

Multimodal Clinical Imaging To Longitudinally Assess a Nanomedical Anti-Inflammatory Treatment in Experimental Atherosclerosis

Mark E. Lobatto,[†] Zahi A. Fayad,^{*,†} Stephane Silvera,[†] Esad Vucic,[†]
Claudia Calcagno,[†] Venkatesh Mani,[†] Stephen D. Dickson,[†] Klaas Nicolay,[‡]
Manuela Banciu,[§] Raymond M. Schiffelers,[§] Josbert M. Metselaar,[§] Louis van
Bloois,[§] Hai-Shan Wu,^{||} John T. Fallon,^{||} James H. Rudd,^{†,⊥} Valentin Fuster,^{#,▽}
Edward A. Fisher,[○] Gert Storm,[§] and Willem J. M. Mulder^{*,†}

Translational and Molecular Imaging Institute and Imaging Science Laboratories, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, One Gustave L. Levy Place, New York, New York 10029, United States, Biomedical NMR, Department of Biomedical Engineering, Eindhoven University of Technology, PO Box 513, 5600 MB Eindhoven, The Netherlands, Department of Pharmaceutics, Utrecht Institute for Pharmaceutical Sciences, Utrecht University, Sorbonnelaan 16, 3584 CA Utrecht, The Netherlands, Department of Pathology, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, One Gustave L. Levy Place, New York, New York 10029, United States, Division of Cardiovascular Medicine, Addenbrooke's Hospital, ACCI, Box 110, Hills Road, Cambridge CB2 2QQ, U.K., Mount Sinai Heart, the Zena and Michael A. Wiener Cardiovascular Institute and the Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis Center for Cardiovascular Health, Mount Sinai Medical Center, One Gustave L. Levy Place, New York, New York 10029, United States, Centro Nacional de Investigaciones Cardiovasculares Carlos III (CNIC), Melchor Fernandez Almagro 3, E-28029 Madrid, Spain, and Departments of Medicine (Cardiology) and Cell Biology, New York University School of Medicine, New York, New York 10016, United States

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Abstract: Atherosclerosis is an inflammatory disease causing great morbidity and mortality in the Western world. To increase the anti-inflammatory action and decrease adverse effects of glucocorticoids (PLP), a nanomedicinal liposomal formulation of this drug (L-PLP) was developed and intravenously applied at a dose of 15 mg/kg PLP to a rabbit model of atherosclerosis. Since atherosclerosis is a systemic disease, emerging imaging modalities for assessing atherosclerotic plaque are being developed. ¹⁸F-Fluoro-deoxy-glucose positron emission tomography and dynamic contrast enhanced magnetic resonance imaging, methods commonly used in oncology, were applied to longitudinally assess therapeutic efficacy. Significant anti-inflammatory effects were observed as early as 2 days that lasted up to at least 7 days after administration of a single dose of L-PLP. No significant changes were found for the free PLP treated animals. These findings were corroborated by immunohistochemical analysis of macrophage density in the vessel wall. In conclusion, this study evaluates a powerful two-pronged strategy for efficient treatment of atherosclerosis that includes nanomedical therapy of atherosclerotic plaques and the application of noninvasive and clinically approved imaging techniques to monitor delivery and therapeutic responses. Importantly, we demonstrate unprecedented rapid anti-inflammatory effects in atherosclerotic lesions after the nanomedical therapy.

Keywords: MRI; FDG-PET; multifunctional liposomes; atherosclerosis; rabbits; glucocorticoids

Introduction

Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of morbidity and mortality in developed nations.¹ Primarily this is caused by atherosclerosis, a systemic disease, characterized by a chronic inflammation of the arterial wall with concomitant vascular lumen lipid deposits (plaques).^{2,3} A main challenge is to develop strategies to treat plaque inflammation more effectively. This may be accomplished by developing nanomedical formulations that efficiently target atherosclerotic lesions, accumulate to a much higher extent than free drug formulations and then release the active compound locally at the desired area of interest.⁴ Additionally, establishing robust end points for a given therapy in atherosclerosis is very difficult since the vasculature is a complex and extensive network within the body. Novel imaging strategies have shown great potential in visualizing, quantifying, and characterizing atherosclerosis, and therefore may be used to determine valid end points.^{5–7}

Glucocorticoids are powerful anti-inflammatory agents and one of the drug classes that have been studied in the treatment of inflammation in developing atherosclerotic lesions. An early study with dexamethasone in cholesterol-fed rabbits clearly demonstrated the inhibitory effect on macrophage accumulation in the intima and media of atherosclerotic

lesions,⁸ while Danenberg et al. have shown reduction of in-stent neointimal hyperplasia using liposomal bisphosphonates.⁹ As of yet, glucocorticoids have not been seriously considered for clinical treatment of atherosclerosis because they exhibit a poor pharmacokinetic profile. This results in low drug concentrations at sites of intended action, renders them ineffective in treatment, and necessitates high dosages and frequent administration, which causes an array of adverse systemic effects, including diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis and hypertension.¹⁰

To overcome these shortcomings, water-soluble glucocorticoids, such as prednisolone phosphate, can be encapsulated in long-circulating poly(ethylene) glycol (PEG) coated liposomes, which considerably enhances their circulation half-life, thereby increasing their accumulation in inflamed sites.^{4,11} Liposome-encapsulated prednisolone phosphate (L-PLP) has recently been used in a variety of cancer models,^{12–15} multiple sclerosis¹⁶ and rheumatoid arthritis,¹⁷ where they have been shown to successfully inhibit inflammation and reduce neovascularization.

