Review

Insulin resistance and rheumatoid arthritis

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Abstract

Resistance to insulin action is a feature that accompanies certain diseases among which chronic inflammatory states like rheumatoid arthritis are included. What is, what its pathogenesis is, how it is measured, and what clinical and therapeutic implications have in rheumatoid arthritis patients is a topic not familiar to rheumatologists that is reviewed in this paper.

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Definition

Insulin is a polypeptide hormone produced and secreted by the beta cells of the Langerhans islets in the pancreas, in the form of an inactive precursor called proinsulin. It is in involved in the metabolic use of nutrients, especially in carbohydrate anabolism, and its metabolic action is to maintain glucose homeostasis as well as to promote its efficient use. Its maximum effect is defined by the responsiveness to the latter, while the insulin concentration required to elicit half of the maximum response is defined as insulin sensitivity.

Insulin resistance (IR) is a state in which a high insulin concentration is associated with an inadequate response to glucose with normal or high levels of glycaemia. It is, therefore, a pathological condition characterised by a loss of the physiological response of peripheral tissues to insulin activity (endogenous or exogenous). The existence of IR has been known since the commercial use of insulin and initially referred to patients requiring high doses of insulin to control their hyperglycaemia. This was due to the presence of antibodies resulting from the use of non-human insulin. The disappearance of these antibodies through the use of recombinant human insulin has changed the view of the pathogenesis of IR. The clinical spectrum accompanying IR is varied and is determined by how insulin acts on different target tissues. Since this hormone promotes glucose uptake in skeletal muscle through stimulation of GLUT4 (glucose transporter type 4), IR causes this signal to occur in a defective manner, producing a decrease in glucose uptake by the muscle. In the liver, insulin in its physiological form inhibits the expression of gluconeogenic enzymes and, thus, hepatic synthesis of glucose increases in a state of IR. With regard to adipose tissue, insulin decreases the activity of certain lipases causing a decrease in the production of free fatty acids: the antilipolytic effect. Therefore, in a state of IR, there will be an increase in free fatty acids. The presence of hyperglycaemia is very common with IR in the presence of high insulin doses, but it is not uncommon to find patients with normoglycaemia having alterations such as acanthosis nigricans, hyperandrogenism, amenorrhea and infertility, polycystic ovary syndrome, obesity, alopecia, hirsutism, hypertriglyceridaemia and so on.

Currently, IR is regarded as a component of several diseases with different aetiologies and various manifestations, as listed in Table

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1. The relationship between insulin resistance and microvascular dysfunction as an early marker of atherosclerosis seems clear. For some authors, all these clinical manifestations are grouped into a single syndrome called syndrome X or metabolic syndrome, in which IR would be a common denominator and the link between them all; however, according to the National Cholesterol Education Program-Adult Treatment Panel III (NCEP-ATPIII), the presence of IR is not required for the diagnosis of metabolic syndrome.

**Measurement of insulin resistance**

How to measure IR is open to debate, because there are several useful methods. The following is an abbreviated summary of the different techniques and indexes available, within which there are direct methods, indirect methods and simple substitution indexes.

**Direct methods**

- **Euglycemic hyperinsulinemic clamp.** This is accepted as the standard method for determining sensitivity to insulin in humans. After an overnight fast, insulin is administered intravenously at a rate per minute dependant on body surface. This infusion of insulin leads to an insulin blood level above normal (hyperinsulinaemia). As a result, glucose usage in skeletal muscle and fat increases, while in contrast, hepatic glucose production is inhibited. Under these conditions, administration of 20% dextrose is started in order to maintain (clamp) glucose at normal levels. A condition of general equilibrium of plasma insulin, blood glucose and dextrose infusion rate is reached after several hours of constant insulin infusion. Assuming that the state of hyperinsulinaemia is sufficient to completely suppress hepatic glucose production, and since there is no net change in blood glucose concentration under these conditions, the glucose infusion rate should be equal to the glucose utilisation rate. In this way, it is possible to calculate insulin sensitivity, using the equation:

\[ SL = \frac{glucose \text{ utilisation rate}}{glucose \times \Delta \text{insulin}} \]

\[ (\Delta \text{insulin} = \text{insulin increase}) \]

- **Insulin suppression test.** After fasting for 8 h, a dose of somatostatin is administered to inhibit endogenous secretion of insulin and glucagon. Subsequently, insulin (25 mU·m⁻²·min⁻¹) and glucose (240 mg·m⁻²·min⁻¹) are administered for 3 h through a single intravenous catheter while another is used to determine glucose and insulin periodically. Glucose and insulin concentrations at a steady state are obtained after approximately 2 h. These will be higher in insulin-resistant subjects and lower in insulin-sensitive subjects. This test has the advantage over the clamp test of being less technically demanding and that the equilibrium concentration between glucose and insulin is obtained at an earlier stage.

