

VITAMIN D AND ASTHMA IN CHILDHOOD

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Abstract

Asthma is the most common chronic disease in children and one of the most common chronic disease in adults. It is defined as a chronic inflammatory disease of the airways, caused by the influence of many different cells and cellular elements (eosinophiles, mast cells and T-lymphocytes).

The symptoms usually appear in childhood, and are associated with atopy and sometimes persist into adulthood. In the last decades, there has been an increased scientific interest in the research of vitamin D and its immunomodulatory effects, as well as the association of vitamin D deficiency and allergic disease development, especially asthma in childhood.

The study was prospective and was performed at the Pulmonology Department at the University Children's Hospital in Skopje on 120 outpatient children between the ages of 2-14 years. The examined group consisted of 60 children with asthma, and the control group consisted of 60 healthy children. Serum levels of vitamin D was measured in both groups.

The examined group was treated with inhaled corticosteroids, and the participants with vitamin D deficiency were also treated with oral vitamin D.

The results from the pulmonary function testing for bronchial hyperreactivity and the episodes of bronchoobstructions after 6 months follow-up were compared to the one at the beginning of the asthma therapy.

Mean serum vitamin D levels in the asthmatic children were 24.57 ± 10.0 , and for the healthy children they were 28.74 ± 9.5 , with a statistical significant difference of $p=0,0021$. 46,67% of the asthmatic children had vitamin D deficiency, versus 15% of the healthy children. In our study, vitamin D supplementation had no significant impact in asthma control efficacy.

Children with asthma have lower serum levels of vitamin D, versus healthy individuals. Although vitamin D supplementation in asthmatic children hasn't improved the asthma treatment efficacy, the data shows positive therapeutic effects in patients with more severe symptoms.

Keywords: asthma, vitamin D deficiency, children.

Introduction

Asthma is the most common chronic disease in children and one of the most common in adults (it is considered that about 300 million people have asthma worldwide) [1,2].

It is defined as a chronic inflammatory disease of the airways, caused by the influence of many different cells and cellular elements (eosinophiles, mast cells and T-lymphocytes). Asthma is manifested with repetitive wheezing episodes, cough, dyspnea and chest pain [3].

The symptoms usually appear in childhood, and are associated with atopy, and sometimes persist in adulthood. Asthma has a complex etiology. Genetic basis of the diseases can go from 35 to 95% [4]. Apart from genetics, different extrinsic factors can control its expression, such as: viral infections, early exposure to allergens, passive smoking, smoking during pregnancy, industrial and traffic airpollution [4, 5].

The development of inflammation plays the main role in the pathogenesis, which is presented by the accumulation of eosinophiles, mast cells and T-helper lymphocytes that release cytokines. Dendritic

cells are the main antigen presenting cells that activate T-lymphocytes and enhance IgE production and development of an allergic reaction [6].

Asthma diagnostic procedures in children covers: patient history, physical examination and investigations (serum IgE levels, allergen sensitization testing and pulmonary function tests) [3,5,7].

The therapeutic approach to asthma is based by the severity of the disease, the frequency of exacerbations and pulmonary function variability [3, 4].

The first line of therapy in asthmatic children is the administration of anti-inflammatory drugs, such as inhaled corticosteroids. They decrease the bronchial hyperresponsiveness, the need for treatment of acute exacerbation episodes and improve the quality of life of the patients [3,5,7].

Vitamin D (VD). In the last decades, there has been an increase in scientific interest in the research of VD and its immunomodulatory effects, as well as the association of VD deficiency and allergic disease development, especially childhood asthma. VD is a hormone with an impact in different immunological activities, apart from the main known role in calcium homeostasis [8,9].

There are two main sources of VD in the human body: ultraviolet sunlight induced skin production and several dietary supplements [8, 10-13]. VD action in human tissues is made through vitamin D receptors (VDR). They are found in almost all human cells and tissues [14, 15].

VD is well known for its immunomodulatory effects, its VDR are very common in T-lymphocytes, macrophages, and especially in immature thymic immune cells and mature T-lymphocytes [16, 17].

Many epidemiologic studies suggest that VD deficiency is associated with an increased risk for wheezing, respiratory tract infections and asthma development [20-22]. VD controls activities of macrophages, dendritic cells and many TLR (toll-like receptors) mediated processes in neutrophilic cells, decreases the dendritic cells activities by slowing down and inhibition of their maturation, antigen presentation and cytokine production (interleukins IL-12, IL-23) [18, 19, 23, 26].

