Plasma C-Reactive Protein Levels Among Children With Sleep-Disordered Breathing

Riva Tauman, MD; Anna Ivanenko, MD, PhD; Louise M. O’Brien, PhD; and David Gozal, MD

ABSTRACT. Introduction. Levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), an important serum marker of inflammation with major implications for cardiovascular morbidity and atherogenesis, are elevated among adult patients with sleep-disordered breathing (SDB). We hypothesized that elevated CRP plasma levels would also be present among children with SDB.

Methods. Eighty-one children (mean age: 9.3 ± 3.7 years) underwent polysomnographic evaluations. Samples for plasma CRP level and lipid profile determinations were drawn the next morning.

Results. Because plasma CRP levels were not normally distributed in this cohort, logarithmic transformation was applied. Log plasma CRP levels were significantly higher in the SDB group (obstructive apnea/hypopnea index [AHI] of ≥5), compared with the mild SDB group (AHI of ≥1 and <5) and the control group (AHI of <1). Significant positive correlations were found between log CRP levels and AHI (r = .53) and arousal index (r = .28), whereas an inverse correlation was found between the lowest nocturnal arterial oxygen saturation and log CRP levels (r = -.47). These correlations persisted after exclusion of outliers. Moreover, 94% of the children with elevated log CRP levels reported excessive daytime sleepiness and/or learning problems, compared with 62% of the children with normal log CRP levels.

Conclusions. Plasma CRP levels were increased among some children with SDB and were correlated with AHI, arterial oxygen saturation nadir, and arousal index measures. These changes were particularly prominent among children who were sleepy or presented with neurobehavioral complaints. The intermittent hypoxemia and sleep fragmentation of SDB may underlie inflammatory responses, the magnitude of which may ultimately lead to the cardiovascular, cognitive, and behavioral morbidities of SDB. Pediatrics 2004;113:e564–e569. URL: http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/113/6/e564; sleep-disordered breathing, C-reactive protein, atherogenesis.

ABBREVIATIONS. SDB, sleep-disordered breathing; CRP, C-reactive protein; BMI, body mass index; HDL, high-density lipoprotein; TST, total sleep time; AHI, obstructive apnea/hypopnea index; SPO2, arterial oxygen saturation.

Sleep-disordered breathing (SDB) is characterized by repeated events of partial or complete upper airway obstruction during sleep, resulting in disruption of normal ventilation, hypoxemia, and sleep fragmentation. SDB is associated with neurobehavioral and cardiovascular morbidities.1–7 The increased prevalence of hypertension and atherogenesis among SDB patients has been ascribed to sympathetic activation8–10 and to endothelial dysfunction,11–13 most likely resulting from initiation and propagation of inflammatory responses within the microvasculature.

C-reactive protein (CRP), an important serum marker of inflammation, has emerged as one of the most powerful independent predictors of risk for future cardiovascular morbidity.14–16 In addition, recent evidence suggests that CRP may directly participate in atheromatous lesion formation through leukocyte activation and endothelial dysfunction.17–20 CRP has also been found to be independently associated with insulin resistance21–23 and low levels of the fat-derived cardioprotective hormone adiponectin,24 supporting the association between inflammation, atherogenesis, and insulin resistance.

Among adult patients with SDB, plasma CRP levels are elevated and are correlated with the severity of the disease.25 Moreover, plasma CRP levels are decreased after treatment with continuous positive airway pressure,26 which suggests that SDB leads to inflammatory responses that ultimately promote cardiovascular complications. Although substantial evidence of the cardiovascular morbidity of SDB among children has been accumulated in the past decade, no studies thus far have examined the levels of CRP among children with SDB. In this study, we assessed plasma CRP levels among a large cohort of children and also examined whether CRP levels were associated with some of the typical clinical complaints that usually lead to referral for evaluation of snoring.

