



Increased platelet reactivity and platelet–leukocyte aggregation after elective coronary bypass surgery

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Abstract

Inflammatory mechanisms are activated, and thrombotic complications occur during the initial months after coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG). Therefore, changes over time of platelet activation and platelet–leukocyte interactions after CABG are of interest. Whole-blood flow cytometry was performed before, and 4–6 days, one month, and three months after elective CABG in 54 men with stable coronary artery disease treated with acetylsalicylic acid (ASA). Single platelets and platelet–leukocyte aggregates (PLAs) among monocytes (P-Mon), neutrophils (P-Neu), and lymphocytes (P-Lym) were studied without and with stimulation by submaximal concentrations of ADP, thrombin, and the thromboxane analog U46619. White blood cell counts were increased during the initial postoperative course, and platelet counts were increased after one month. Platelet P-selectin expression was significantly enhanced at one month when stimulated by thrombin and U46619 and at three months with ADP and thrombin. All PLAs subtypes were increased at one month without stimulation *in vitro*. P-Mon and P-Neu stimulated by ADP, thrombin, or U46619 were significantly increased one month after the operation but decreased compared to baseline at three months. Agonist stimulated P-Lyms were increased at one month and remained increased at three months after ADP stimulation. There was significant platelet activation and formation of PLAs unstimulated and after agonist stimulation by ADP, thrombin, and a thromboxane analog after CABG in patients with stable coronary artery disease irrespective of ASA treatment. Changes observed up to three months after CABG support further studies of the clinical implications of protracted increases in platelet activation and platelet–leukocyte interactions.

Keywords

Coronary bypass, platelet activation, platelet aggregates

History

Received 25 June 2018

Revised 14 October 2018

Accepted 22 October 2018

Published online 13 November 2018

Introduction

During recent years, it has become increasingly clear that platelets and platelet–leukocyte interactions are involved in the complex pathophysiology of atherosclerosis and the terminology athero-thrombosis is frequently used in this context [1–8]. Cardiopulmonary bypass activates inflammatory mechanisms and several aspects of hemostasis [9,10]. We have previously reported on biphasic pro-thrombotic and inflammatory responses after coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) in a study focusing on the first week after surgery [11]. Thromboembolic events may occur during the first month after cardiac surgery and early vein graft failure is related to thrombosis and high platelet reactivity [12,13]. Thus, more intense antiplatelet therapy than acetylsalicylic acid (ASA) alone may be required

to improve the prognosis of patients with stable coronary artery disease undergoing CABG [14,15].

We have previously reported on the efficacy of different ASA dosages following CABG and found that 75 mg twice daily or 160 mg once daily inhibited thromboxane-dependent platelet activation more effectively than 75 mg once daily [16]. The present study describes platelet reactivity and circulating platelet–leukocyte aggregates (PLAs) irrespective of ASA dosage following elective CABG in patients without indication for dual antiplatelet therapy. Flow cytometry of single platelets or PLAs is insensitive to ASA treatment as such measurements are performed under static conditions that do not promote thromboxane generation [17–19]. The present aim was to investigate changes in thromboxane independent platelet activation and platelet–leukocyte interaction including responses to agonist stimulation during the recovery phase, at one and three months after elective CABG in patients with stable coronary artery disease.

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Patients and Methods

Subjects

We included patients with stable angina pectoris scheduled to undergo elective CABG. Exclusion criteria were intake of any other platelet inhibitor than ASA during the last seven days

prior to surgery, known bleeding disorder or kidney failure, pre-operative platelet count outside of the range 100,000–450,000/ μ L, or a hemoglobin level below 8 g/L. We screened 75 subjects of whom 54 were included in the final analysis; 20 patients were excluded because of incomplete follow-up with blood samples and one patient with insulin-treated diabetes mellitus and advanced three-vessel disease died suddenly two months after the operation. Results in 42 of the patients have been previously reported regarding the serum thromboxane B2 effect of the ASA doses 75 mg twice daily, 160 mg once daily, and 75 mg once daily [16]. Twelve patients with complete cytometric data and included in the present analyses were excluded in the previous study due to faulty compliance with the prescribed ASA dosage and study procedures.

