. Those individuals who took vitamin D injection or had remarkable changes in weight or diet in the last six months or any disease / metabolic disorder that may affect their vitamin D levels, were excluded from study. Socio-demographic information (age, sex and ethnicity) and lifestyle factors were collected through interviewer administered questionnaire. Anthropometric characteristics (height, weight, and waist circumference), body mass index (BMI) and bone mass were also measured.

A 7-day camp was set up for phlebotomy and for determination of BMD by heel ultrasound. Blood samples for 25(OH)D measurements were drawn in gel separation tubes and centrifuged. Aliquot of serum were prepared, labelled with the participant’s serial number and immediately stored at -20°C until analysis.

Ultrasound Bone Densitometer Sonost-3000 by Osteosys Belgium East Flanders was used for measuring BMD. This device is an ultrasound bone densitometer which has ±0.2 (T-score) precision error.

Serum 25(OH)D levels was measured by ADVIA Centaur vitamin D total assay which is a direct competitive chemiluminescence immunoassay that is standardised to the ID-LC/MS/MS 25(OH)D Reference Measurement Procedure of the Vitamin D Standardisation Programme. Each run included three controls with high, low and normal concentration of 25(OH)D provided by the manufacturer. Assay’s lower and upper detection limits were 4.2 ng/ml and 150 ng/ml, respectively and its CV ranged between 4.2 and 11.9%.

Genomic DNA was extracted from WBC using Promega DNA isolation kit [Madison, WI, USA]. Purified DNA was stored at -20°C for further processing. The SNPs rs4588 and rs7041 were analysed by PCR-RFLP using a published protocol (12). PCR reactions were subjected to 40 cycles of denaturation (95°C for 30 s), annealing (60°C for 40 s) and elongation (72°C for 30 s) using a BioRad Techne 100 thermal cycler. Restriction enzymes Haelll and Btgl (New England Biolabs, Hitchin, UK) were used for the identification of rs7041 (T/G) and rs4588(C/A) alleles, respectively. Restriction mix consisted of 15 μl PCR product, 3 μl of corresponding buffer, 0.2 μl BSA, 11.3 μl nuclease-free water and 5 units of specific enzyme, which was incubated overnight in a water bath at 37°C. Restriction products were then analysed by 3% agarose gel electrophoresis after staining with ethidium bromide. All assays were examined with appropriate controls. Statistical analysis was done using SPSS version 21. For categorical variables, descriptive statistics such as alleles and genotypes frequencies with percentages and for quantitative data mean ±SD were performed. After testing for normality distribution using Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, data of vitamin D was found skewed and; hence, medians were reported. Vitamin D deficiency was defined as <20 ng/mL and sufficiency or optimal levels as >20 ng/mL. Genomic DNA was analysed for rs4588 and rs7041 as described earlier. The SNPs rs4588 (p=0.81) and rs7041 (p=0.85) did not find any association between vitamin D levels and VDBP genotypes surveyed in the pregnant women and neonates of urban and rural areas in Pakistan. In another study, an association was found between GC 1-2 genotype of VDBP gene and risk to T2DM in a Pakistani population, while hypovitaminosis D appeared not to have any relationship with T2DM. So far, no study in Pakistan has been conducted on GC; gene polymorphisms in normal healthy individuals. This study was conducted to explore association between two non-synonymous SNPs in GC gene, specifically rs4588 and rs7041 with 25(OH)D and BMD in healthy Pakistani young adults.

**RESULTS**

Table I elaborates biochemical parameters of 101 medical students enrolled in the study. Median age was 20 (7) years. Forty-two students (41.6%) and 59 (58.44%) were males and females, respectively. Eighty-seven students (86.1%) were vitamin D deficient, of which 49 (48.5%) were males while 38 (37.7%) were females. Sufficient 25(OH)D levels were present in seven (6.9%) medical students only. Notably, all those classified as having sufficient 25(OH)D levels were females. Median 25(OH)D levels of males [14.9 (20.9) ng/ml] and females [12.1 (51.8) ng/ml] were statistically different (p = 0.03). DNAs of three students were contaminated; hence, excluded from genotype analysis. The rs4588 (p=0.81)
and rs7041 (p=0.54) genotypes were in Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium. Within the rs4588; C/C genotype was the most frequently detected 51% (n=50), followed by A/C 42% (n=41) and A/A genotype 7% (n=7). The C allele constituted 72% (n=141) of the total allele count; whereas, the remaining 28% (n=55) were A allele. The spectrum of rs7041 genotypes consisted of heterozygous G/T 54% (n=55); the homozygous G/G and T/T were 22% (n=22) and 23% (n=23), respectively with distribution for G and T alleles of 97 (49.4%) and 99 (48.5%)。

