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Electrolytes disturbances after kidney transplantation

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Water and electrolytes disturbances often occur in renal transplant recipients. The objective is to describe the pathophysiology and the treatment of the most prevalent abnormalities.

Methods: We screened PubMed for the following words in various combination: kidney transplantation and (disturbances or abnormalities) of (electrolytes or sodium or potassium or phosphate or calcium or acid-base).

Results: We found abnormalities in all major electrolytes, as a consequence of tubular dysfunction caused by both rejection episodes and toxic effects of calcineurin inhibitors (CNIs; cyclosporine or tacrolimus). The renal tubular acidosis found in kidney transplant recipients is characterized by a normal anion gap and normal or high serum chloride levels. The incidence of hyperkalemia is 5–40% of patients treated with CNIs. The majority of kidney transplant recipients develop hypomagnesemia within the first weeks and months. Both cyclosporine and tacrolimus do induce hypomagnesemia by several mechanisms. Severe magnesium depletion may include clinical manifestations such as confusion, muscle weakness, tremor, dysphagia, tetany and convulsions. The immediate posttransplant period (first 3 months) is often accompanied by a decline in serum phosphate. Phosphate substitution is needed when serum levels fall below 0.5 mmol/l, or in patients with clinical symptoms and serum levels between 0.5 and 1.0 mmol/l. Hypercalcemia is also a common disorder in the chronic posttransplant phase, and is most often due to persistent hyperparathyroidism.

Conclusions: Patients with kidney transplants display electrolytes abnormalities more frequently than non-transplanted patients with the same levels of renal function. A good knowledge of their physiopathology and treatment is important in the care of those patients.

KEYWORDS

Kidney transplantation;
potassium; calcium;
magnesium; phosphate

Introduction

Kidney transplantation is the best strategy for patients who reach terminal renal failure. Each year, more than 400 kidney transplantations are performed in Belgium. It is thus likely that general practitioners and internal medicine physicians will come across one of those patients during their career.

Water and electrolyte abnormalities frequently occur in kidney transplant patients. They most commonly occur as consequence of tubular dysfunction caused by acute and/or chronic rejection, or by the direct toxic tubular effects of calcineurin inhibitors (CNIs; cyclosporine or tacrolimus). Although acute and/or chronic reduction in renal function is the most common and significant renal adverse effect induced by CNI, tubular dysfunctions are also described and are manifested by metabolic acidosis, magnesium loss, hyperkalemia, hypercalciuria, phosphate wasting and hyponatremia. In addition, failing grafts (eGFR <30 ml/min/1.73 m²) are also susceptible to the electrolyte disturbances encountered with advanced renal failure.

Here, we describe the mechanisms and treatment of the most common electrolyte and acid–base disturbances observed after kidney transplantation.

Metabolic acidosis

There are three major types of renal tubular acidosis (RTA): type I, resulting from a defect in distal tubular acid excretion as a result of decreased H⁺ secretion or back leak of secreted hydrogen; Type II, resulting from proximal tubule HCO₃⁻ wasting; and Type IV, resulting from decreased aldosterone action either due to a reduced hormone level or a functional resistance. Three major forms of distal RTA have been described in transplant recipients, the classic type Ia, the hyperkalemic type Ib (voltage-dependent) and a mixed form with additional bicarbonate wasting (type III) [1–4].

RTA is a common complication after kidney transplantation but information about its prevalence, clinical importance and risk factors in long-term allograft recipients is scarce. The form usually found in kidney transplant patients is characterized by a normal anion gap and normal or high serum chloride levels. RTA, especially in the early posttransplant period, is due to

suboptimal allograft function, CNI nephrotoxicity, acute rejection or ischemic tubular dysfunction [5–7]. Description of the incidence and prevalence of the different subtypes is still uncertain and needs further research (see below). Among all the immunosuppressive drugs, CNIs are considered to be the main contributors to RTA in kidney transplant recipients. Indeed, no study has reported on the involvement of the other immunosuppressive drugs in causing RTA, except for some cases of metabolic acidosis owing to diarrhea-associated intestinal bicarbonate loss secondary to mycophenolate toxicity [6].

CNIs might induce functional tubular damage, which is responsible for the occurrence of disturbances of the electrolyte tubular transport, including RTA. Watanabe et al. [8] demonstrated that cyclosporine induces RTA by blocking the peptidyl prolyl cis-trans isomerase activity, through a specific cyclophilin-dependent mechanism, but not involving calcineurin inhibition. Mohebbi et al. [9] demonstrated that tacrolimus may affect several major transport proteins involved in the renal control of acid–base balance, such as H⁺-ATPase transport protein and AE1 (anion exchanger).