In the present study we evaluated the therapeutic efficacy of MRI detectable liposomal PLP, schematically depicted

* Corresponding authors. Mailing address: Translational and Molecular Imaging Institute, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, One Gustave L. Levy Place, Box 1234, New York, NY 10029; e-mail, willem.mulder@mountsinai.org, zahi.fayad@mssm.edu; tel, 212-241-7717; fax, 212-534-2683.

† Translational and Molecular Imaging Institute and Imaging Science Laboratories, Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

‡ Eindhoven University of Technology.

§ Utrecht University.

|| Department of Pathology, Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

⊥ Addenbrooke's Hospital.

Mount Sinai Heart, the Zena and Michael A. Wiener Cardiovascular Institute and the Marie-Josée and Henry R. Kravis Center for Cardiovascular Health, Mount Sinai Medical Center.

∇ CNIC.

○ New York University School of Medicine.

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in Figure S1 in the Supporting Information, in a rabbit model of atherosclerosis using a multimodal imaging setup and clinical scanners. The liposomal delivery was visualized by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). ^{18}F -Fluoro-deoxy-glucose positron emission tomography combined with computed tomography (^{18}F -FDG-PET/CT), an imaging method used routinely for the visualization of metastases in cancer patients,^{18,19} has recently been exploited as an imaging modality for visualizing and quantifying plaque macrophage inflammation.^{20–23} Therefore, we applied this imaging method to monitor the effects of the anti-inflammatory nanomedicine in atherosclerotic arteries serially and noninvasively. Inflammation is often accompanied by ongoing neovascularization (angiogenesis), a deleterious process affecting the adventitia in atherosclerosis.²⁴ Dynamic contrast enhanced MRI (DCE-MRI) is an imaging method that allows the investigation of early angiostatic effects in tumors,^{25,26} but we recently reported the applicability of this technique for atherosclerotic plaque neovascularization as well.²⁷ Since it was shown recently that liposomal glucocorticoids inhibit

tumor angiogenesis,^{12,15} we also applied DCE-MRI of the vessel wall to investigate antiangiogenic activity noninvasively.

Experimental Section

Animal Protocol. Thirty-nine male NZW rabbits (mean age 7 months; Covance) were included in this study. Aortic atherosclerotic plaques were induced in 37 NZW rabbits, through a well-established model,⁴³ by a combination of 7 months of high cholesterol diet (4.7% palm oil and 0.3% cholesterol-enriched diet; Research Diet Inc.) and a repeated balloon injury of the aorta (2 weeks and 6 weeks after starting the high cholesterol diet); at seven months mean weight was established at 3.5 ± 0.3 kg. Two noninjured NZW rabbits fed a normal chow diet were used as non-atherosclerotic controls.

Aortic injury was performed from the aortic arch to the iliac bifurcation with a 4F Fogarty embolectomy catheter introduced through the femoral artery. All procedures were performed under general anesthesia by an intramuscular injection of ketamine (20 mg/kg; Fort Dodge Animal Health), xylazine (10 mg/kg; Bayer Corp.) and acepromazine (5 mg/kg; Boehringer Ingelheim). Plaque biology of induced atherosclerotic lesions of the abdominal aorta of rabbits closely resembles atherosclerotic lesions of humans; the diameter is approximately the size of a human coronary artery. All experiments were approved by the Mount Sinai School of Medicine Institute Animal Care and Use Committee.

Liposomal Glucocorticoids. Long-circulating liposomes were prepared as described previously.^{12,17,44} In brief, 51.5% 1,2-dipalmitoyl-*sn*-glycero-3-phosphocholine (DPPC); 33.3% cholesterol; 5.0% 1,2-distearoyl-*sn*-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine-*N*-[methoxy(polyethylene glycol)-2000] (PEG-DSPE); 10% Gd-DTPA-bis(stearylamide) (Gd-DTPA-BSA); and 0.2% 1,2-dipalmitoyl-*sn*-glycero-3-phosphoethanolamine-*N*-(Lissamine Rhodamine B Sulfonyl) (Rhodamine-PE) were dissolved in chloroform:methanol (2:1 vol/vol) in a round-bottom flask. A lipid film was made under reduced pressure on a rotary evaporator and dried under a stream of nitrogen. Liposomes were formed by addition of an aqueous solution of 100 mg/mL prednisolone phosphate disodium salt (Bufa, Uitgeest, The Netherlands). A water-soluble phosphate derivative of prednisolone was used to ensure stable encapsulation in the liposomes. Liposome size was reduced by multiple extrusion steps through polycarbonate membranes (Nuclepore, Pleasanton, CA, USA) with a final pore size of 100 nm. The mean size and zeta potential were determined to be 103 nm and -2 meV, respectively.

MRI. MRI was used to monitor delivery of liposomal PLP into atherosclerotic plaques. Rabbits were sedated with ketamine/xylazine/acepromazine (as above) and imaged supine in a 1.5 T MRI clinical system (Siemens, Sonata, Germany) using high-resolution MR imaging (i.e., pre- and postcontrast, T1-weighted, TR 800 ms, TE 5.60 ms, FOV 120×120 mm, 3.00 slice thickness/1.50 spacing, 256×256 with 4.0 signal averages). After a pretreatment scan was performed, liposomal PLP was administered. MR images were acquired preinjection, immediately after injection and

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2, 7, 14, and 21 days postinjection of the liposomes. Rabbits were positioned to match pre- and postcontrast scans by aligning corresponding vertebrae.

DCE-MRI was performed according to a protocol we published recently.²⁷ In short, the change of signal intensity in a region of interest (ROI) including the entire atherosclerotic plaque during the injection of the contrast agent was studied with a custom-made Matlab (The MathWorks, Inc., Natick, MA, USA) program. The area under the signal intensity versus time curve (AUC) for the acquisition of 15 min was calculated via the trapezoidal rule of the time series by numerical integration.