Table II: Distribution of 25(OH)D levels and bone mass according to rs4588 and rs7041 genotypes in young adults (n=98).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SNP-Genotype (n)</th>
<th>25(OH)D levels (ng/mL)</th>
<th>Bone mass (g/cm²)</th>
<th>p-value</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>rs4588</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AA (7)</td>
<td>13.0 (16.3)</td>
<td>2.7 (1.2)</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AC (41)</td>
<td>14.0 (49.6)</td>
<td>2.3 (1.5)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.037*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CC (50)</td>
<td>14.0 (38)</td>
<td>2.3 (1.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rs7041</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GG (22)</td>
<td>14.9 (37.1)</td>
<td>2.3 (1.3)</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.037*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GT (53)</td>
<td>13.2 (49.6)</td>
<td>2.2 (1.4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT (23)</td>
<td>14.0 (21.5)</td>
<td>2.7 (1.5)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p=0.037* association with bone mass was statistically significant as assessed by Kruskal-Wallis test.

This study was consistent with the distribution patterns of GC gene rs4,588 and rs7041 allele frequencies compared to other populations. G/T was recognised as the most common variant amongst the rs7041 polymorphisms, while the homozygous variant T/T was found in a smaller number of individuals; in case of rs4588 SNP, C/C was observed as the most common genotype, whereas A/A was rarely seen.

Several studies have shown that rs4588 variants A/A and A/C and rs7041 variants T/T and T/G are associated with lower serum vitamin D levels compared to the C/C and G/G, respectively. Moreover, significantly lower levels of vitamin D were noted in individuals having rs4588A/A: rs7041 T/T haplotype compared to other combinations. Furthermore, median serum levels of 25(OH)D have been observed to be highest for individuals with two copies of rs7041 G/G: rs4588G/G.

The present findings were similar to those mentioned above, lower median 25(OH)D levels were observed within the rs4588 A/A and rs7041 G/T genotypes (evaluated separately) and highest levels in rs7041 C/C and G/G genotypes; although these differences did not achieve statistical significance in our study, because of a smaller sample size. Numerically, the difference between the median serum 25(OH)D levels for C/C and A/C genotypes was less than 1 ng/mL.

The low levels of vitamin D associated with the rare alleles can be explained in part by the functionally different proteins coded by these genes, which leads to decreased synthesis of DBP by the rare genotypes, ultimately translating into lower total vitamin D metabolite levels in the serum. Interestingly, some of the variants with the higher median levels of serum 25(OH)D also showed higher frequency of Z-scores below-2 (A/C, C/C in rs4588 and G/T in rs7041) (data not shown). Indeed, it has been shown that individuals carrying the C/C variant of rs4588 have a higher risk of osteoporosis despite high levels of serum 25(OH)D as underscored by Li et al. in a Chinese population. These observations can be substantially explained by taking into consideration the structure of DBP. It is comprised of three domains; domain I is the vitamin D binding region; whereas, domains II and III are responsible for other non-binding functions, including osteoclast differentiation and activation. Thus, this protein can essentially influence bone resorption directly by functioning as a DBP-macrophage activating factor. Rats treated with DBP-
macrophage activating factor have increased osteoelastic activity and decreased bone mass.\textsuperscript{21,22} Since these domains are independent of each other in function, the nature of the relationship between the allelic variation, vitamin D levels and osteoporotic risk can be validated.\textsuperscript{23} Lauridsen et al. reported an increased fracture risk and the haplotype of DBP rs7041 G allele and rs4588 C alleles.\textsuperscript{24} This study showed statistically non-significant association between bone mass and the A/C and C/C genotypes, the lowest bone mass within rs7041 was observed to have a significant association with the G/T variant. Nevertheless, these findings must be interpreted in context of the genetic influence of the vitamin DBP gene on osteoporosis, and fracture risk is part of an interplay between both, environmental and other genetic risk factors in vitamin D, and hence, bone metabolism.\textsuperscript{25} Findings from this study improve the understanding of vitamin D homoeostasis and could assist identification of a subgroup of the Pakistani population who are at risk of hypovitaminosis D and its consequences. This is one of the few studies that addresses multiple genetic factors underlying the Pakistani population-wide vitamin D deficiency. It also highlights the need to perhaps redefine the cutoffs for Vitamin D deficiency and sufficiency for a population largely genetically predisposed to lower serum vitamin D levels than counterparts in the Western world.

CONCLUSION

Certain variants within the rs4588 and rs7041 polymorphisms, which code for the vitamin DBP are related to lower vitamin D levels, and/or osteoporosis, and this study paves the way for future studies on a larger scale to further explain and highlight these genetic associations in Pakistan.

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