METHODS

Consecutive snoring children who were being evaluated for the presence of SDB were enrolled in the study. Exclusion criteria included the presence of genetic disorders, cerebral palsy, neuromuscular diseases, or any systemic diseases or acute infectious processes. All parents completed a detailed, routine, intake, clinical questionnaire that inquired, among many other questions, about the presence of daytime sleepiness and learning and behavioral problems of their child (see “Appendix”). Daytime sleepiness was considered present if a positive answer was obtained for either of the following 2 questions. “Is your child sleepy during...
Data are presented as means ± SD unless otherwise indicated. Because plasma CRP levels were not normally distributed, logarithmic transformation was applied. Comparisons of demographic data among groups were performed by analysis of variance or analysis of variance followed by post hoc comparisons, with P values adjusted for unequal variances when appropriate (Levene’s test for equality of variances), or χ² analyses with Fisher’s exact test (dichotomous outcomes). Because obesity would be expected to contribute to increased CRP levels, we performed analysis of covariance with relative BMI as a covariate. Correlations of log CRP levels with arousal index, AHI, and SPO₂ nadir were performed by linear regression, followed by calculation of Pearson correlation coefficients. All P values reported are 2-tailed, with statistical significance set at <.05.

RESULTS

Eighty-one children (58% male), 3 to 18 years of age (mean: 9.3 ± 3.7 years), participated in the study. Of these, 32 children (19 male) were found to have SDB, 34 children (18 male) were considered to have mild SDB, and 15 children (10 male) were in the control group. Subject characteristics are presented in Table 1. There were no significant differences in age, gender, and relative BMI among the 3 groups; however, there was a trend for a higher relative BMI in the SDB group. No significant differences were observed in the serum lipid profiles for the 3 groups.

Because plasma CRP levels were not normally distributed, logarithmic transformation was applied. Log plasma CRP levels were significantly higher in the SDB group, compared with the mild SDB group and the control group (P < .0001 and P = .04, respectively) (Fig 1). Because obesity would be expected to contribute to increased CRP levels, we performed analysis of covariance with relative BMI as a covariate. Log CRP levels were found to be associated with SDB independently of relative BMI (P < .0001). Furthermore, when multiple linear regression was performed for predicting log CRP levels with AHI, relative BMI, age, and gender as covariates, AHI accounted for 26% of the variance, with relative BMI providing an additional 7% of the variance (adjusted r², P < .0001).

Significant correlations were found between log CRP levels and AHI for the whole group (r = .53; P < .0001) (Fig 2A), as well as between log CRP levels and arousal index (r = .28; P < .01) (Fig 2B). In contrast, a significant negative correlation was found between the SPO₂ nadir and log CRP levels (r = −.47; P < .0001) (Fig 2C). These correlations persisted after exclusion of outliers (r = .50 and P < .0001 for AHI; r = .24 and P = .03 for arousal index; and r = −.45 and P < .0001 for SPO₂ nadir). No relationship was found between other parameters of sleep disruption and log CRP levels. These findings suggest that both the severity of respiratory disturbance and that of sleep fragmentation may contribute to plasma CRP levels among snoring children.