The main mechanism of the allergic response to asthma symptoms is determined by the Th2 immune response activation, that causes secretion of IgE and inflammatory cytokines, which leads to inflammation and bronchial hyperreactivity (BHR) of the airways [24, 26]. Moreover, VD affects airway remodelling [25].

Literature data proves the benefit of VD supplementation in the treatment of allergic diseases. Therapeutic doses of VD are recommended for people with VD deficiency (VD serum level < 20ng/ml). Optimal levels of VD are considered from 30 to 50 ng/ml. The maximum recommended doses for VD oral intake range from 1000 to 4000 I.U., depending on the age and VD serum levels [27].

Aim

To measure and compare VD serum levels in healthy and asthmatic children, to present the distribution of common allergens in the examined group, and determine the role of VD supplementation in children with VD deficiency by comparing the results to the rest of the patients after 6 months asthma therapy.

Methods

The study was prospective and was performed at the Pulmonology Department at the University Children's Hospital in Skopje on 120 outpatient children between the age of 2-14 in a 3-year period. The examined group (EG) consisted of 60 children with asthma, and the control group (CG) consisted of 60 healthy children. Both groups were additionally divided into two age subgroups, due to the diagnostic protocols for asthma in childhood [7].

Serum levels of VD were measured in both groups. The results from both groups were compared. The examined group had passed the diagnostic procedures from standardized asthma protocol from GINA (Global INitiative for Asthma). For our study, we analyzed the VD serum levels, results from allergic sensitization tests and the pulmonary function testing for BHR (bronchodilatory testing–BDT), which was performed for the subgroup of asthmatic children at the age of 6 and above.

All asthmatic children were treated with inhaled corticosteroids.

Additionally, patients with VD deficiency underwent treatment with oral VD in the recommended doses. All patients were followed up after 6 months, for episode frequency of acute bronchoobstuctions (BO), and control testing of pulmonary function (BDT) in the older subgroup.

The results from the control examination of the patients with VD treatment, and the other without, were compared.

Statistical analysis was prepared by SPSS 23.0, using parametric and non-parametric tests and correlation testing. The statistical significance was defined at level $p < 0,05$.

Results

Our analysis was performed on 120 children divided into two groups (EG and CG), each consisted of 60 children aged between 2-14 years. We presented the sex distribution and VD levels for both groups of children. Table 1. shows that although there was a male predominance in both groups, it still made no statistical significant difference in sex distribution.

Table 1. Sex distribution of the participants. X^2 (Pearson Chi-square)

Sex	Groups			p-level
	n	EG n(%)	CG n(%)	
Female	48	22 (36.67)	26 (43.33)	$X^2=0.56$ p=0.46 ns
Male	72	38 (63.33)	34 (56.67)	

Table 2. and Image 2. show the mean VD serum levels in both groups.

The difference of 4,17 ng/ml was statistically significant ($p=0,021$). That proves that children with asthma have significantly lower serum levels of VD, compared to the healthy children (non-asthmatic children).

Table 2. Level distribution of serum VD

Vitamin D (ng/ml) Statistic parameter	Groups	
	EG	CG
mean±SD	24.57 ± 10.0	28.74 ± 9.5
min – max	3.7 – 48.4	9.2 – 60.4
p-level	t=2.34* p=0.021 sig	

t(Student t-test); * $p < 0.05$

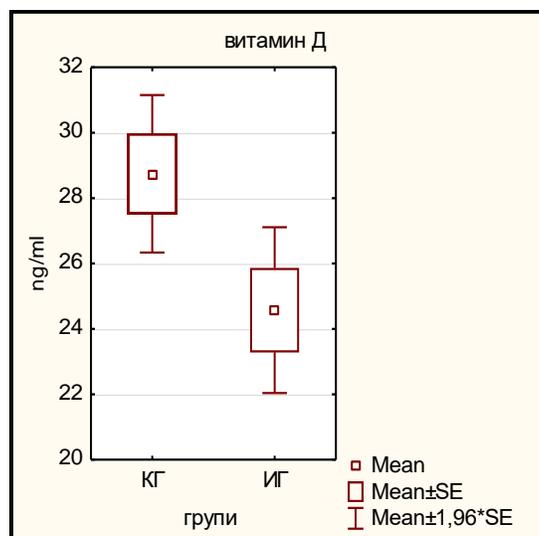


Image 2. Level distribution of serum VD.

