Effect of spironolactone on stool electrolyte losses during human cholera

RICHARD L. GUERRANT, LINCOLN C. CHEN, AND JON E. ROHDE

From the Pakistan-SEATO Cholera Research Laboratory, Dacca, East Pakistan

SUMMARY This study demonstrated that endogenous aldosterone, as determined by its transient competitive block by spironolactone, caused significant sodium and chloride retention during naturally acquired cholera. This beneficial effect of the hormone is accompanied, however, by a deleterious depletion of potassium. In addition, it was found that stool rate significantly altered the sodium and potassium concentrations in cholera stool despite minimal or absent aldosterone activity.

The ability of aldosterone to increase sodium absorption and potassium excretion in the distal tubule of the kidney (Laragh, 1967) is an important factor in the response to reduction in circulating vascular volume (Davis, Carpenter, Ayers, Holman, and Bahn, 1961). The action of pharmacological doses of aldosterone on electrolyte transport in colonic epithelium closely resembles its effect in the renal tubule (Shields, Mulholland, and Elmslie, 1966; Levitan and Goulston, 1967; Crocker and Munday, 1969).

The role of aldosterone has not been investigated during the volume-depleted state of acute cholera, and its influence on the electrolyte losses in the stool and the potassium depletion of cholera is unclear. This study explores the effect of aldosterone on stool electrolyte losses during cholera by employing spironolactone, a competitive antagonist of this hormone (Liddle, 1961; Porter, Bogoroch, and Edelman, 1964).

Patients and Methods

Twenty-three previously healthy adult male patients with bacteriologically confirmed cholera were selected for study. As stool rate is known to affect stool electrolyte composition (Watten, Blackwell, and Phillips, 1962), the patients were divided into two groups: one with constant stool rates during brisk diarrhoea, and the second group with declining stool rates during recovery from diarrhoea. All patients received intravenous therapy and standardized diets without salt restriction. The first group of 15 patients with constant stool rates was rehydrated but was maintained in a mildly hypovolaemic state with plasma specific gravities of 1.027 to 1.030 (normal = 1.024-1.027) in order to retain the hypovolaemic stimulus to aldosterone release. During the course of study these patients demonstrated mild clinical dehydration with no sweat and low jugular venous pressure, but care was taken to prevent oliguria, postural hypotension, and tachycardia. Stool and urine were collected for eight-hour periods and were analysed for sodium, potassium, chloride, and bicarbonate by standard methods. After two control periods a single oral dose of 100 mg spironolactone (Aldactone-A, Searle and Co.) was given. Stool and urine collections were continued for an additional 48 hours.

A second group of eight patients with declining stool rates was studied. These patients were kept well hydrated (plasma specific gravities were 1.022-1.026) with intravenous fluids to avoid any hypovolaemic stimulus to aldosterone release. In addition, they were given spironolactone 50 mg orally every eight hours to block any remaining aldosterone effect. Stool and urine volume and electrolytes were determined for eight-hour periods until diarrhoea had stopped.

Results

As shown in Fig. 1, spironolactone significantly raised the sodium : potassium ratio of choleraic stool. This was effected both by an increase in sodium and a decrease in potassium concentrations, the latter being smaller and thus changing the ratio more. The effect of spironolactone began in most patients

Received for publication 11 January 1972.
Fig. 1  Effect of spironolactone (100 mg) on average stool sodium: potassium ratios (± 1 SEM) in 15 patients during cholera. Bar graph above shows there is no significant change of stool rate during the study period. Bottom graph shows average stool sodium: potassium ratios during 36 hours of study. Paired data show that the average rise in sodium:potassium ratio from control to peak (usually at 12-16 hours after spironolactone) is 4·63 (p < 0·001), and fall from peak to control values (by 28-36 hours after spironolactone) is 4·89 (p < 0·001).

Discussion

Aldosterone is known to play an important role in sodium and potassium metabolism (Yunis, Bercovitch, Stein, Levitt, and Goldstein, 1964; Gelb and Gerson, 1969). Spironolactone, because of its ability to compete with aldosterone at the target cell for a specific nuclear binding site, competitively antagonizes the action of aldosterone (Liddle, 1961; Porter...
Effect of spironolactone on stool electrolyte losses during human cholera

![Graph showing the effect of spironolactone on stool electrolyte losses during cholera](image)

**Fig. 2** Effect of spironolactone (50 mg every eight hours) on average stool sodium: potassium ratios during declining stool rates in eight well hydrated cholera patients. Correlation of stool rate with sodium: potassium ratios is highly significant (r < 0.001, n = 34). Regression equation with stool rate as the independent variable is y = 7.168 ± 2.510x; r = 0.5526.