Subsequent chart review identified a significantly higher frequency of excessive daytime sleepiness and learning problems among the children with elevated log CRP levels (defined as more than −0.52, corresponding to a laboratory value of >0.3 mg/dL), compared with children with log CRP levels of less...
TABLE 1. Demographic and Polysomnographic Characteristics of 81 Children With AHI < 1 (Control), AHI ≥ 1 and <5 (mild SDB), or AHI ≥ 5 (SDB).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Control (n = 15) (AHI &lt; 1)</th>
<th>Mild SDB (n = 34) (1 ≤ AHI &lt; 5)</th>
<th>SDB (n = 32) (AHI ≥ 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (y)</td>
<td>10.1 ± 2.9 (5–15)</td>
<td>8.9 ± 3.6 (3–17)</td>
<td>9.4 ± 3.1 (3–18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (male/female)</td>
<td>10:5</td>
<td>18:16</td>
<td>19:13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative BMI, %</td>
<td>146.8 ± 45.0</td>
<td>147.3 ± 65.6</td>
<td>175.4 ± 60.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AHI</td>
<td>0.42 ± 0.28</td>
<td>2.1 ± 1.0*</td>
<td>14.6 ± 14.0†‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPO₂ nadir, %</td>
<td>91.0 ± 3.7</td>
<td>88.6 ± 4.7</td>
<td>83.4 ± 7.8‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End tidal carbon dioxide (mm Hg)</td>
<td>47.0 ± 7.1</td>
<td>45.8 ± 5.2</td>
<td>51.7 ± 9.1‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arousal index</td>
<td>6.6 ± 2.7</td>
<td>11.0 ± 3.6*</td>
<td>16.2 ± 7.8‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep efficiency, %</td>
<td>89.1 ± 7.9</td>
<td>89.9 ± 8.5</td>
<td>91.2 ± 8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 1, %</td>
<td>8.0 ± 6.0</td>
<td>8.8 ± 7.9</td>
<td>9.0 ± 8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stage 2, %</td>
<td>44.9 ± 8.2</td>
<td>45.5 ± 9.5</td>
<td>46.1 ± 9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow wave sleep, %</td>
<td>23.5 ± 6.4</td>
<td>22.4 ± 7.6</td>
<td>22.7 ± 6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REM sleep, %</td>
<td>23.2 ± 6.0</td>
<td>23.3 ± 6.2</td>
<td>22.2 ± 7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cholesterol, mg/dL</td>
<td>160.1 ± 36.7</td>
<td>172.0 ± 35.1</td>
<td>155.6 ± 25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triglycerides, mg/dL</td>
<td>99.8 ± 65.4</td>
<td>115.4 ± 90.7</td>
<td>101.8 ± 50.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDL, mg/dL</td>
<td>49.9 ± 16.3</td>
<td>50.9 ± 17.4</td>
<td>48.3 ± 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDL, mg/dL</td>
<td>90.3 ± 34.3</td>
<td>97.5 ± 30.4</td>
<td>86.9 ± 22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log CRP</td>
<td>-0.8 ± 0.33</td>
<td>-0.91 ± 0.28</td>
<td>-0.51 ± 0.40†‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.22 ± 0.27 mg/dL)</td>
<td>(0.15 ± 0.12 mg/dL)</td>
<td>(0.46 ± 0.39 mg/dL)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

REM indicates rapid eye movement; LDL, low-density lipoprotein.
* P < .05, mild SDB versus control.
† P < .05, SDB versus control.
‡ P < .05, SDB versus mild SDB.

CRP levels among children with SDB, and levels were correlated with the severity of SDB. This association suggests that SDB elicits the activation of inflammatory processes and that the latter may be responsible in part for the morbidity associated with the disease. Our findings agree with those of a previous study of adult patients with SDB, in which similar correlations were found between the severity and AHI and arousal index and correlated inversely with the SPO₂ nadir, suggesting that inflammatory processes are triggered by SDB among children. Furthermore, an increased prevalence of learning problems and excessive daytime sleepiness was present among children with elevated CRP levels, even with matching for AHI or arousal index. Taken together, these findings suggest that the inflammatory processes previously shown to be elicited by SDB in a rodent model may also be operative among children with SDB and could play a role in the pathogenesis of the behavioral and learning deficits associated with this otherwise highly prevalent condition.