PET/CT Imaging. PET/CT was used to track changes in plaque inflammation in response to the administration of liposomal PLP. PET/CT scanning was performed on a GE advance LS 16 slice PET/CT scanner. This system has PET and CT components mounted back-to-back, and is mechanically calibrated so that alignment between the two parts is within 2 mm in the transaxial field of view. Rabbits were fasted for 4 h prior to ¹⁸F-FDG injection, with water given ad libitum. They were scanned preinjection and 2, 7, 14, and 21 days postinjection of the treatment.

The rabbits were imaged under general anesthesia and secured with a Velcro blanket during imaging. They were injected with 1 mCi/kg ¹⁸F-FDG administered over 20 s via the marginal ear vein. Imaging started 180 min after ¹⁸F-FDG injection, which is the optimal time point according to previous studies.²¹ PET/CT imaging covered the region from the superior mesenteric artery to the aortic bifurcation. The bladder was emptied prior to scanning to allow for a clear view of the distal aorta. Images were acquired in 3D mode with the following parameters: field of view (FOV) 15.5 cm per bed; single bed position; 10 min imaging per bed position. Iterative reconstruction was performed with a 30 cm FOV, giving a reconstructed slice thickness of 4.25 mm. PET/CT images were calibrated to the injected dose of ¹⁸F-FDG.

PET/CT images were analyzed on a Xeleris 2.0 workstation (GE, Milwaukee, WI, USA). Arterial ¹⁸F-FDG uptake (as a measure of arterial inflammation) in the aorta was measured by drawing a region of interest around the aorta on every slice of the coregistered transaxial PET/CT images. On each image slice, the mean SUV of ¹⁸F-FDG in the artery was calculated as the mean pixel activity within the ROI. The SUV is the decay-corrected tissue concentration of ¹⁸F-FDG (in kBq/g), corrected for injected ¹⁸F-FDG dose and body weight (in kBq/g), and is a well-recognized method for quantification of ¹⁸F-FDG-PET data.

Experimental Setup. Rabbits were randomly assigned to receive a single injection of liposomal PLP or free PLP. The drugs were administered to the rabbits through the marginal ear vein at a dose of 15 mg/kg. Figure 1 displays the different scanning and histology time points.

Statistical Analysis. Data are presented as the mean \pm SD. Statistical analysis was performed using paired *t* test for comparisons within groups. Statistical significance was established at *P* < 0.05.

Results

Liposomal PLP Exhibits Favorable Pharmacokinetics and Accumulates in Atherosclerotic Lesions. Liposomal PLP exhibited a dramatically elevated circulation half-life as compared to free PLP (Figure S2 in the Supporting Information). Importantly, the L-PLP, the PLP and gadolinium labeled liposomes displayed a similar pharmacokinetic profile, indicative of the intactness of the PLP liposomes in circulation. High levels of liposomes were observed in the spleen and liver, 2 days after intravenous administration, which remained the same 7 days after administration (Figure S3 in the Supporting Information). On the other hand, the initially high PLP levels in these organs at 2 days showed a 4-fold reduction at 7 days postadministration (Figure S4 in the Supporting Information), demonstrating that the PLP are released once the liposomes accumulate in these organs.

Groups of animals that were treated with either liposomal PLP (*n* = 14) or free PLP (*n* = 8) were serially imaged with different imaging techniques according to the overview depicted in Figure 1. Several animals were randomly sacrificed at different time points to enable ex vivo histological and immunofluorescent analyses.

T1-weighted MRI of the abdominal aorta of atherosclerotic New Zealand White (NZW) rabbits was performed to monitor the delivery of gadolinium-labeled liposomal PLP after intravenous administration. Figure 2A shows an MR image of a rabbit aortic wall before (left) and 2 days after (right) the administration of PLP liposomes. A clear signal intensity increase throughout the entire inflamed vessel wall was observed, indicative of a considerable accumulation of liposomes within the atherosclerotic lesions. The mean signal increase of the vessel wall 2 days after administration was established to be $27\% \pm 12.5\%$.

To further explore the uptake and localization of liposomes within the inflamed vessel wall we performed liposome determinations as well as near-infrared fluorescence (NIRF) imaging on intact aortas and confocal laser scanning microscopy (CLSM) on multiple aortic sections taken from different animals. We measured a mean concentration of 175 and 120 μ g of liposomes/g of aortic tissue at 2 and 7 days post intravenous administration, respectively. NIRF imaging showed Cy5.5 labeled liposomes distributed throughout the entire atherosclerotic aorta (Figure 2B). For CLSM, the liposomes were labeled with rhodamine and could be identified as red fluorescent regions in the aortic sections (Figure 2C,D). Cell nuclei were stained with DAPI (Figure 2C, blue), while fluorescently labeled RAM-11 antibodies enabled the identification of macrophages (Figure 2C, green). In the fused CLSM (Figure 2D) it was appreciated that liposomes were mainly found to be associated with macrophages. Although in all sections liposomes were found throughout the entire aortic plaque (Figure S5 in the Supporting Information), the quantity of liposome accumulation was heterogeneously distributed. In Figure 2E a reconstruction of an entire aortic section is depicted that consists of 35 individually acquired 10 \times CLSM images. The corre-

Pharmacokinetics

AR (6) – Liposomal PLP (4)
Gd, PLP day 2 (2), day 7 (2)
– Free PLP (2)
Gd, PLP day 2 (2)

Imaging evaluation groups

HR (2) – Evaluation FDG-PET/CT
– Correlation macrophage density
AR (6) – Evaluation FDG-PET/CT
– Correlation macrophage density

Legend

HR –Healthy rabbit
AR –Atherosclerotic rabbit
n† –Number of animals sacrificed
Ram-11 (n) –Macrophage density
CLSM (n) – Confocal laser scanning microscopy
(n) –FDG-PET, number of rabbits
(n) –MRI, (n) number of rabbits
(T) T1-w MRI, (D) DCE-MRI
(n) –Number of animals

