Low levels of phosphate can disrupt bone ossification and predispose to fractures. FGF23 is one of the major determinants of phosphate homeostasis, acting to increase urinary phosphate excretion. However, the regulation of FGF23 is incompletely understood. In this issue of the JCI, Smith et al. show that the cleaved form of αKlotho, the membrane-bound form of which is an FGF23 coreceptor, serves as a novel endocrine regulator of phosphate homeostasis, capable of inducing FGF23 production in osteocytes.

Phosphate is a critical component of bone, and it serves numerous biological functions in the synthesis of DNA and membrane lipids, protein modifications, energy metabolism, and second messenger formation. FGF23 and parathyroid hormone (PTH) are the major regulators of phosphate homeostasis (1, 2). Both hormones increase urinary phosphate excretion by reducing proximal tubular expression of the sodium-dependent phosphate cotransporters, NPT2a and NPT2c, thereby lowering serum phosphate levels. However, in contrast to FGF23, which decreases serum levels of 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D (1,25D) by inhibiting renal 1α-hydroxylase and stimulating 24-hydroxylase, PTH increases renal production of 1,25D, which consequently enhances the absorption of phosphate (and calcium) from the intestinal tract (3).

FGF23 belongs to the subfamily of endocrine FGFs and mediates its phosphate-regulating actions in the kidney through FGF receptors (FGFRs), most prominently FGFR1. These actions require the transmembrane form of αKlotho (mKL), which acts as the coreceptor that enhances the binding affinity of FGF23 to different FGFRs (4, 5). Ablation of αKlotho in mice leads to severe hyperphosphatemia, elevated levels of 1,25D, hypercalcemia, diffuse soft tissue calcifications, accelerated aging, and premature death (6). These findings are largely indistinguishable from those observed in FGF23 loss-of-function models (7, 8).

Osteocytes are the primary cellular source of FGF23 after the fetal period (9), but little is known about their regulation and secretion. Although discovery of the molecular causes of monogenic hypophosphatemic rickets disorders has helped to identify a set of bone-derived proteins that decrease FGF23 production, the mechanisms of how these inhibitors suppress FGF23 remain largely unknown. Furthermore, despite our knowledge that changes in dietary phosphate intake can alter FGF23 levels in healthy individuals (10, 11), how serum phosphate or phosphate balance is sensed and how this signal is conveyed to the osteocyte to alter FGF23 expression remains completely unknown.

A novel regulator of FGF23 synthesis In this issue of the JCI, Smith et al. provide intriguing new findings about the
recapitulated that of a patient in whom a chromosomal translocation resulted in markedly increased circulating cKL levels and FGF23-dependent hypophosphatemia (14). As observed in the patient with the spontaneously occurring mutation (14), viral cKL expression also led to markedly increased PTH concentrations (12). Although this may have been due to hypercalcemia or FGF23-mediated reduction of 1,25D driven by reduced Cyp27b1 and increased Cyp24a1 mRNA levels, and thus impaired intestinal calcium absorption, PTH seems to have risen prior to the onset of overt hypercalcemia. Indeed, PTH was significantly elevated 2 weeks after high-dose viral infection, when serum calcium levels were subtly but significantly increased compared with those of control. This suggests that cKL may have direct effects on the parathyroid glands that led to secondary hyperparathyroidism, which is an intriguing hypothesis, since activation of the FGFR1-FGF23-mKL complex in the parathyroid is thought to suppress PTH secretion (15, 16).
FGFR1 in the presence of cKL (or sKL) (23).

FGFR1 signaling in osteocytes, thereby enhancing, directly or indirectly, FGF23 production and consequently urinary phosphate excretion. Alternatively, cKL may activate another distinct, as-of-yet unknown, receptor-signaling system.

Translating the novel observations

The presented findings raise additional important questions. What is their relevance to normal day-to-day regulation of mineral metabolism, and is it conceivable that more modest changes in circulating levels of cKL than those induced in this extreme model have a prominent role in regulating FGF23 levels in normal human physiology? Does cKL act as a “portable” coreceptor that can bind to FGF23 in the circulation, thereby transforming FGFRs that have low affinity for FGF23 into high-affinity receptors that are capable, at least in some tissues, of efficient signal transduction? Is the reduction in cKL levels that occurs in chronic kidney disease an adaptive response to reduce markedly elevated FGF23 levels through this new putative endocrine feedback loop? Smith et al. have provided novel insights into the complex regulation of phosphate homeostasis, which will generate new hypotheses regarding the endocrine role of cKL in the production of FGF23 and its potential therapeutic implications. For example, the presented findings raise the possibility that reducing cKL levels could be a novel therapeutic approach to ameliorate FGF23-dependent hypophosphatemic rickets. Conversely, augmenting cKL production might promote phosphate excretion in disorders of hypoparathyroidism or PTH resistance.