This agent has been shown to block the increased entry of potassium into ileal and colonic loops of aldosterone-loaded dogs (Elmslie, Mulholland, and Shields, 1966).

During states of volume depletion, the increased secretion of aldosterone leads to renal retention of sodium, a vital response to hypovolaemia (Davis et al, 1961). We have demonstrated that during the diarrhoea of cholera this hormone also leads to gastrointestinal retention of sodium and chloride and excretion of potassium. This is believed to occur predominantly in the colon. The electrolyte composition of choleraic small intestinal fluid has been shown to be similar to that of serum (Banwell, Pierce, Mitra, Brigham, Caranasos, Keimowitz, Fedson, Thomas, Gorbach, Sack, and Mondal, 1970). However, unless stool rate is extremely rapid, cholera stool contains decreased sodium and increased potassium concentrations, indicating significant sodium absorption and potassium excretion during transit through the colon (Watten et al, 1962; Banwell et al, 1970; Mahalanabis, Wallace, Kallen, Mondal, and Pierce, 1970). In our studies with uniform stool rates, spironolactone nearly doubled the stool sodium: potassium ratio. The beginning of the effect of spironolactone, the maximal effect, and the duration of effect on stool electrolytes are similar to those reported by Edmonds and Wilson (1960) on urine electrolytes.

From the data in Table it is clear that aldosterone, as determined from its transient block of spironolactone, caused retention of 74 m-equiv of sodium and 35 m-equiv of chloride daily during cholera. However, this hormone simultaneously doubled the potassium excretion and caused an additional daily stool potassium loss of 71 m-equiv. This potentiates the dangerous potassium depletion in cholera. Although these effects are readily blocked by spironolactone, unfortunately potential renal effects in dehydrated patients preclude any recommendation for the use of this drug in cholera therapy.

During human cholera, a fall in stool sodium and rise in stool potassium concentrations have been reported as stool rate decreases, suggesting that cation transport is greater with slower transit time through the colon (Watten et al, 1962). Despite full hydration, which should minimize aldosterone secretion and specific inhibition of its action with spironolactone, we were unable to eliminate the fall in sodium concentration and rise in potassium concentration with declining stool rates. This suggests that with a prolonged colonic transit time transport of these cations may occur independently of aldosterone.

We thank Miss Dorothy Torrence and the nursing staff at PSCRL Hospital for their excellent care of patients being studied.

Reprint requests should be sent to Dr R. L. Guerrant, SEATO Cholera Research Programme, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Building 31, Room 7A03, National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Maryland 20014, USA.

References


The February 1972 Issue

**THE FEBRUARY 1972 ISSUE CONTAINS THE FOLLOWING PAPERS**

75Se-selenomethionine scanning in the diagnosis of tumours of the pancreas and adjacent viscera: The use of the test and its impact on survival DENS M. MCCARTHY, PAMELA BROWN, R. N. MELMED, J. E. AGNEW, AND I. A. D. BOUCHIER

The detection and measurement of circulating gastrin-like activity by bioassay D. G. COLIN-JONES AND J. E. LENNARD-JONES

Intestinal absorption of an arginine-containing peptide in cystinuria A. M. ASATOOR, B. D. W. HARRISON, M. D. MILNE, AND D. I. PROSSER

Effect of truncal vagotomy on acid and pepsin: Response to a cholinergic drug in man D. J. COWLEY

Intrajejunal volatile fatty acids in the stagnant loop syndrome A. J. CHERNOV, W. F. DOE, AND D. GOMPertz

Intraluminal fat digestion in the chronic alcoholic GARY M. ROGGIN, FRANK L. IBER, AND WILLEM G. LINSCHER

Coeliac disease, vasculitis, and cryoglobulinaemia WILLIAM F. DOE, D. EVANS, J. R. HOBBs, AND C. C. BOOTH

Intraabdominal abscesses due to azathioprine for Crohn’s disease T. C. NORTHFIELD AND C. I. ROBERTS

Plasma protein turnover (albumin, transferrin, IgG, IgM) in Ménetrier’s disease (giant hypertrophic gastritis): Evidence of non-selective protein loss STIG JARNUM AND KURT BIRGER JENSEN

A clinical evaluation of ano-rectal pressure studies in the diagnosis of Hirschsprung’s disease IAN AARONSON AND H. H. NIXON


**Technique**

New device for progressive dilatation of benign oesophageal stricture P. A. MAZURE, J. C. CHIOCCA, AND A. G. SPERCO

**Progress report** Hormonal control of pancreatic endocrine and exocrine secretion GILES YOUNGS

**Notes and activities**

Copies are still available and may be obtained from the PUBLISHING MANAGER,

BRITISH MEDICAL ASSOCIATION, TAVISTOCK SQUARE, LONDON, WC1H 9JR, price 87½p