High Testosterone and Low Progesterone Circulating Levels in Premenopausal Patients with Hyperplasia and Cancer of the Breast

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ABSTRACT

Sera from 55 normal and 23 breast cancer patients were examined for circulating levels of testosterone, progesterone, luteinizing hormone, prolactin, and sex hormone-binding globulin. Testosterone levels were higher in breast cancer patients than in normal controls; progesterone levels were lower. These results confirm previous studies of increased urinary testosterone excretion in women with anovulatory menstrual cycles and epithelial hyperplasia or cancer of the breast and strongly support the hypothesis that androgens play an important role in both induction and development of breast cancer.

INTRODUCTION

In a previous paper (23), we found serum testosterone levels to be significantly higher than normal in postmenopausal breast cancer patients. This finding supported previous reports of increased urinary testosterone excretion in these patients (10, 11). Increased urinary testosterone excretion was also found in premenopausal breast cancer patients (8, 22) and in patients with hyperplastic alterations of breast epithelium (9), suggesting that androgens play an important role in induction and development of breast cancer. In these patients, the increased urinary androgen excretion was shown to be associated with anovulatory menstrual cycles (8, 9).

Blood concentrations of hormones are considered better parameters of their biological activity than their urinary excretion. The purpose of this study was, consequently, to support previous findings in urine (8, 9, 22) by determining the circulating levels of testosterone, progesterone, LH, prolactin, and SHBG in premenopausal women with epithelial hyperplasia or cancer of the breast.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Fifty-five normal controls, 31 patients with histologically proven hyperplastic alterations of breast epithelium, and 23 patients with a histological diagnosis of infiltrating carcinoma of the breast entered the study. Controls were selected from healthy women according to the following criteria: no abnormality of the breast at the clinical examination; no benign or malignant neoplasias outside of the breast; and no endocrine, metabolic, or chronic diseases. Patients with breast epithelial hyperplasia were examined within 6 months after biopsy, and breast cancer patients were examined before mastectomy. All of the subjects in the study were premenopausal, and none of them was taking any hormonal drug for at least 6 months before hormonal examination or digital, antihypertension drug, or psychodrugs for chronic disease.

Hormone determinations were made on peripheral blood samples drawn between 9 a.m. and 11 a.m. on Days 20 to 23 of the menstrual cycle. The collected blood was allowed to clot at room temperature and was centrifuged; the serum was separated and stored at −20°C until the assay. All of the hormones and SHBG were determined in the same blood samples.

Testosterone was quantitatively extracted from serum with diethyl ether (spectrograde Merck) and measured by radioimmunoassay according to the method of Ismail et al. (14). 3H-Labeled testosterone-3-tyrosine-methyl-ester and specific antiserum against testosterone-3-carboxymethylloxime-bovine serum albumin were used for the assay. The separation of the free antigen from the complex was performed by the polyethylene glycol method (3).

LH and prolactin were respectively determined with the method of Midgley (18) and Sinha et al. (27). LH was expressed according to the second International Reference Preparation of Human Menopausal Gonadotropin, and prolactin was expressed in ng according to the NIH Standard (NIH Code F1) (1 ng = 23 ± 3 mIU of WHO 71/222). Testosterone-3-tyrosine methyl ester, LH, and prolactin, labeled with 125I by use of the chloramine-T method (12), and the respective antibodies were supplied by Biodata (Milan, Italy).

Radioimmunoassay of progesterone was performed without preliminary extraction by the method of El Shami et al. (4). The progesterone 125I-11-tyrosine and the specific antiserum against progesterone 11-HSA, immobilized to the wall of the polystyrene tubes, were obtained from Diagnostic Products Corporation (Los Angeles, CA).

SHBG was quantitated by its ability to bind DHT. The binding protein saturated with [1,2-3H]DHT was separated by the ammonium sulphate saturation curve for prolactin and SHBG; testosterone and progesterone values were processed without log transformation of the data. Significance between groups was confirmed by variance analyses. Comparisons of LH data were performed using a nonparametric test (Mann-Whitney)
because of the nonhomogeneity of variances. Two-tailed p values were considered for statistical analyses; p ≤ 0.05 was considered significant.

RESULTS

The 3 groups of subjects were comparable for age, age at menarche, marriage and first full-term pregnancy, number of pregnancies, height, weight, and body surface. Table 1 reports the ranges and means for the various characteristics of the patients and controls.

