Maternal age at menarche and atopy among offspring at the age of 31 years

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Abstract

Background—Influences of female hormones on the occurrence of allergic disorders have been suggested. Age at menarche may be a marker of endogenous oestrogen levels. Data from a Finnish birth cohort followed to adulthood were analysed to determine whether there is any association between maternal age at menarche and the occurrence of atopy among offspring.

Methods—The study was conducted in 5188 subjects born in northern Finland for whom data collections were started during pregnancy and a follow up examination was completed at the age of 31 years. Atopy was determined by skin prick tests with cat, birch, grass, and mite extracts, and doctor diagnosed asthma was ascertained by questionnaire at follow up. Maternal age at menarche was obtained from perinatal data. Logistic regression models were used to adjust for maternal age, parity, smoking, season of birth, parental allergy, and measures of adiposity and socioeconomic status.

Results—The prevalence of atopy at the age of 31 years was lower in children whose mothers reached menarche at a later age, especially after age 15. Compared with children whose mothers started menarche at the age of 16 or over, the adjusted odds ratios of being atopic for children whose mothers started menarche younger than or at 12, 13, 14 and 15 years were 1.43 (95% CI 1.12 to 1.83), 1.29 (95% CI 1.03 to 1.60), 1.15 (95% CI 0.93 to 1.42), and 1.19 (95% CI 0.95 to 1.48), respectively. Among girls, the offspring’s own age at menarche was not significantly associated with atopy.

Conclusion—Our results encourage further evaluation of the potential effect of maternal age at menarche on the later development of atopy and possible biological mechanisms.

Keywords: atopy; asthma; maternal age at menarche

The prevalence of allergies is increasing in many countries, but most of the increase cannot be explained by factors so far known or identified. The potential influence of oestrogen on the occurrence of allergic disorders has been suggested. Age at menarche reflects endogenous oestrogen status. Early age at menarche has been shown to be associated with higher oestrogen levels among girls around the onset of puberty and also in adulthood. As a critical period in the later development of allergic disorders appears to be the prenatal and perinatal environment, we have examined the association between age at menarche of the mother and the occurrence of atopy among her offspring.

Methods

The study population was based on a geographically defined cohort of 12 058 live births in northern Finland in 1966 of whom 11 635 had survived up to 31 years of age in 1997. The 8463 subjects who were still living in northern Finland or had moved to the Helsinki area (in southern Finland) were invited to a clinical examination in 1997, and 6025 of these attended. Sensitivity to the three most common allergens in Finland—cat, birch, and timothy grass—and also to house dust mite (Dermatophagoides pteronyssinus) was assessed by skin prick tests, together with histamine dihydrochloride (10 mg/ml) and diluent of the allergen extracts used as positive and negative controls. Skin reactions to the allergens were recorded after 15 minutes, taking the average of the maximum weal diameter and the diameter perpendicular to the maximum. Subjects with a weal reaction of 3 mm or greater to at least one of the four allergens tested were considered to be atopic. Twelve subjects with a positive reaction to histamine. Information on doctor diagnosed asthma was obtained from a self-administered questionnaire that was completed by the subjects who attended for clinical examination. The final analyses were limited to 5188 subjects with information on atopy, asthma, and perinatal data and with signed consent to use their data for research.

The information on maternal age at menarche, weight, and height before pregnancy was collected from the mothers’ first antenatal visit and size at birth was taken from hospital records. Current weight and height at 31 years were measured during the follow up clinical examinations. Ponderal index at birth was
null
Age at menarche of the mother and the daughter were significantly correlated, even though the mean age at menarche of mothers was later than for their daughters (14.1 versus 12.9 years). Daughter’s age at menarche was not significantly associated with her atopic status, but there was a suggestion of a similar trend as with maternal age at menarche. This result suggests that the intrauterine environment might be more important in later life in terms of development of adult atopy, at least for the mechanism underlying the association observed here.