Treatment groups

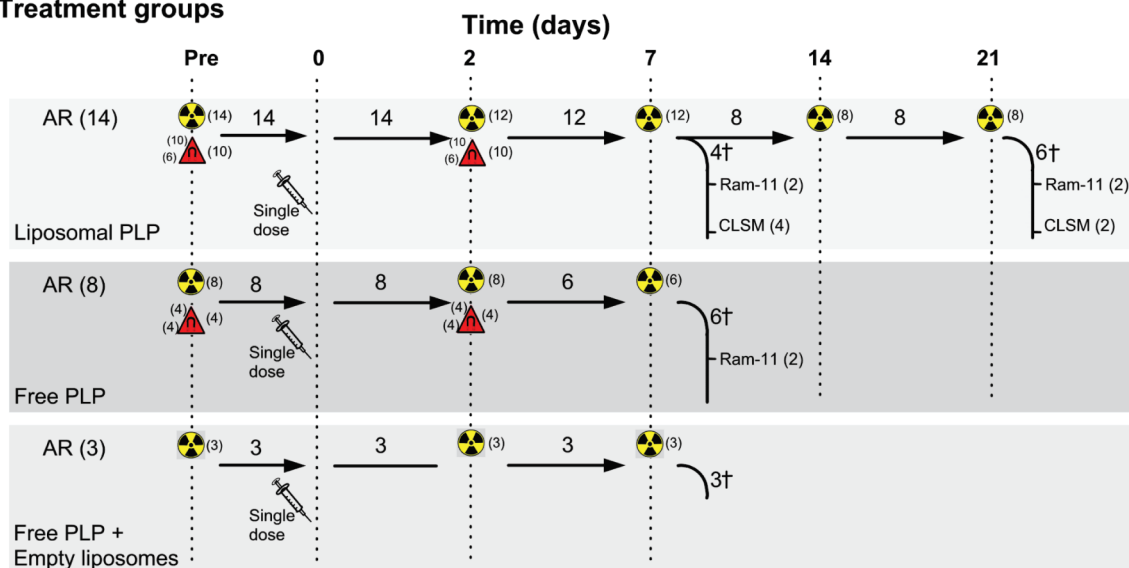


Figure 1. Pharmacokinetics, imaging and treatment scheme. The organ distribution and pharmacokinetic profile of liposomal PLP and free PLP were evaluated in 6 atherosclerotic rabbits. Two healthy rabbits and 6 atherosclerotic rabbits (top, left) were used to quantify the mean uptake values of ^{18}F -FDG using PET/CT imaging. The treatment groups consisted of a group of 14 atherosclerotic rabbits that received a single dose of liposomal PLP and a group of 8 atherosclerotic rabbits that received a single dose of free PLP (bottom). All animals underwent baseline scanning; multimodality imaging was performed at different time points post-treatment to visualize liposome accumulation in the vessel wall and to quantify inflammation of the abdominal aorta. Immunofluorescence and histological analyses were performed on randomly selected animals at the indicated time points.

sponding MR image is shown in Figure 2F. The regions that contained a high proportion of rhodamine-labeled liposomes as visualized with CLSM corresponded with hyperintense areas in the aortic wall on MRI (arrows Figure 2E,F).

Anti-Inflammatory Effects of Liposomal PLP on the Atherosclerotic Vessel Wall Were Observed by ^{18}F -FDG PET/CT Imaging. To evaluate the therapeutic efficacy of the liposomal PLP, 25 atherosclerotic NZW rabbits were imaged using ^{18}F -FDG PET/CT. These scans provide quantifiable information about the level of inflammation present in the abdominal aorta.²⁰

Prior to the start of the treatment study, the aortas of 6 atherosclerotic rabbits and 2 non-atherosclerotic rabbits were imaged to establish mean standard uptake value (SUV) levels of ^{18}F -FDG in the abdominal aortic wall of both atherosclerotic and non-atherosclerotic rabbits and to validate the robustness of this imaging technology in the assessment of atherosclerosis related inflammation in rabbits. These measurements resulted in SUV levels of 0.65 ± 0.03 for atherosclerotic rabbits and 0.23 ± 0.03 for non-atherosclerotic rabbits, comparable to values reported by others.²⁸

Several studies by different research groups have revealed a good correlation between macrophage density and SUV levels.^{28–30} In studies at our laboratory we also found the same high degree of correlation between these two parameters.

In Figure 3A, coronal CT, PET and fused PET/CT images of the aorta of an atherosclerotic rabbit are shown. Hotspots of ^{18}F -FDG uptake were clearly visible throughout the aorta before treatment with liposomal PLP (top), while a reduced ^{18}F -FDG uptake was observed after seven days of treatment, demonstrating the efficacy of liposomal PLP. The mean SUV of the different groups, i.e. liposomal PLP treated, free (i.e., not encapsulated in liposomes) PLP treated, and healthy animals at base level, are shown in Figure 3B. Two days and seven days post-treatment, rabbits injected with liposomal PLP showed a significant reduction in SUV (two days $p = 0.0025$, seven days $p = 0.0036$), while for rabbits that