While type I RTA has been most frequently reported, types II and IV have also been observed. For instance, type II RTA seems to prevail during the early course posttransplantation (first 6 months). This form of RTA is characterized by bicarbonate wasting due to the toxic effects of CNIs or persistent hyperparathyroidism [10,11]. As the tubular damage recovers and hyperparathyroidism resolves, proximal RTA improves [1,11]. In addition, the high doses of CNI used in the early period may lead to type IV RTA. The mechanism behind this CNI effect is the suppression of renin–angiotensin–aldosterone axis [5].

In the long-term, distal type I RTA seems to be more prevalent due to chronic CNI nephrotoxicity or to chronic transplant rejection [1]. In addition, acute transplant rejection seems to have an influence on the subtype of RTA present posttransplantation [1]. The number of acute rejections was significantly higher in type I RTA.

The evidence supporting the beneficial effects of correcting acidosis has been described in all chronic kidney disease stages except in kidney transplant patients [12,13].

Most data indicate that the RTA-inducing effects of CNI are dependent on the drug dose, because a reduction of the dosage has been reported to be often associated with a recovery of the RTA [14,15]. There is some evidence that RTA is more frequent in patients on tacrolimus than on cyclosporin treatment [1,16]. RTA seen in kidney transplant recipients receiving CNI is often associated with high potassium serum levels. The presence of this association can be useful

not only for a correct diagnosis but also for a proper correction of the metabolic acidosis [6].

Hyperkalemia

The incidence of hyperkalemia is 5–40% of the patients treated with CNIs [17]. CNIs impair renal potassium excretion through different mechanisms. First, they decrease the activity of the renin–angiotensin–aldosterone system due to a tubular insensitivity to aldosterone [18]. Second, CNI can act through direct inhibition of ROMK (the renal outer medullary K⁺ channel), Na-K ATPase and direct activation of chloride shunt mechanism [19].

In patients treated with a beta-blocker, cyclosporine may exert a secondary effect on potassium homeostasis. In these patients, transient hyperkalemia may occur as a result of increasing potassium efflux from the intracellular to the extracellular fluid space through an as yet undefined mechanism [20].

The potassium level is most often only slightly elevated (around 5.5 mmol/l), and rarely requires treatment [17].

Hypomagnesemia

Data on the incidence of hypomagnesemia after transplantation are limited, although the majority of kidney transplant recipients seem to develop hypomagnesemia within the first weeks and month posttransplantation. Both cyclosporine and tacrolimus do induce hypomagnesemia [21–24]. CNIs induce a downregulation of the renal expression of epidermal growth factor and the distal magnesium absorber Transient Receptor Potential Melastatin 6 in the distal collecting tubule [23–25]. This leads to renal magnesium wasting associated with an increased absolute and fractional urinary excretion of magnesium.

In more than 20% of the kidney transplant patients, the hypomagnesemia persists for many years after transplantation [26,27]. However, CNIs-induced hypomagnesemia is often asymptomatic. Severe magnesium depletion in this setting is rare but has been reported and may include clinical manifestations such as confusion, muscle weakness, tremor, dysphagia, tetany and convulsions [28–30]. Studies by Van Laecke et al. [30] and Tin et al. [31] suggest a possible role of magnesium deficiency in graft dysfunction.

Hypophosphatemia

The immediate posttransplant period (first 3 months) is often accompanied by a decline in serum phosphate. In a study by Evenepoel et al., 90% of patients experience a temporary hypophosphatemia (defined as serum phosphate ≤ 2.3 mg/dl [≤ 0.74 mmol/l]). Mild-to-moderate hypophosphatemia (serum phosphate >1.5 and

≤ 2.3 mg/dl [>0.48 and ≤ 0.74 mmol/l]) was seen in 24% of the patients and severe hypophosphatemia (serum phosphate ≤ 1.5 mg/dl [≤ 0.48 mmol/l]) was encountered in 66% of patients [32]. This is due to the fact that when a patient undergoes transplantation, he/she is still under the influence of an hormonal 'phosphaturic climate' (high levels of serum phosphate, PTH and FGF-23 and low levels of 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D), causing renal phosphate wasting. Furthermore, Cyclosporine has been shown to cause a decrease in fractional tubular phosphate reabsorption. Although the exact mechanism is not known, in the rat, cyclosporine inhibits the proximal tubular brush border membrane Na/Pi cotransport activity [33]. A study by Falkiewicz et al. showed a faster recovery of impaired phosphate reabsorption by the proximal tubule in patients treated with tacrolimus compared to cyclosporine [34].

Because of the rapid changes in serum phosphate after kidney transplantation, KDIGO (Kidney Disease Improving Global Outcomes) guidelines recommend to measure serum calcium and phosphate levels at least weekly, until stabilization [35]. In patients with moderate hypophosphatemia (0.5–1.0 mmol/l), substitution of phosphate, either orally or parenterally, is generally not necessary. Substitution of phosphate may even lead to nephrocalcinosis in the kidney allograft [36,37]. We suggest phosphate substitution should only be considered when serum levels fall below 0.5 mmol/l, or in patients with clinical symptoms and serum levels between 0.5 and 1.0 mmol/l.

