Comparative study of serum ferritin and vitamin D in thalassemia patients with healthy controls

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ABSTRACT

Background: Thalassemia is the most common genetic disorder in humans; they are encountered among all ethnic groups and in almost every country around the world. Mostly occur in the regions surrounding the Mediterranean sea, hence the name. These are a group of hereditary haemolytic disorders characterized by impairment in the synthesis of globin chains of Hb. The present study aimed to find out the serum ferritin and vitamin D level in thalassemic children in the tertiary care hospital in Bikaner, western Rajasthan, India.

Methods: This study was conducted at Sardar Patel Medical College and associated hospital in Bikaner, Rajasthan. There were 40 cases and 40 controls in the age groups from 4 to 16 years. Fresh samples were taken and required tests were performed following standard protocol. Both ferritin and vitamin D were performed on Electrochemiluminescence (ECL).

Results: Level of serum ferritin was significantly high and vitamin D was significantly low (p-value<0.0001 for both) in thalassemic children.

Conclusions: In this study the role of serum ferritin and vitamin D has been explored. The extremely high level of ferritin was found due to the regular blood transfusion and consequent iron overload and low vitamin D was found due to impairment in liver functions among thalassemic children.

Keywords: Ferritin, Vitamin D, Thalassemia

INTRODUCTION

Thalassemia (British English: thalassemia), also called Mediterranean anaemia, is a form of inherited autosomal recessive blood disorder characterized by abnormal formation of hemoglobin.1

Haemoglobin consist of four protein chains, 2α and 2β chains. Four genes are needed to make enough alpha protein globin chain and two genes are needed to make enough beta globin protein chain. The two major types of thalassemia α and β are named after defect in these protein chains.2 A large number of thalassemic syndromes are currently known; each involves decreased production of one globin chain or more, which form the different Hbs normally found in RBCs. The most important types in clinical practice are those that affect either α or β chain synthesis.

Alpha-thalassemia

Several forms of α thalassemia are known in clinical practice.

The most common form studied is Hb H disease: This condition, which results from the deletion or inactivation of 3 α globin genes (oo/ao), represents α thalassemia intermedia, with mildly to moderately severe anemia, splenomegaly, icterus, and abnormal RBC indices.3
**Beta-thalassemia**

Similar to α thalassemia, several clinical forms of β thalassemia are recognized; some of the more common forms are as follows: Thalassemia intermedia: This condition is usually due to a compound heterozygous state, resulting in anaemia of intermediate severity, which typically does not require regular blood transfusions. Thalassemia major (Cooley anaemia): This condition is characterized by transfusion-dependent anaemia, massive splenomegaly, bone deformities etc.4

Ferritin is a universal intracellular protein that stores iron and releases it in a controlled fashion. It has been the primary clinical measure of iron stores in thalassemic patients undergoing transfusions. The clinical consequences of iron overload are varied and reflect the key sites of iron storage. In the liver, the formation of collagen and portal fibrosis has been shown to occur after about two years of transfusion therapy. Thus, many studies show a significant increase in ferritin level in it.5

Vitamin D is critical for calcium homeostasis and for mineralization of the skeleton. Vitamin D is transported to the liver and hydroxylated to 25-hydroxy vitamin D3. Regulated by parathyroid hormone, additional hydroxylation to 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D3 takes place in the kidney. Patients affected by thalassemia major progressively develop iron overload, and a deficiency in liver hydroxylation of vitamin D. Thus, low vitamin D levels is found in most cases.6

**METHODS**

This study was conducted at Sardar Patel Medical College and associated hospital in Bikaner, Rajasthan. There were 40 cases and 40 controls in the age groups from 4 to 16 years of both sex.

It was an institution based cross-sectional study, where clinically diagnosed thalassemia patients those receiving regular blood transfusion were included. Very sick patients and those receiving calcium and vitamin D supplancements were excluded in the study.

Fresh samples were taken and required tests were performed following standard protocol. Both ferritin and vitamin D were performed on Electrochemiluminescence (ECL).

ECL is a kind of luminescence produced during electrochemical reactions in solutions. It is comprised of ECL cell. Serum Ferritin was analysed by sandwich principle and Serum Vitamin D was analysed by competitive principle.

**RESULTS**

It is revealed from Table 1 that serum ferritin level with a range from 11 to 55 ng/ml with a mean as 24.77±9.52 ng/ml in normal control subjects was increased to 2363.10±364.46 ng/ml with a range of 1572 to 2920 ng/ml in thalassemia children (study subjects). It is revealed from Table 2 that serum vitamin D level with a range from 20 to 40 ng/ml with a mean as 28.85±5.27 ng/ml in normal control subjects was decreased to 17.15±4.32 ng/ml with a range of 10 to 27 ng/ml in thalassemia children (study subjects).

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**DISCUSSION**

Beta thalassemia is a single gene disorder requiring regular multi-blood transfusions which causes serious side effects and overload of iron in the form of ferritin. Excess or free iron can catalyze the formation of very toxic compounds such as OH- radicals through Fenton reaction which causes oxidative damage. Singh J et al observed that as the number of blood transfusions increased, the serum ferritin concentration was significantly increased.7

Serum ferritin levels in medically treated patients with β thalassemia major was studied by Belhoul KM et al. The association between iron overload indices and pathology of the heart and liver in transfusion-dependent patients with β thalassemia major has been extensively studied.8

The mean value of serum ferritin was increased and these results were in close collaboration with the results obtained by Mishra AK et al. These levels reflect inadequate chelation and vulnerability to develop iron overload related complications. There is an urgent need
to rationalize the chelation therapy and to create awareness about the consequences of iron overload in the patients. The study showed high levels of serum ferritin beta thalassaemia major patients which give an overall bleak view.9

The increased level of serum ferritin level was statistically highly significant as compared to that of normal healthy children (control group) as evident by p-value which is less than 0.0001 (p<0.0001). The results of present series of study resembles with findings of Haghpghanah S et al.10

Given the high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency in the general population and the added burden of increased metabolic demands, chronic medical care, and iron overload, it is not surprising that vitamin D deficiency is quite common in thalassemia major patients. The results of mean serum vitamin D were in close collaboration with the results obtained by Wood JC et al.11

The decreased level of serum vitamin D level is statistically highly significant as compared to that of normal healthy children (control group) as evident by p-value which is less than 0.0001 (p<0.0001). The results of present series of study resembles with findings of Fahim M et al.12

Soliman A et al surveyed that the survival of patients with thalassemia major has progressively improved with advances in therapy; however, osteoporosis and cardiac dysfunction remain frequent complications. Adequate circulating levels of vitamin D are essential for optimal skeletal health and reducing fracture risk.13

Low bone mass, a major cause of morbidity in patients with β-thalassemia major is multifactorial. The prevalence of low vitamin D was found by Tzoulis P et al.14

CONCLUSION

In this study the serum ferritin and vitamin D levels were explored. Ferritin serves to store iron in a non-toxic form, to deposit it in a safe form, and to transport it to areas where it is required. Multiple blood transfusions are needed to treat thalassemia, which leads to hepatic iron overload and high levels of serum ferritin, thus many studies show a significant increase in ferritin level in it. In thalassemia low vitamin D concentrations have been reported. The results were attributed to hepatic dysfunction which lead to defective hydroxylation of vitamin D and so decreased serum level. Family history of thalassemia was more common in Muslims than in any other religion. This may be due to the fact that there is trend of consanguineous marriages in Muslims and this may cause increased frequency of Genetic diseases like thalassemia in them.

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Conflict of interest: None declared
Ethical approval: The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee

REFERENCES