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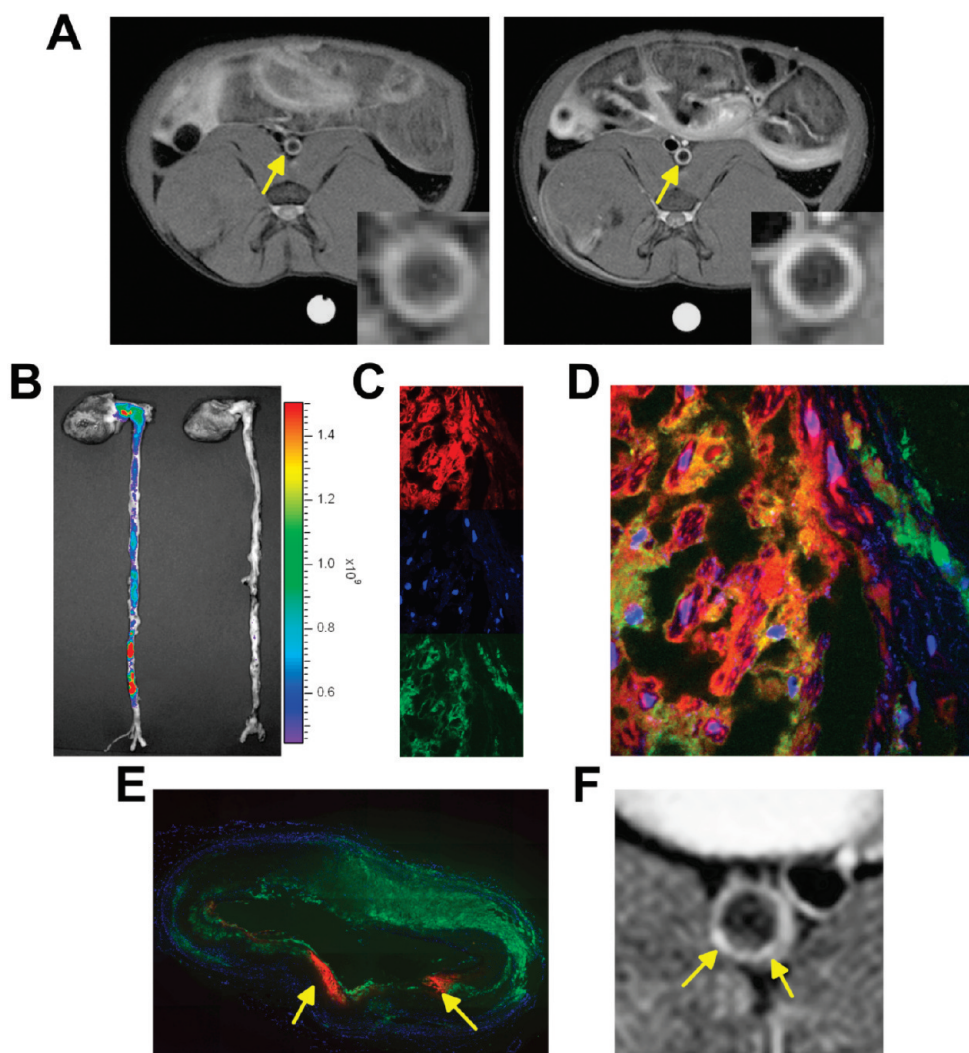


Figure 2. Images of delivery and localization of liposomal PLP by MRI and confocal laser scanning microscopy. (A) In vivo MRI of the abdominal aorta before (left) and two days after (right) the administration of liposomes. A marked signal intensity increase was observed throughout the atherosclerotic lesion. (B) NIRF images of an atherosclerotic aorta excised from a rabbit injected with liposomes (left) and untreated aorta (right). The color bar represents photon count. (C) CLSM of liposomes (red), cell nuclei (blue), and macrophages. (D) A high degree of colocalization of liposomes with macrophages was observed. (E) Although liposomes were found throughout the entire lesion areas, a vessel wall reconstruction of multiple CLSM images revealed heterogeneous accumulation of liposomes. (F) The corresponding MRI slice of the histological section depicted in (E) revealed a similar heterogeneous distribution.

were treated with free circulating PLP no significant SUV differences were found (two days $p = 0.56$, seven days $p = 0.41$) at these time points. From day 14 post-treatment SUV levels were not significantly different from baseline level. The relative changes in SUV were determined by [(posthealthy/

(prehealthy))] and are displayed in Figure 3C as an extraction of the previous graph. We observed that the relative SUV decreased by 40% for rabbits treated with liposomal PLP compared to rabbits treated with free PLP. To ensure that the decrease in SUV was not the result of gadolinium toxicity, 3 atherosclerotic rabbits were treated with subsequent injections of empty liposomes labeled with gadolinium and free PLP. The SUV levels did not significantly differ at the different time points and were 0.63 ± 0.06 at baseline, and 0.60 ± 0.07 and 0.64 ± 0.07 at day 2 and day 7, respectively (2 days $p = 0.49$, 7 days $p = 0.21$).

DCE-MRI Revealed Early Changes in Plaque Permeability after Liposomal Glucocorticoid Treatment. A total of 10 rabbits (6 treated with L-PLP and 4 with free PLP) underwent dynamic contrast enhanced MRI (DCE-MRI)