CRP, an acute-phase reaction protein, is synthesized in the liver, and its expression is regulated by cytokines. CRP levels are usually stable during a 24-hour period; the levels not only reflect the intensity of the inflammatory response but also have been shown to provide a reliable estimate of the risk of atherogenesis. Indeed, several large-scale, prospective, epidemiologic studies have shown that plasma levels of CRP are a strong independent predictor of risk for cardiovascular morbidity. Furthermore, although CRP is a nonspecific marker of inflammation, recent epidemiologic studies suggested that CRP may participate directly in atheromatous lesion formation through reduction of nitric oxide synthesis and induction of the expression of particular adhesion molecules in endothelial cells. Particular adhesion molecules in endothelial cells.36
of disease and the degree of CRP level increases. We also found that CRP levels were correlated with the arousal index, indicating that elevated CRP levels may result from both the intermittent hypoxemia and the sleep fragmentation associated with SDB. Indeed, SDB-induced hypoxic stress has been shown to modulate levels of circulating inflammatory mediators and could lead to endothelial dysfunction through induction of cellular adhesion molecules in response to inflammatory cytokines. Plasma levels of tumor necrosis factor-α and interleukin-6 were significantly increased among patients with SDB. Elevated levels of circulating adhesion molecules such as intercellular adhesion molecule-1, vascular cell adhesion molecule-1, and E-selectin were also reported and correlated with the severity of SDB.

What are the potential clinical implications of these findings? The strong epidemiologic links between CRP levels and atherogenesis may indicate that the coincidence of SDB with higher CRP levels may increase the risk of atheroma formation among such children, thus promoting the development of cardiovascular morbidity later in life. CRP elevations in the context of SDB not only may provide a marker of the magnitude of the inflammatory response to SDB but also may be indicative of particular populations at increased risk for the development of long-term cardiovascular complications, which might be partially triggered or accelerated by the SDB disor-

Fig 2. A, Scatterplot of log CRP levels plotted against AHI for 81 children. B, Scatterplot of log CRP levels plotted against arousal index for 81 children. C, Scatterplot of log CRP levels plotted against SpO₂ nadir for 81 children. Linear regression lines are shown and were all statistically significant (see text for details).

Fig 3. A, Scatterplot of log CRP levels plotted against AHI for 81 children. B, Scatterplot of log CRP levels plotted against arousal index for 81 children. Children with excessive daytime sleepiness and/or learning problems are indicated with open circles, whereas children without excessive daytime sleepiness and/or learning problems are indicated with closed circles. The line represents the logarithmically transformed value of 0.3 mg/dL (−0.52), which was considered the cutoff value for elevated CRP levels.
The potential end-organ morbidity induced by SDB through an inflammation-mediated process is intriguingly supported by the significant differences in the frequency of excessive sleepiness and learning problems among children with elevated CRP levels, compared with children with similar AHI or arousal index values who did not develop increased CRP concentrations. Of note, the findings of sleepiness and learning problems were based on subjective parental reports, which is an obvious limitation of the current study. However, objective correlates of excessive sleepiness in children, i.e., the multiple sleep latency test, are very insensitive among children. Although these findings need to be corroborated with more appropriate and objective methods, rather than using parental reports alone, they raise the possibility that the magnitude of the inflammatory response may underlie components of neurocognitive and vigilance deficits associated with SDB.

No significant differences in serum lipid profiles emerged among the various SDB groups, indicating that specific alterations in lipid regulation do not seem to occur as a function of SDB severity. However, the negative correlation between HDL levels and plasma CRP levels and the positive correlation between triglyceride levels and CRP levels are in close agreement with previous reports on adults, suggesting that SDB may play a role in the regulation of HDL and triglycerides.

CONCLUSIONS

SDB among children is associated with increased plasma CRP levels, and the latter appear more frequently among children presenting with symptoms of excessive daytime sleepiness and/or learning deficits. Additional studies are needed to examine the short-term and long-term consequences of the inflammatory responses induced by SDB and their reversibility with treatment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was supported by National Institutes of Health grant HL65270, Department of Education grant H324E010101, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention grant E11/CCE 422081-01, and the Commonwealth of Kentucky Research Challenge Trust Fund. R.T. was supported by an Ohio Valley American Heart Association Fellowship.
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Pediatrics 2004;113:e564
DOI: 10.1542/peds.113.6.e564

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Plasma C-Reactive Protein Levels Among Children With Sleep-Disordered Breathing
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_Pediatrics_ 2004;113:e564
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