All patients were treated with ASA (Trombyl®, Pfizer Health AB, Strängnäs, Sweden) 75 mg OD before the operation and they received ASA 75 mg OD or BID or 160 mg OD at discharge from the hospital. The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Stockholm (2011/1074–31/1) and by the Swedish Medical Products Agency (EudraCT 2011–002233–19). The study is registered with ClinicalTrials.gov (NCT02482857). A signed consent form was obtained from all participants.

Study Design

All operations were performed through a standard sternotomy with the aid of standard cardiopulmonary bypass using a non-pulsatile centrifugal pump and a membrane oxygenator. The extracorporeal system was primed with Ringer's acetate. Cold blood cardioplegia was used for myocardial protection at a core temperature of 36°C while the aorta was cross-clamped. Heparin was given before cardiopulmonary bypass (3 mg/kg) to maintain activated clotting time >480 s.

Blood Collection

Blood samples were collected for platelet function testing on admittance before the operation, repeated 4–6 days after surgery before hospital discharge, and at follow-up after one and three to four months. Blood was obtained from an antecubital vein using vacutainer tubes containing EDTA for hematological analyses and sodium citrate for flow cytometry. Complete blood cell counts and mean platelet volume were assessed in samples anticoagulated with EDTA, within 20 min of sampling to minimize platelet swelling, using a MICROS 60 cell counter (ABX Diagnostics, Montpellier, France).

Flow Cytometric Analyses

Venous blood was collected by venipuncture without stasis, using siliconized vacutainer tubes containing 1/10 volume of 3.8% trisodium citrate (Becton Dickinson, Meylan, France).

Five μ L aliquots of blood were added to 45 μ L HEPES-buffered saline (150 mmol/l NaCl, 5 mmol/l KCl, 1 mmol/l MgSO₄, 10 mmol/l HEPES, pH 7.4) containing appropriately diluted antibodies as well as agonists or vehicle within 5 min of collection. Samples were incubated at room temperature and static conditions in the dark for 20 min, and then diluted and mildly fixed with 0.5% formaldehyde saline. Agonists (final concentrations) used to activate platelets and stimulate PLA formation *in vitro* were as follows: 1 μ M adenosine diphosphate (ADP), 0.04 U/mL human alpha-thrombin, or 0.3 μ M of the thromboxane analog U46619. We chose these submaximal agonist concentrations based on our previous experience to be able to detect bidirectional changes in platelet sensitivity to agonist stimulation,

and to employ several agonists to elucidate possible effects via different activation pathways.

Whole blood flow cytometric measurements of platelet P-selectin expression and PLAs have been described previously [20,21]. Platelets were gated by size and light scatter and verified as CD42b positive in $\geq 99\%$ of events. Total leukocytes were gated as CD45 positive cells using a PE-labeled anti-CD45 MAb (clone J33; Immunotech, Marseille, France) and neutrophils and lymphocytes were determined by size and granularity. Monocytes were further identified using a PC-5 labeled MAb against CD14 (clone RMO52; Beckman Coulter, Miami, FL, USA).

Platelet P-selectin expression data are reported as percentages of P-selectin positive cells in the platelet population. PLAs are presented as percentages of platelet-conjugated leukocytes among leukocyte subtypes, that is, monocytes (P-Mon), neutrophils (P-Neu), and lymphocytes (P-Lym).

Statistics

Descriptive statistics with arithmetic means with standard deviations (SD) or 95% confidence intervals (CI) and graphical methods were used to characterize the data. In cases of skewed distributions medians with interquartile ranges (IQR) are presented. A paired *t* test or in case of skewed distributions the Wilcoxon test were used to analyze changes from baseline to postoperative time points. Repeated measures analysis of variance and the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis one-way analysis of variance were applied to compare multiple measurements. Spearman rank order correlations were used to examine P-selectin expression in relation to PLAs. Two-tailed *p*-values $\leq 5\%$ were considered statistically significant. STATSTICA 13 (StatSoft, Dell) was used to analyze data.

Results

Preoperative characteristics of the 54 patients are shown in Table 1. The European System for Cardiac Operative Risk Evaluation (EuroSCORE) II was used to estimate the risk of surgery [22]. All patients received an internal mammary graft,

Table I. Characteristics of the 54 patients at recruitment.