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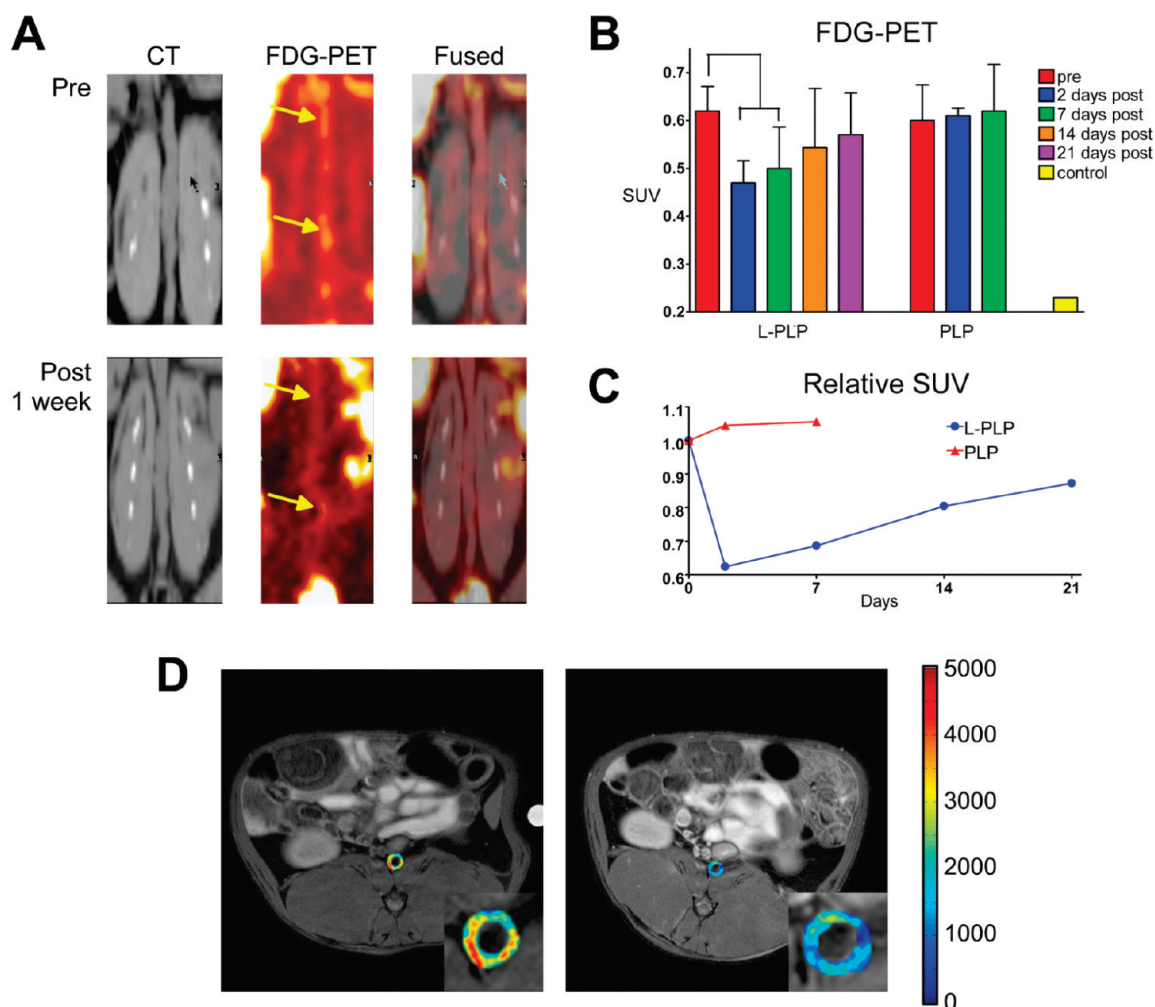


Figure 3. Noninvasive imaging of therapeutic effects as determined by ^{18}F -FDG-PET and DCE-MRI. (A) A representative coronal CT, ^{18}F -FDG-PET, and fused imaging slice throughout the abdominal aorta of an atherosclerotic rabbit before and 1 week postadministration of liposomal PLP. (B) The mean SUV for the different time points pre- and postinjection of liposomal PLP and free PLP are given. (C) Relative changes in SUV for animals treated with liposomal and free PLP. (D) Overlays on anatomical images of AUC maps obtained with DCE-MRI before treatment (left) and two days post-treatment (right) with liposomal PLP.

before and 2 days after the onset of therapy. This technique requires the acquisition of sequential images before and after the administration of contrast agent (Gd-DTPA, Magnevist); the images obtained during the acquisition can be analyzed calculating the pixel-by-pixel area under the curve (AUC) of the signal intensity versus time. AUC is a parameter that can express the uptake and retention of contrast agent in the region of interest (i.e., vessel wall) and correlates with neovascularization of the vasa vasorum in the atherosclerotic vessel wall. Our group recently validated this technique for the detection of neovascularization within atherosclerotic plaque of rabbits.²⁷

In Figure 3D, a typical AUC map of the vessel wall before and 2 days after the application of L-PLP is shown and clearly demonstrates a decrease in AUC. The mean AUC before and 2 days after onset of therapy revealed a significant reduction from 2278 ± 406 to 1784 ± 449 (AU) for L-PLP treated animals, while the AUC for the free PLP treated

animals remained the same: 2384 ± 924 before and 2351 ± 488 (AU) 2 days after treatment.

Plaque Macrophage Density Determined ex Vivo Corroborated the in Vivo PET Imaging Data. After the PET scans, aortas were excised and sectioned in segments corresponding to reconstructed PET/CT axial slices. Quantitative immunohistochemistry measurements of macrophages were performed to validate PET findings. With that objective, two animals from each group (healthy, 1 week L-PLP, 1 week free PLP, 3 weeks L-PLP) were sacrificed and macrophage density was quantified. Figure 4A–C show images of Masson's trichrome (marker of connective tissue) and RAM-11 (marker of macrophage) stained sections with different treatments/time points. Figure 4D displays the corresponding SUV values determined by in vivo PET imaging. A good correlation (Pearson correlation coefficient $r = 0.78$) between SUV and macrophage density in corre-