Moreover, we divided the groups due to the serum concentration of VD in children with: deficient (<20 ng/ml), insufficient (20-30ng/ml) and sufficient (>30 ng/ml) VD levels.

We found a statistically significant difference in EG and CG regarding the distribution of all three levels (p=0.00028) (Table 3.).

Table 3. Distribution of VD serum levels.

Vitamin D ng/ml	Groups			p-level
	n	EG n(%)	CG n(%)	
20-30	40	12 (20)	28 (46.67)	X ² =16.4 ***p=0.00028 sig
<20	37	28 (46.67)	9 (15)	
>30	43	20 (33.33)	23 (38.33)	

X² (Pearson Chi-square); ***p<0.0001

Table 4. Presents the distribution of most common allergens in the EG.

EG	
Variable	n(%)
Grass pollens	
positive	12 (20)
negative	48 (80)
Tree pollens	
positive	6 (10)
negative	54 (90)
Dermatophagoides	
positive	29 (48.33)
negative	31 (51.67)
Mold	
positive	7 (11.67)
negative	53(88.33)
Cow's milk	
positive	3 (5)
negative	57 (95)
Eggs	
positive	4 (6.67)
negative	56 (93.33)

After 6 months of therapy, all 60 participants from the EG were followed up. We found that only 1 of the participants with normal VD levels, had an acute episode of bronchoobstruction (BO). It showed that no statistically significant difference appeared between the children with VD supplementation (VD deficient asthmatic children–VDD) and the ones without (VDN). Table 5.

Table 5. Number of episodes of bronchoobstruction.

BO episodes	Vitamin D (ng/ml)			p-level
	n	VDN n(%)	VDD n(%)	
none	27	26 (96.3)	1 (100)	Fisher exact p=1.0 ns
1 – 2 /month	1	1 (3.7)	0	

In the subgroup of asthmatic children aged 6-14 years (VDD2, VDN2), only one had positive bronchodilatary testing (BDT) after 6 months of therapy. It was the one with normal VD serum levels. It shows no statistically significant difference in the results from BDT, due to VD serum levels of the participants. (Table 6).

Table 6. Results from control BDT.

BDT	Vitamin D (ng/ml)			p-level
	n	VDN2 n(%)	VDD2 n(%)	
Positive	1	1 (6.67)	0	Fisher exact p=0.23 ns
Negative	15	14 (93.33)	1 (100)	

Discussion

Due to the results in our study, we found that significantly more of the asthmatic children (participants from the EG) had serum VD deficiency, compared with the healthy children (children without asthma), 46,7% and 33,3% accordingly.

Our study proved that asthmatic children have significantly lower levels of serum VD than healthy children. Literature data from different and various studies, shows that asthmatic people (children and adults) have lower levels of serum VD no matter of their age, ethnic, cultural or geographic differences [28-37].

Our study showed that 75% of our asthmatic patients had a positive sensitization test for at least one of the analyzed specific allergens, and additionally 40% of them had a positive sensitization for more than one specific allergen.

The results from the allergen distribution showed predominance of sensitization for mite allergens (Dermatophagoides) over the distribution of grass and tree polens, mold, cow's milk and eggs.

Data from other studies show differences in distribution of specific allergens in children from different countries and nations. Most of them had the same predominance as in our study [38-39, 42-44], and some of them present predominance of grass polens over mite allergens [40].

In the group of our asthmatic participants, we also followed the effect of VD supplementation in patients with VD deficiency, comparing the results we found between them and the group of asthmatic children that had no VD deficiency.

According to our results, VD supplementation showed no significant difference in the asthma treatment efficacy. Data from literature differs due to the role of VD supplementation in asthmatic children and adults as well [45-54].

Conclusions

Asthmatic children have significantly lower levels of serum VD, compared to healthy individuals. The most common allergens in asthmatic children in our country are mite allergens (dermatophagoides) and grass pollens, and appear to be the same as for most of the regions worldwide.

Although vitamin D supplementation in asthmatic children hasn't improved asthma treatment efficacy, data shows positive therapeutic effects in patients with more severe symptoms.

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