	Median	IQR
Age (years)	68	59–72
Logistic EuroSCORE II %*	1.9	0.5–12.1
	Mean	SD
BMI (kg/m ²)	27	3
Blood pressure (mm Hg)		
Systolic	138	19
Diastolic	80	8
Hemoglobin (g/L)	142	10
eGFR (mL/min)	90	28
	<i>n</i>	%
Male sex	54	100
History of smoking	34	59
Hypertension	43	80
Hyperlipidemia	54	100
Diabetes mellitus	14	26
Medication		
Beta blocker	46	85
ACE inhibitor	27	50
Statin	49	91

SD: standard deviation; IQS = interquartile range; ACE: angiotensin-converting enzyme; eGFR: estimated glomerular filtration rate using the Cockcroft and Gault equation [35].

*Mortality risk according to European System for Cardiac Operative Risk Evaluation Score II [22].

and both mammary arteries were used in 19 patients. Mean cardiopulmonary bypass time was 91 min, and an average of 2.9 grafts was inserted. Median blood loss was 580 (interquartile range 450–750) ml. Eight of the 54 included patients (15%) reported minor bleedings such as slight nose bleeds, mouth bleeding associated with tooth brushing, or bruises at the clinical follow-up after three months. There were no major bleeds or gastrointestinal complications. None of the patients reported recurrent angina during the three months of follow-up.

Hematological Analyses

There was a marked drop in average postoperative hemoglobin level that was normalized at three months after the operation (Figure 1a). White blood cell counts were increased during the initial postoperative course, and platelet counts were slightly reduced after the operation but significantly elevated by 32% after one month without significant changes of mean platelet volumes (Figure 1b-d).

Flow Cytometric Data

The patients were treated with different low dosages of ASA after the operation [16]. Flow cytometric results did not differ between the three treatment groups, and data could thus be pooled for all patients (Supplementary Tables I and II).

Platelet Activation

Single platelet surface P-selectin expression was significantly enhanced at one month when stimulated by thrombin and the thromboxane analog U46619 (by 8% and 23%, respectively), and at three months when stimulated by ADP and thrombin (by 10% and 8%, respectively) (Figure 2). Mean levels without agonist stimulation were reduced by 12% from preoperative levels at three months (from $2.5 \pm 1.1\%$ to $2.2 \pm 1.1\%$).

Platelet–Leukocyte Aggregation

The percentages of PLAs separated into subsets are shown in Figure 3. Baseline unstimulated levels of PLAs were low and