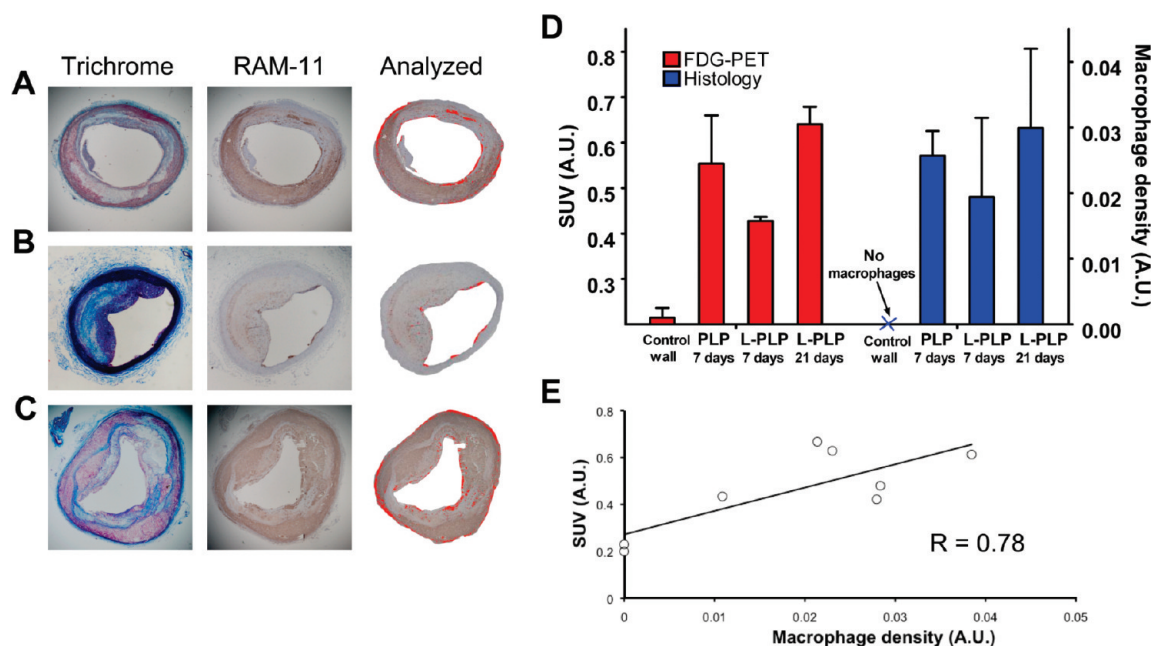


Figure 4. Correlation between histology and noninvasive ^{18}F -FDG-PET imaging. Representative histological slices of aortic sections stained with Masson's trichrome and stained for macrophages with RAM-11. (A) Section from a free PLP treated animal, 7 days after intravenous administration. (B) Macrophage density is significantly reduced 7 days post-treatment with liposomal PLP and was (C) back to baseline after 21 days. (D) The mean SUVs (left) for the rabbits that underwent histological quantification of macrophage density (right). (E) Correlation between macrophage density determined histologically and SUV determined by noninvasive imaging (FDG-PET).

sponding sections was observed (Figure 4E). Macrophage density in rabbits treated with liposome-encapsulated PLP was lower than in rabbits treated with free PLP corresponding to findings from the ^{18}F -FDG-PET/CT imaging. No macrophages were detected by immunohistochemistry in the aortic wall of healthy rabbits. Three weeks after treatment with liposome-encapsulated PLP, macrophage density was back to base level (Figure 4D), similar to findings of the three-week PET/CT scan. Furthermore, we qualitatively assessed monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1) expression in nontreated animals and treated animals. MCP-1 monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1) plays a crucial role in the initiation of atherosclerosis and has direct effects that promote inflammation³¹ and angiogenesis.³² A decrease in MCP-1 expression was observed (Figure S6A,B in the Supporting Information), indicative of a reduction of the aforementioned processes. In addition to the MCP-1 staining, endothelial cells were stained to confirm neovascularization in the adventitia of plaque (Figure S6C in the Supporting Information).

Discussion

In this study we have shown (a) the potential applicability of long-circulating liposomes as a carrier system for efficient anti-inflammatory/antiangiogenic drug delivery to atherosclerotic plaques. In addition, we were able to (b) monitor the delivery of these nanomedicines by MRI, which was confirmed using immunofluorescence techniques at (sub)-cellular level. In our study, the glucocorticoid prednisolone phosphate (PLP) was encapsulated into long-circulating liposomes. We demonstrated that (c) clinical imaging, i.e. ^{18}F -FDG-PET/CT and DCE-MRI, can be used to monitor the fast therapeutic responses of liposomal PLP. Most importantly, we found that (d) a single injection of liposomal PLP showed a therapeutic effect within 2 days, lasting up to 7 days. Most clinically used anti-inflammatory agents need to be administered for weeks or even months before they are effective.³³ To the best of our knowledge, an equally effective and rapid method for reduction of inflammation within atherosclerosis has not been previously reported.

Both in vivo and ex vivo imaging showed that long-circulating liposomes are highly suitable as a carrier vehicle for drug delivery to atherosclerotic plaques. The therapeutic efficacy of the administration of liposomal PLP is consider-

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ably better than that of free circulating PLP, for which we did not observe significant changes of the inflammatory state of the atherosclerotic lesions. Large quantities of liposomes were found in the atherosclerotic plaque. Atherosclerotic lesions are characterized by angiogenesis and enhanced capillary permeability. The method of targeted delivery and accumulation can be attributed to the “enhanced permeability and retention” (EPR) effect.³⁴ Long-circulating macromolecular materials, such as PEGylated liposomes, extravasate from the bloodstream and accumulate at inflammatory sites where they are retained and act locally. This targeting effect results in an enhanced delivery of drug to the desired site, which enables the use of lower dosages to achieve the same efficacy. Due to the long-circulating properties of the liposomes a higher proportion of the injected dose of the liposome-encapsulated drug compared to the nonliposomal delivered drug ends up in the plaques. In addition to passive targeting of liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids, targeted delivery of drugs to sites with enhanced capillary permeability of e.g. angiogenic endothelial cells may be accomplished by conjugation of targeting ligands to the liposomal surface. Numerous studies have shown that liposomes can be actively targeted to entities of interest by conjugating targeting molecules to the surface.³⁵ To that end, it is also possible to actively target liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids to atherosclerotic plaques by e.g. targeting macrophages via the macrophage scavenger receptor,³⁶ neovessels via $\alpha v \beta 3$ -integrin^{37,38} or any other target of choice that is upregulated in atherosclerotic lesions.⁶ Nevertheless, “simple” long circulating liposomes without targeting ligands are very attractive and even preferred for a number of reasons. They are easier to synthesize, less expensive, and more generally applicable, generate less immunoresponse, and most importantly can more easily be applied to humans. This has led to the approval and clinical application of a variety of liposomal drugs in the field of oncology.³⁵