**Indirect methods**

- **Minimal analysis model after frequently sampled intravenous glucose tolerance test (FSIVGTT).** After an overnight fast, a glucose bolus of 0.3 g/kg is administered and 20 min later, another insulin bolus of 4 mU/kg/min is administered for 5 min. After this, blood glucose and insulin measurements are taken every minute for 10 min, then every 3 min until 30 min and thereafter every 10 min until 180 minutes have passed. The data obtained are processed by a computer program designed for this purpose (minimal model software, MINMOD) to determine insulin sensitivity. With respect to the two direct methods described above, this method is different in that it uses dynamic data, rather than equilibrium concentrations and that it is reproducible and technically simpler.

- **Oral glucose tolerance test (OGTT).** This is widely used to diagnose glucose intolerance or type 2 diabetes. After fasting overnight and then taking 75 g of glucose, glycaemia is determined at 0, 30, 60 and 120 min. This should reflect the efficiency of the organism to dispose of glucose after an overload or eating. This method mimics the dynamics of glucose and insulin in a more physiological manner than FSIVGTT or clamp, but has the obvious disadvantage that glucose tolerance and insulin sensitivity are not equivalent concepts.

**Simple substitution indexes.** It is assumed that during fasting, glucose and insulin are in homeostasis and expressing a constant hepatic glucose secretion, that is, insulin secreted by β cells determines a relatively constant level of insulin, which will be higher or lower in accordance with resistance/sensitivity to it; hepatic glucose production will consequently be equivalent to the overall expenditure of glucose in fasting conditions. These indexes, which use only plasma glucose and insulin, are less costly tools that can be used in epidemiological studies, clinical trials and clinical practice. The first 4 are mentioned below: 1/insulin, glucose/insulin ratio, homeostasis model assessment (HOMA) and quantitative insulin sensitivity check index (QUICKI). These are simple substitution indexes for indirect methods; the remaining are derived from dynamic models.

- **Fasting 1/insulinemia.** In healthy subjects, insulin elevation is related to an increased resistance to it. Therefore, the index 1/insulin would decrease as a patient becomes insulin-resistant. It has the disadvantage that insulin is not distributed normally, so there is no strong linear correlation between this index and the clamp method. Similarly, this index does not take into account the low insulin secretion that occurs in the final stages of hyperglycaemia in patients with diabetes or glucose intolerance, so it would not be appropriate for use in patients with impaired pancreatic reserves.

- **Glucose/insulin ratio.** In patients without diabetes, this ratio would be equivalent to the 1/insulin rate. It has the disadvantage that a specific insulinemia may correspond to different glycaemias depending on whether the subject is diabetic or not. It is considered as a conceptually incorrect insulin sensitivity index.

- **Homeostasis assessment model (HOMA).** Described in 1985, this model uses the dynamic interaction between glucose and insulin
levels to predict insulin sensitivity or β cell production. It assumes a positive feedback loop between liver and pancreatic cells; that is, glucose concentration is defined by hepatic production, which is inhibited by insulin, while insulinemia is a reflection of β cell response to glucose concentration. Therefore, resistance to insulin would be determined by a diminished response of hepatic glucose production to the inhibitory effect of insulin. This model in its updated form (http://www.dtu.ox.ac.uk/homa), HOMA2, makes it possible to determine insulin sensitivity (S) and beta cell function (β). It correlates reasonably well with the clamp method, is useful in patients with moderate diabetes mellitus and states of insulin resistance associated to other diseases, but is not applicable in patients with severely damaged or null pancreatic function.

• Quantitative insulin sensitivity check index (QUICKI). Like the HOMA model, this represents a mathematical model of the insulin-glucose relationship, but has a different origin. It is based on the fact that the sensitivity data analysis of insulin and glucose during the first 20 min of FSIVGTT contains critical information about insulin sensitivity. In these data, fasting insulinemia does not follow a normal distribution but its logarithmic transformation improves its correlation with the clamp method. To this end, the formula: QU1CK1 = 1/log insulin + log glucose has an excellent correlation with the clamp method. It has the advantage over HOMA that it correlates better with the clamp method in diabetic and obese patients.