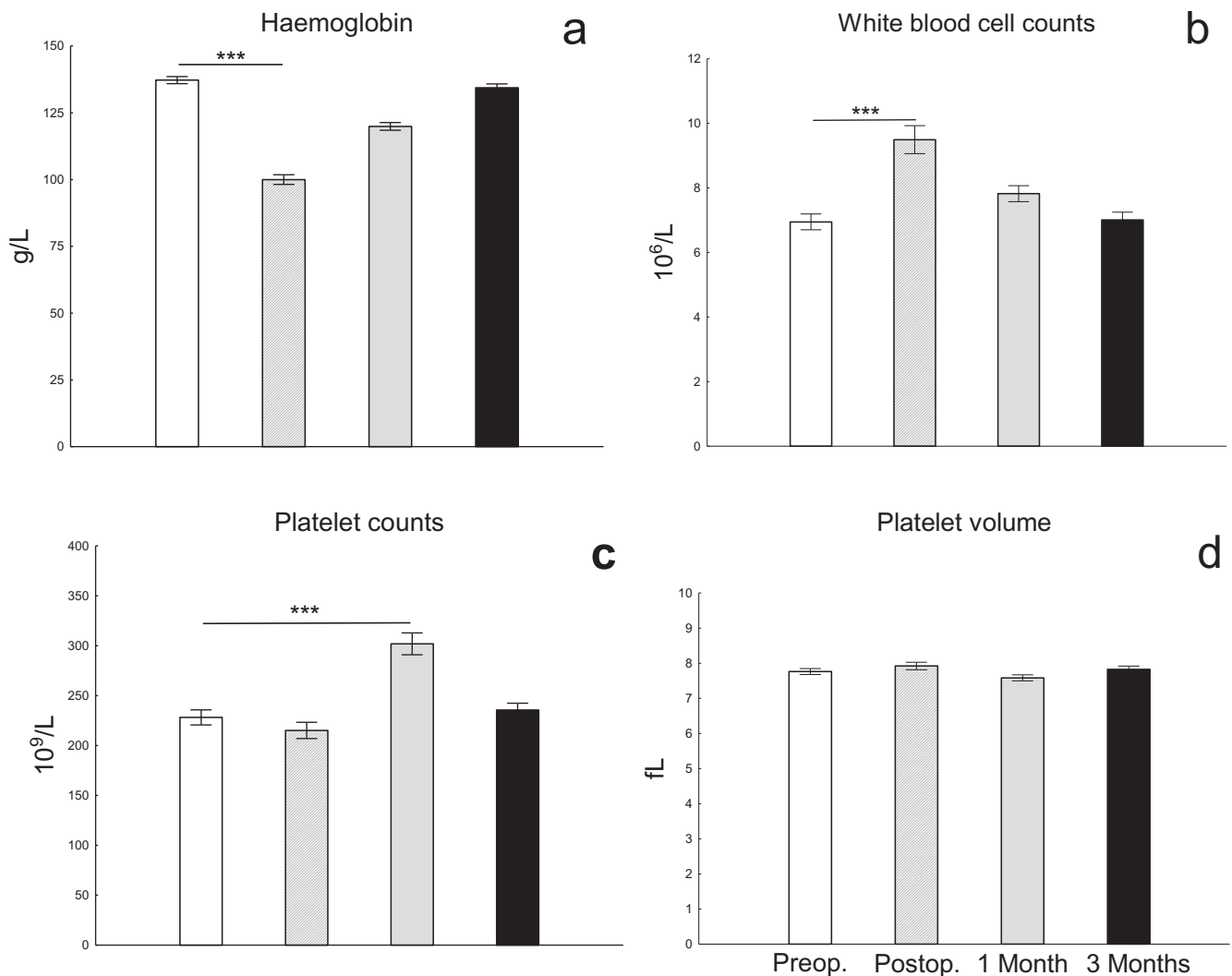


Figure 1. Mean levels with 95% confidence limits of (a) hemoglobin, (b) white blood cell counts, (c) platelet counts, and (d) platelet volumes in 54 patients before and after CABG. Dashed columns indicate results 4–6 days after surgery, shaded columns at one months and black columns at three months. *** $p < 0.001$ for difference between postoperative and preoperative levels are indicated.