Liposomal PLP was tracked in vivo by high-resolution MRI showing heterogeneous signal enhancement throughout the entire abdominal aorta. Inclusion of amphiphilic gado-

linium chelates in the liposomes allowed their visualization in the aortic vessel wall. In addition to paramagnetic labels, other labels may be used to monitor the delivery of liposomes. For instance, it is possible to coencapsulate liposomes with a radioactive marker to enable detection by PET. In a study investigating anti-inflammatory effects in a rat model of rheumatoid arthritis, liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids were detected by scintigraphic imaging.¹⁷ Since no therapeutic effect can be ascribed to the labels, they can be omitted, which would be essential for human application. In fact, liposomal PLP similar to the liposomes used in our study, without inclusion of gadolinium and fluorescent labels, are currently being evaluated in patients with active rheumatoid arthritis (clinicaltrials.gov identifier: NCT00241982). Studies in atherosclerotic patients are needed to prove the significance of the findings reported in the current study.

In previous studies, ¹⁸F-FDG PET/CT has been shown to be an effective imaging method to monitor therapeutic effects of anti-inflammatory drugs and risk factor modification in atherosclerosis.^{28,39} In our study we demonstrated that ¹⁸F-FDG PET/CT could be effectively and noninvasively applied to determine the effects of liposomal glucocorticoids. The advantage of PET/CT for monitoring the effect of drugs is that it is a sensitive and robust technique that is used on a regular basis in clinical practice, which facilitates the translation of the presented drug targeting technology to patients. Also, in recent studies from our group, Rudd et al. show that ¹⁸F-FDG PET/CT of atherosclerotic plaque inflammation is highly reproducible within studies and has high inter- and intraobserver agreement, further acknowledging ¹⁸F-FDG-PET as a noninvasive plaque imaging technique.^{20,40}

Ogawa et al. showed that probucol, an antioxidant drug, has a therapeutic effect on rabbit atherosclerotic lesions after three months.²⁸ In our study we have shown that a single injection of liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids has a similar therapeutic effect within 2 days, lasting up to 7 weeks, before returning to baseline after 2 weeks. This demonstrates that liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids may be very potent anti-inflammatory drugs efficient not only in e.g. rheumatoid arthritis and cancer but also in the treatment of atherosclerosis by reducing the amount of macrophages in a short time period without systemic toxicity as seen with free circulating glucocorticoid administration.¹⁰ This greatly enhances benefit-risk ratios and is a step forward toward a clinically viable treatment for advanced atherosclerotic lesions. The exact pathway is not known, but it is believed that high concentrations of PLP show nongenomic effects

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in addition to their genomic effects, causing a reduction of macrophage infiltration.⁴¹ Further effects of liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids must be researched by examining plaque biology and different inflammatory markers. By changing the treatment schedule or intensity, for instance, injecting multiple doses over a prolonged period of time or combining the presented treatment with lipid lowering therapies, long-term regression may be achieved. Statins can reduce plasma cholesterol and have anti-inflammatory effects, but they do not always lead to stabilization of vulnerable or high-risk plaques. Combination with liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids may lead to a powerful one–two combination, ultimately achieving long-term regression of atherosclerosis.

A combined approach of MR imaging and drug targeting has been performed previously in atherosclerosis. Winter et al. published results on a combinatory approach of MR molecular imaging and drug targeting of atherosclerosis using $\alpha v \beta 3$ -specific nanoparticles.⁴² They used these nanoparticles to target the aortic vessel wall of atherosclerotic rabbits. For therapeutic purposes, they included fumagillin in the lipid monolayer of the nanoparticles and observed an antiangiogenic effect with MRI that was confirmed histologically.

In this study we obtained preliminary results about early antiangiogenic effects on the atherosclerotic lesions with this

liposomal compound using DCE-MRI. Recently, it has been shown using molecular biological techniques that liposome-encapsulated PLP exhibits antiangiogenic effects in cancer.¹⁵ This phenomenon should also contribute to halting progression of atherosclerosis in addition to the anti-inflammatory effects studied in greater detail here.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates a novel anti-inflammatory treatment for advanced atherosclerotic lesions monitored by noninvasive multimodality imaging. Pronounced atherosclerotic lesions in a rabbit model, closely mimicking human lesions, showed a significant and unprecedented rapid decrease in inflammation by a single injection of liposome-encapsulated glucocorticoids. This treatment can be tracked and monitored noninvasively and can be used to achieve reduction of inflammation in atherosclerotic lesions within a short time period with minimal systemic toxicity.

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Supporting Information Available: Additional experimental details and six figures: Figure S1, schematic of the liposomal nanomedicine; Figure S2, plasma half-lives of free PLP and PLP liposomes; Figure S3, liposome concentration in the liver, kidney and spleen; Figure S4, PLP concentration in the liver, kidney and spleen; Figure S5, CLSM of different regions throughout aortic sections; Figure S6, atherosclerotic plaque histology. This material is available free of charge via the Internet at <http://pubs.acs.org>.

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