• Matsuda index. This represents a combination that reflects both hepatic and muscular insulin sensitivity via the formula:

\[
\text{Matsuda} = 10,000 \sqrt{\left(\frac{\text{glucose} \times \text{insulin}}{\text{mean (0-120)} \times \text{mean glucose during OGTT} \times \text{mean insulin during OGTT}}\right)}
\]

It has a reasonable correlation with the clamp method.

• Gutt index. Like the Matsuda index, it is a test derived from dynamic techniques which is closely correlated with the clamp method but has a complex determination:

\[
\text{Gutt} = 75,000 \times (G_0 - G_{120}) \times 0.19 \times \frac{\text{weight}}{120} \\
\times G_{\text{mean}} \text{ (0-120)} \times \log \text{insulin}_{\text{mean}} \text{ (0-120)}
\]

Where G0 is fasting glucose and G120 is glucose at 120 minutes.

Insulin resistance and inflammation

Since the 1950s, a certain correlation has been observed between chronic inflammatory conditions and resistance to insulin action. A relationship has been proven in the past decades between obesity and inflammation, two processes that are clearly linked with insulin resistance. Obesity studies in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and other conditions related to IR have found elevated levels of tumour necrosis factor (TNF), interleukin IL-6 and IL-8. Another common feature in these states is the elevation of C reactive protein, a non-specific acute phase reactant. The existence of a low-level inflammation state has been observed in relation to obesity, although the mechanisms generating it are not known in depth. One theory is that the expansion of adipose tissue (hypertrophy and hyperplasia of adipocytes) leads to local cellular hypoxia and activation of inflammatory signalling pathways. It is also known that certain cytokines secreted by adipocytes, known as adipokines (such as resistin, adiponectin and leptin), have proinflammatory activity and are related to IR states. Fatty infiltration of the liver likewise produces local inflammation in this organ that could lead to activation of Kupffer cells, which also promote states of insulin resistance. Lastly, overnutrition leads to an elevation of saturated and unsaturated free fatty acids and these acids also have proinflammatory properties, given that they activate vascular endothelial cells, adipocytes and myeloid cells.

Inflammation can also cause, independently of obesity, resistance to insulin activity. The mechanisms that have been implicated in this effect are:

1. TNFα has been linked to insulin resistance in inflammatory states. Its effects on lipid metabolism, coagulation and endothelial function are determinant in this regard. It is known to influence the insulin receptor, preventing its signal transduction after being stimulated by insulin. Independent pathways for the insulin receptor through which TNF induces IR are also known. Such mechanisms are mainly the inhibition of genes such as GLUT4.

2. Similarly, it has been known for years that certain anti-inflammatory compounds such as salicylates, and more specifically aspirin, have a beneficial, insulin-sensitising effect on hyperglycaemia. This is thought to occur because they interfere with the pathway for NF-kappa B, an inflammation-related transcription factor.

3. Other factors such as Jnk1 and 2 (C-Jun N-terminal kinase 1 and 2) also seem to play a key role in inflammation, obesity and diabetes. It is known that their levels are elevated in obese mice with insulin resistance and that Jnk1-/ knockout mice develop less insulin resistance after a high-fat diet.

4. Nitric oxide, involved in vasodilatation and other processes, plays an important role in IR. It is known that proinflammatory states activate the expression of Nos2, the gene responsible for iNOS (inducible nitric oxide synthase) synthesis, and Nos2 is ultimately responsible for the IR observed in states of sepsis.

5. IL-10 has an anti-inflammatory effect, inhibiting TNF-induced activation of NF-kappa B. It is known that in humans there is a clear relationship between low levels of IL-10 and IR, which has led to the suggestion that this interleukin has insulin sensitising effects. This has been partly corroborated by observing mice treated with IL-10 that do not develop IR when treated simultaneously with IL-6.

6. Another protein that has linked inflammation and IR is MCP1 (monocyte chemoattractant protein-1). This is a chemokine synthesised by macrophages and endothelium that promotes recruitment of monocytes into damaged or inflamed areas. It is known that knockout mice for CCR2, the MCP1 receptor, express less macrophage infiltration in adipose tissue, have less liver steatosis, show increased insulin sensitivity and have a reduced weight gain after high-fat diets. This same effect has been observed in mice treated with a pharmacological CCR2 antagonist.