Hyperphosphatemia

In case of impaired graft function, hyperphosphatemia might recur, which needs dietary and/or pharmacological interventions. KDIGO guidelines suggest to manage these abnormalities as for patients with CKD G3a–G5 without kidney transplantation [35]. It should be taken into account that the phosphate binder sevelamer has been shown to reduce the peak plasma concentration and area under the curve of mycophenolate mofetil reflecting interference with its gastrointestinal uptake [38]. Because of this, phosphate binders should be used with caution in patients taking immunosuppressive drugs, including renal transplant recipients.

Hypocalcemia

A decline in serum calcium levels may be seen in the immediate posttransplant period. A study by Nobata et al. shows an average drop in serum calcium of 7%, mainly due to a temporary increase in urinary calcium excretion [39]. Other possible reasons for this immediate drop in serum calcium levels are the abrupt discontinuation of calcium-containing phosphate binders and active vitamin D supplements, as well as glucocorticoid-induced calcium loss. Along this line, CNIs also induce

osteopenia and bone loss by accelerating bone remodeling [40]. Furthermore, Yang et al. [41] and Steiner et al. [42] demonstrated a decreased renal calbindin – D28K expression (a vitamin D-dependent calcium binding protein) in the kidneys of cyclosporine-treated rats, which was accompanied by a significant decrease in serum calcium concentration and an increase in urinary calcium excretion.

A few studies show that tacrolimus has a more favorable bone protective profile than cyclosporine, most probably indirectly related to their steroid-sparing effect [43,44].

Finally, the presence of metabolic acidosis (as seen further) can also result in hypercalciuria.

Hypercalcemia

Despite the higher mentioned early drop in serum calcium, hypercalcemia is also a common disorder in the chronic posttransplant phase. In a Canadian cohort, hypercalcemia (defined as a serum calcium >2.60 mmol/l) was seen in 16%, 13%, 10% and 10% of patients at 12, 24, 36 and 48 months after successful transplantation, respectively [45]. Of the patients with hypercalcemia, $>90\%$ had parathyroid hormone (PTH) levels above the upper limit of normal (ULN), and $>75\%$ had PTH levels $>2\times$ ULN [45]. One of the most important determinants of posttransplantation hyperparathyroidism is the pre-transplantation PTH level, especially in patients with good graft function [parathyroid]. Thus, hypercalcemia is mainly due to secondary hyperparathyroidism persisting after transplantation (tertiary hyperparathyroidism).

Initially, in case of asymptomatic, mild hypercalcemia, watchful waiting is an option, mainly in the first year after transplantation. In case of severe, persistent or symptomatic hypercalcemia, treatment options are calcimimetics (cinacalcet) or parathyroidectomy (subtotal vs. total with or without autotransplantation) [47]. Bisphosphonates, used in the classical treatment of hypercalcemia, is not a preferred choice in renal transplant recipients, as it may lead to adynamic bone disease despite preservation of bone mineral density [48]. A systematic review and meta-analysis demonstrated that the use of cinacalcet appeared to be safe and effective for treatment of posttransplant hyperparathyroidism [49]. Parathyroidectomy is a very efficient treatment to correct hypercalcemia and treat hyperparathyroidism. A retrospective review demonstrated that near total parathyroidectomy leads to resolution of hypercalcemia in 97% of patients at a median follow-up of 3 years. In 80% of patients, PTH levels fell to <250 pg/ml [50]. Optimal timing of parathyroidectomy is a matter of discussion. Some centers opt to perform a parathyroidectomy during the time on the waiting list in patients with pre-transplant hypercalcemia or severe secondary hyperparathyroidism.

Hyponatremia

Kidney transplant patients are predisposed to develop hyponatremia since they are exposed to immunologic, infectious and pharmacologic changes, the combination of which alters their salt and water homeostasis. Studies have suggested that cyclosporine reduces proximal tubular sodium reabsorption by decreasing sodium–hydrogen exchanger activity, which is responsible for reabsorbing 30–60% of the filtered sodium [51].

Tacrolimus alters distal tubular sodium handling by inducing aldosterone resistance, thereby causing a salt-losing nephropathy [52–56]. This explains why hyponatremia appears to be more common under tacrolimus than cyclosporine therapy. Furthermore, it explains the ineffectiveness of fludrocortisone for treating tacrolimus-induced hyponatremia [51,52,57].

Conclusions

Patients with kidney transplants display electrolyte abnormalities more frequently than non-transplanted patients at the same levels of renal function. This is due to the specific consequences of tubular dysfunctions caused by either rejection episodes or the use of CNIs. A good knowledge of their physiopathology and treatment is important in the care of those patients.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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