Of the original birth cohort born in 1966 in northern Finland, only those still living in the same area or those who had moved to the Helsinki area were invited to participate in the study; 71% attended and complete data were available for 61%. However, only 45% of the original cohort was included in the present analyses. This introduces possibilities for selection bias if migration away from northern Finland or attendance for the clinical examination were associated with atopy and age at menarche. However, we consider that the possible effect of selection bias on the current analyses was only limited as we included the main area of migration (around Helsinki) and because there was no substantial difference in maternal age at menarche between those included in the analyses and other subjects (14.07 versus 14.04 years, p = 0.34).

In conclusion, atopy at the age of 31 years seems to be less common among those whose mothers experienced a late menarche. Our results need to be confirmed in other populations and with direct measurements of hormone status, but are encouraging for further research on the effect of sex hormones on the development of atopy.

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1 Björksten B. The environmental influence on childhood asthma. *Allergy* 1999;54:17–23.
Table 1: Comparison of TST measurements using 5 and 10 TU tuberculin

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 TU dose</th>
<th>0 mm</th>
<th>1–9 mm</th>
<th>10–14 mm</th>
<th>15–19 mm</th>
<th>≥20 mm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10 TU dose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 mm</td>
<td>31 (24)</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–9 mm</td>
<td>11 (9)</td>
<td>42 (33)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10–14 mm</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17 (13)</td>
<td>14 (11)</td>
<td>1 (0.8)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–19 mm</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2 (1.5)</td>
<td>3 (2)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥20 mm</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 (0.8)</td>
<td>2 (1.5)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are no. (%).

patients with suspected active tuberculosis, and assessment for preventive antituberculous drug therapy. Unfortunately the TST has many variables that may affect its interpretation and result. These include variation in tuberculin dose and formulation, experience and technique in application, the effect of previous BCG vaccination, subject age, recent vaccination with live vaccines, and underlying immunosuppression.

In the 1940s and 1950s the “optimal” dosage of tuberculin was determined. Persons with and without a history of exposure to tuberculosis were tested with increasing doses of tuberculin and the cumulative proportion of reactors was calculated. From these studies it was concluded that 5 TU was the dose that gave the “best” balance between sensitivity and specificity.

Historically, 10 TU has been employed in Australia and the United Kingdom to perform the TST, while in the United States 5 TU is the standard dose used. Because of these dosage differences in performing the TST, comparison of TST results between countries may be difficult. In particular, comparisons of large multicentre TST studies of health care workers in different countries have been complicated by these differences in TST dosage. To assess the impact of the tuberculin dose on the TST we compared the TST responses in a cohort of BCG vaccinated and unvaccinated health care workers who received a TST with both 5 and 10 TU simultaneously.

Methods

Health care workers within the Southern Healthcare Network were informed of the study via table drops and individual mailings. Those who had previous TST readings of 5–19 mm were particularly encouraged to enrol. This was aimed at increasing the likelihood of positive results to those who had since been directed to continue with their TST. The upper limit of 19 mm was chosen to decrease the risk of large reactions occurring in individuals who had previously tested positive. Health care workers completed a questionnaire at the time of TST placement documenting age, occupation, and prior BCG status and timing.

TSTs were performed by one of two trained personnel. Two TSTs were performed simultaneously in each health care worker using a 5 and 10 TU dose. Each dose was assigned to the right or left forearm based on whether their home address was an odd or even number. To minimise reader variability all results were read by a single nurse who was blinded to the assignment of the 5 and 10 TU doses. The transverse diameter of induration at 48–72 hours was measured by the palpation method.

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Southern Healthcare Network.

The results of the 10 TU test were used to assess whether the individual needed further investigation and follow up. According to the Australian and British guidelines, a TST was classified as strongly positive if induration of ≥15 mm was detected in a person who had previously received BCG and ≥10 mm in those without such a history. These individuals underwent chest radiography and were offered individual consultation with a specialist physician.

Data were analysed using the two tailed paired samples t test. A residual-like plot of the difference between the measurements against their mean as described by Bland and Altman was also employed since this method allows the detection of differences between the two doses at different diameters of induration.