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Address correspondence to: Harald Jüppner, Massachusetts General Hospital Endocrine Unit, Thier 10, Boston, Massachusetts 02114, USA. Phone: 617.726.3966; Fax: 617.726.7543; E-mail: hjueppner@partners.org.
Understanding the TXA seizure connection

Debra A. Schwinn,1 G. Burkhard Mackensen,2 and Emery N. Brown3

1Department of Anesthesiology, Pharmacology, and Biochemistry, Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine, The University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa, USA.
2Department of Anesthesiology and Pain Medicine, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA.
3Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, MIT-Harvard Division of Health Science and Technology, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA.

Tranexamic acid (TXA) is an antifibrinolytic that has been used successfully to prevent blood loss during major surgery. However, as its usage has increased, there have been growing reports of postsurgical seizure events in cardiac surgery patients. In this issue of the JCI, Lecker et al. explore this connection and suggest that TXA-mediated inhibition of glycine receptors may underlie the effect. This finding prompted the authors to explore the preclinical efficacy of common anesthetics that function by reducing the TXA-mediated inhibition to prevent or modify postsurgical seizures.

Introduction

Translation from clinical bedside to laboratory bench and back is the holy grail of medicine. In this issue, Lecker et al. (1) undertake just such a translation. In an elegant set of studies, the authors investigate the neuronal mechanisms that underlie seizures occurring as side effects in patients receiving tranexamic acid (TXA) to reduce blood loss during major cardiovascular surgery. Given the structural similarity between the antifibrinolytic drug TXA and inhibitory neurotransmitter-gated Cl– channel glycine receptors, the authors tested the hypothesis that TXA inhibits glycine receptor action as a possible mechanism underlying the seizures. After demonstrating that TXA inhibits glycine receptors, they then proposed that anesthetic agents with glycine receptor agonist properties may be uniquely suited to prevent such seizures. The studies presented are of high quality, based on an impressive range of laboratory data and models. However, they may be premature in recommending specific clinical actions to prevent seizures based on the limited clinical data. To place these interesting and provocative translational findings in context, we review use of antifibrinolytics in major cardiovascular surgery; this is followed by a brief overview of mechanisms of general anesthesia recognized to date and how anesthetic agents may play a role in treating seizures generally rather than specifically. We conclude by suggesting how the work of Lecker et al. moves the field forward, and where further work is still needed.

Antifibrinolytic agents and major cardiovascular surgery

Excessive perioperative bleeding remains a complication of cardiac surgery employing cardiopulmonary bypass, with blood transfusions considered a major contributor to subsequent morbidity and mortality (2). Despite serious efforts to achieve perioperative blood conservation by multimodal approaches (e.g., point-of-care monitoring paired with institution-specific blood transfusion algorithms and applied pharmacologic strategies), cardiac surgery patients continue to receive the vast majority of all perioperative blood transfusions (3). Therefore, antifibrinolytic therapy, because of its proven hemostatic effects, has become routine in this setting. Historically, three main antifibrinolytics have been used in cardiac surgery: lysine analogs e-aminocaproic acid (EACA) and TXA in patients at low risk for bleeding, and the serine protease inhibitor aprotinin in patients at high risk for perioperative bleeding (such as those undergoing reoperations). However, with the removal of aprotinin from clinical practice following its association with a higher incidence of death and renal dysfunction in the Blood Conservation Using Anti-Fibrinolytics in a Randomized Trial (BART) study, many institutions worldwide have updated their therapeutic protocols (4, 5). The safety concerns surrounding aprotinin use that were raised in the BART study are largely backed by a recent systematic review and network meta-analysis confirming increased risk of mortality and renal morbidity with aprotinin versus TXA and EACA (6). The search for alternatives to aprotinin recently culminated in a phase 2 clinical trial demonstrating the inferiority of the novel protease inhibitor ecallantide in combating blood loss during high-risk cardiac surgery compared with TXA, and enhanced hemostatic efficacy with higher doses of TXA (7). However, as TXA usage has increased, there has been a growing awareness that some patients experience TXA-induced seizures. Occurrence peaks during the early postoperative period (8) in a dose-related manner (9, 10), and seizures are more common in patients with a history of renal dysfunction (11).

General anesthesia and seizures

General anesthesia is critical for performing most surgical and many non-surgical interventions (12). This state is induced by administering an intravenous hypnotic such as propofol and maintained by a combination of inhaled drugs, hypnotics, opioids, and muscle relaxants. Understanding the mechanism whereby inhaled anesthetics create this drug-induced reversible coma has been a major area of investigation since the first use of ether in the 1840s. Substantial evidence has established that the molecular targets of inhaled anesthetics in the brain and central nervous system are GABAα, NMDA and glycine receptors, two-pore potassium channels, and HCN channels (13). Although immobility is now believed to result from inhaled anesthetics acting mostly at these targets in the spinal cord (14), the mechanisms of unconsciousness, amnesia, and analgesia

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