In the controls, the mean circulating levels of testosterone [0.47 ± 0.16 (S.D.) ng/ml] were significantly lower and the mean levels of progesterone [17.63 ± 8.11 ng/ml] were significantly higher than in breast cancer patients [testosterone level, 0.62 ± 0.22 ng/ml (p < 0.005); progesterone level, 11.4 ± 8.0 ng/ml (p < 0.005)] and in patients with breast epithelial hyperplasia [testosterone level, 0.55 ± 0.2 ng/ml (p < 0.05); progesterone level, 13.9 ± 8.6 ng/ml (p < 0.05)]. Neither testosterone nor progesterone levels differed significantly between the 2 groups of patients (Table 2, Charts 1 and 2).

No difference was found among controls, patients with breast epithelial hyperplasia, and patients with breast cancer in the mean levels of LH, prolactin, or SHBG (Table 2, Charts 3 to 5).

DISCUSSION

Detection of circulating levels of testosterone that were higher than normal in premenopausal breast cancer patients supports previous reports from our laboratory (8, 22) of increased urinary excretion of testosterone that were significantly higher than normal in premenopausal breast cancer patients. The few reports on postmenopausal patients with breast cancer. The few reports on postmenopausal patients are conflicting; normal values of testosterone have been found by some authors (2, 13, 16) and increased levels by others (1, 17) and by ourselves (23).

In our series, breast cancer patients showed progesterone levels that were significantly lower than normal. This finding fits very well with the anovulatory hypothesis of Grattarola (7) and with the inadequate corpus luteum function hypothesis of Sherman and Korenman (24), and it is in agreement with the data of Kodama et al. (15) of subnormal urinary excretion of pregnanediol, the principal metabolite of progesterone. In contrast, normal progesterone levels have been found by others (5, 6, 29) in the blood of patients with breast cancer.

The circulating levels of prolactin, LH, and SHBG did not differ...
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from normal levels in our patients. Normal values of prolactin (6, 25) have been reported in the literature. The only 2 papers concerning LH levels in premenopause are conflicting; Malarkey et al. (16) found normal values, and Zumoff et al. (30) found significantly subnormal values. Both authors determined the mean 24-hr blood concentrations of the hormone. Our data, based on a single spot determination, are not entirely comparable, because of the wide diurnal variations of LH; nevertheless, in our series, nearly three-fourths of the cancer patients had clearly subnormal LH values (Chart 5), almost suggesting the existence of 2 populations. SHBG binding capacity has been insufficiently studied in breast cancer: Moore et al. (19) recently found normal SHBG values in premenopausal patients and decreased values in postmenopausal patients.

Hyperplastic alterations of breast epithelium are a well-known factor of risk for breast cancer (20). In these patients, we found the same hormonal abnormality that we found in breast cancer patients, namely increased testosterone levels and decreased progesterone levels, which confirms previous findings in urine (9). The hormonal pattern of women with breast noncancerous diseases has been extensively studied, but many different histological findings, varying from cystic disease to fibroadenosis to benign adenoma, etc., have usually been considered together. Consequently, data from the literature are not entirely comparable with the findings of this study, in which patients have been
rigidly selected according to the histological diagnosis of epithelial hyperplasia. Malarky et al. (16) reported normal values of testosterone and progesterone in patients with benign breast disease, and Englund et al. (5) found normal values of progesterone in patients with cystic disease as well as in patients with fibroadenosis of the breast. In contrast, Sitruk-Ware et al. (28), on the basis of subnormal progesterone levels, cited inadequate corpus luteum function as the hormonal alteration of fibrocystic disease of the breast.

In a previous paper (23), we reported circulating testosterone levels that were higher than normal in postmenopausal breast cancer patients; the same abnormal hormonal pattern, together with low progesterone levels, has been found in this study in premenopausal breast cancer patients and in women at enhanced risk for breast epithelial hyperplasia. Differences between patients and controls were not due to differences in body weight or body surface. Increased testosterone levels were present, along with normal levels of circulating SHBG, suggesting that there is an increased bioavailability of free testosterone in these patients. The supposed free testosterone excess could act with a double mechanism, i.e., direct stimulation of the target tissue through binding to androgen receptors and increased metabolism into estradiol. From this point of view, our data could be in agreement with recent findings of increased free estradiol levels in breast cancer patients (19, 26).

In conclusion, our data on serum concentrations of testosterone in patients with breast cancer or with breast epithelial hyperplasia strongly support the hypothesis that androgens play an important role in induction and development of breast cancer. Further studies, mainly on the circulating levels of free steroids, will be necessary to better elucidate this role.

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