As has been seen, IR is a complex metabolic condition with different aetiologies such as obesity, chronic inflammation and so on, in which the aetiopathogenic sequence leading to defective insulin signal processing is still to be defined. It might be expected that the high concentration of proinflammatory factors such as TNF, IL-6, MCP1, NO, etc. that occur in chronic diseases would cause an incorrect tissue response to insulin. When obesity is the starting point, it is considered that adipocyte hypertrophy and death are the main IR activation mechanisms. If there is no obesity, then the mechanisms involved in muscle and liver tissue appear to be the determining factors in IR development.
**Insulin resistance and rheumatoid arthritis**

Although patients with RA show a high prevalence of metabolic syndrome and associated factors such as obesity, dyslipidemia or impaired glucose metabolism, few studies have specifically studied IR in this disease. The broadest study recruited 94 patients with RA, in whom insulin resistance and beta cell function were studied by HOMA. It concluded that IR (HOMA-IR) was associated with markers for inflammation and disease activity such as C reactive protein, erythrocyte sedimentation rate and DAS28. Similarly, IR was associated with values of beta function.

Further studies have also shown a positive correlation between C reactive protein levels and HOMA index in patients with RA, and ascribe to the latter a 21% role in raising this acute phase protein. Likewise, a clear correlation has been shown between IR, also measured by HOMA, and disease activity, C reactive protein and the quantification of coronary calcium, either. A relationship was found only between IR and waist circumference and subclinical vascular disease using carotid ultrasonography, although these features were not directly related to RA.

With regard to the role of different therapies on IR in patients with RA, there are no conclusive studies. Dessein has shown a beneficial effect of metformin on insulin resistance and sensitivity using HOMA and QUICKI and has considered that this effect is caused by its anti-inflammatory activity. However, the same author also concludes that the possibility that this effect is partially mediated by other actions of classical drugs that induce remission of the lipid profile or other areas cannot be excluded.

With regard to anti-TNFα treatment, there are 10 studies in the literature on its influence over IR, which are summarised in Table 2. Each used a different IR determination method and the number of patients (7 to 56) and treatment duration (120 min to 1 year) were very variable. In 3 of them, there was improvement as measured by indirect methods. Only one of them, which used the clamp method, showed improvement in insulin sensitivity after 14 weeks. Our own unpublished data after studying 16 patients with RA who were treated with anti-TNF showed no relationship between the blocking of this cytokine and IR.

Corticosteroids are responsible for glucose intolerance and, given their wide use in RA, they could be expected to be at least partially responsible for IR in these patients. However, several studies have found only a discreet or a nonexistent relationship between corticosteroids and the presence of metabolic syndrome or IR in patients with RA. These data suggest that their beneficial effect on inflammation counteracts their effect on IR.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Anti-TNFα</th>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Result</th>
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<tr>
<td>Seriolo</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Infliximab</td>
<td>Rheumatoid arthritis</td>
<td>24 weeks</td>
<td>HOMA, QUICKI</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
</tr>
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<td>Martinez-Abundis</td>
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<td>Etanercept</td>
<td>Psoriasis</td>
<td>2 weeks</td>
<td>Clamp</td>
<td>No improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oguz</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>Rheumatoid arthritis</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>HOMA</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosevinge</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Adalimumab</td>
<td>Rheumatoid arthritis</td>
<td>8 weeks</td>
<td>Clamp</td>
<td>No improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lo</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>Metabolic syndrome</td>
<td>4 weeks</td>
<td>HOMA</td>
<td>No improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Infliximab</td>
<td>Rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis and Whipple disease</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
<td>Clamp</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tam</td>
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<td>14 weeks</td>
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<td>Improvement</td>
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<td>Infliximab</td>
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<td>120 minutes</td>
<td>HOMA, QUICKI</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
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<td>24 weeks</td>
<td>HOMA, QUICKI</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kiortsis</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Infliximab</td>
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<td>24 weeks</td>
<td>HOMA, QUICKI</td>
<td>Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferraz-Amaro (in press)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Etanercept, infliximab and adalimumab</td>
<td>Rheumatoid arthritis</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>HOMA</td>
<td>No improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Clamp indicates Hyperinsulinnemic Euglycemic Clamp; HOMA, Homeostatic Model Assessment; QUICKI, Quantitative Insulin Sensitivity Check Index.
such as endothelial dysfunction, cellular adhesion, etc.) a link between inflammation and atherosclerosis. For all these reasons, rheumatologists should know insulin resistance better, become familiar with its concepts, learn how to measure it, relate it to other disease parameters and consider it as another systemic manifestation of patients with RA.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References