Results

One hundred and twenty eight health care workers were enrolled (102 women) of overall median age 42 years (range 21–65), 119 (93%) of whom had a past history of BCG vaccination (mean number of years since BCG = 26; range 2–47). There were 70 nurses (55%), seven physicians (6%), 12 laboratory workers (9%), and 40 allied health workers (30%). Thirty one had readings for both the 5 and 10 TU doses recorded as zero; the remaining 97 had at least one recordable response for either the 5 or 10 TU dose.

Eight BCG vaccinated health care workers had TSTs of ≥15 mm with 10 TU and ≥10 mm with the 5 TU dose. An additional subject without a history of BCG vaccination had TSTs of 10 mm and 11 mm with the 10 TU and 5 TU doses, respectively. All nine individuals had normal chest radiographs and no evidence of active tuberculosis.

Using the USA guidelines to determine TST positivity (≥10 mm regardless of BCG status), 40 (31%) subjects would have been considered positive with 10 TU and 26 (20%) positive with 5 TU. In comparison, using the Australian and UK guidelines (≥10 mm if no history of BCG vaccination; ≥15 mm if previously vaccinated), eight (0.06%) and seven (0.05%) would have been positive with the 10 TU and 5 TU doses, respectively.

A comparison of the diameter of induration obtained from the two doses is shown in table 1. Most of the health care workers (66%) had a TST of <10 mm. Generally, the 10 TU dose gave a larger TST reading than the 5 TU dose, but in 16 cases (13%) the 5 TU reading was greater. The overall mean difference in paired reaction sizes for the two doses was 1.5 mm (93% CI 1.0 to 1.9; p<0.001). In the 97 health care workers who had a least one recordable TST response to the 5 or 10 TU doses, the mean difference in reaction was 1.9 mm (95% CI 1.4 to 2.5; p<0.001).
Differences in results between the two doses plotted against the mean of each subject’s result are shown in fig 1. Using the Bland-Altman method for assessing agreement between the two doses, the 95% limits of agreement were -3.6 to 6.5 mm, meaning that 95% of paired results are expected to have differences within this range. Notably, there was no relationship between this difference in TST response and the mean diameter of induration, suggesting that the difference in 5 and 10 TU results did not change significantly with increasing TST response. There was, however, an association between the mean difference in the results and the age of the health care worker (r = 0.21, p = 0.01), but not with years since last BCG vaccination (r = 0.1, p = 0.29; data not shown).

Discussion
The tuberculin skin test has long been an important aid in the diagnosis of tuberculous infection and disease. However, different countries use different doses of PPD for screening so that there is no uniformity. Only one previous study has compared the differences seen when 5 or 10 TU of PPD is employed in the TST. However, this 1954 World Health Organisation study assessed a Danish cohort with no history of previous BCG vaccination who received either a 5 or 10 TU TST, but not both doses simultaneously. The average 10 TU TST result was 2–3 mm larger than the 5 TU dose, but the unpaired nature of this study design limited the conclusions that could be drawn from these data.

Our results show that there is a statistically significant but small mean difference of 1.5 mm obtained when the 5 and 10 TU doses are compared within individuals. This small increase in TST result obtained with the use of the 10 TU dose was large enough to increase the number of positive individuals by 11% (14/128) using a 10 mm cut off. If, however, a 15 mm cut off was used, as is recommended in Australia and the UK, only one extra positive reading was seen with 10 TU compared with the 5 TU dose. Given that most of our health care workers had a past history of BCG vaccination, it would be of interest to assess the differences in a group of non-vaccinated individuals. The lack of a gold standard to determine who is truly infected with tuberculosis when interpreting a TST result remains an issue for the significance of our study, as with other authors on this topic.

These data suggest that, in subjects having a TST, the impact of using 5 or 10 TU to perform the test when comparing studies using one or the other of these doses is likely to be limited. Nevertheless, these differences should be borne in mind and our data suggest that studies using 10 TU should be calibrated back by 1.5 mm to enable comparison with studies employing 5 TU. Whether the previously perceived advantages of using 10 TU in countries such as Australia and the UK really justify the potential for confusion when interpreting the result remains uncertain.