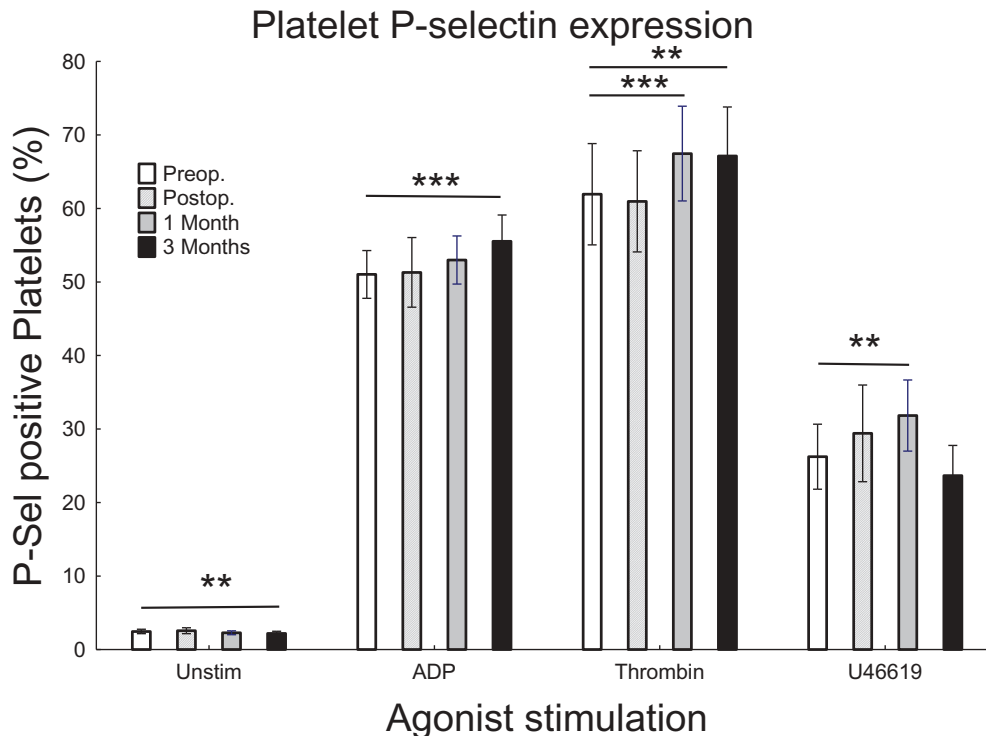


Figure 2. Mean percentages with 95% confidence limits for platelet P-selectin positive cells in the platelet population in 54 patients before and after CABG. Unstimulated basal levels and levels after agonist stimulation by adenosine diphosphate (ADP), thrombin, and the thromboxane A₂ analog U46619 are shown. Dashed columns indicate results 4–6 days after surgery, shaded columns at one month, and black columns at three months. ** $p < 0.01$ and *** $p < 0.001$ for difference between postoperative and preoperative levels are indicated.

reflect circulating PLAs when using our methodology [20]. Agonist stimulation increased P-Mon and P-Neu to more than 50% but to less than 10% for P-Lym. In unstimulated samples, all subsets of PLAs were increased one month after CABG. The percentages of CD14 positive P-Mons and P-Neus formed by *in vitro* stimulation with ADP, thrombin, or U46619 were significantly increased one month after the operation but reduced compared to baseline at three months. Agonist stimulated P-Lyms were increased at one month and remained increased at three months after ADP stimulation.

Correlations

There were several significant correlations at one and three months between agonist stimulated levels of platelet P-selectin expression and the corresponding agonist stimulated PLA formation *in vitro* (Supplementary Table III).

Discussion

In the present study, we found mildly increased platelet responsiveness to agonist stimulation using whole blood flow cytometry up to three months after elective CABG despite ASA use. Circulating PLAs of all subtypes (platelet-conjugated monocytes, neutrophils, and lymphocytes) were elevated one month after surgery, and agonist stimulated PLA formation *ex vivo* was also enhanced at this time point. Agonist stimulated P-Mon and P-Neu formation was reduced at three months compared to baseline whereas P-Lym formation was not. There was no pattern indicating selectivity for any signaling pathway as platelet and PLA responsiveness was elevated with stimulation by ADP, thrombin, and a thromboxane analog. We have previously shown that CABG causes early (within one week) activation of circulating platelets and

leukocytes, increased numbers of circulating PLAs, and marked activation of coagulation and inflammatory responses [11]. We presently show that platelet and PLA responses are protracted and in some cases not normalized even after three months.

Only patients with stable coronary artery disease who underwent elective CABG were included in this study as patients treated for acute coronary syndromes require dual antiplatelet treatment after the operation [23]. ASA was not discontinued before the operation, as the associated bleeding risk is small and withdrawal would leave the patient unprotected against acute ischemic events [21,24,25]. Minor bleeding that in some cases might have been associated with ASA treatment was reported by 15% of the patients during the follow-up. Flow cytometric assays under static conditions are independent of thromboxane formation due to platelet aggregation, and can be used to investigate platelets regardless of ASA therapy [17–19]. In agreement with this, we found no differences between groups treated with different ASA dosages and could pool all patients.

CABG performed with the aid of cardiopulmonary bypass caused an early drop in hemoglobin levels reflecting blood loss and hemodilution. Leukocyte counts were the highest 4–6 days after the operation reflecting inflammatory responses to cardiopulmonary bypass [9]. These changes were normalized three months after the operation. Platelet counts were markedly elevated one month after the operation but mean platelet volume that reflects platelet turnover and platelet reactivity (large, newly formed platelets being more reactive) did not change [26].

The postoperative responses to CABG with cardiopulmonary bypass were more pronounced for PLAs than for single platelets. It is of interest that P-Mons may be a more sensitive marker for platelet activation *in vivo* than P-selectin expression on single platelets [27] presumably since circulating platelets shed the exposed P-selectin *in vivo* [28]. This may explain why the P-selectin expression of unstimulated (circulating) platelets did

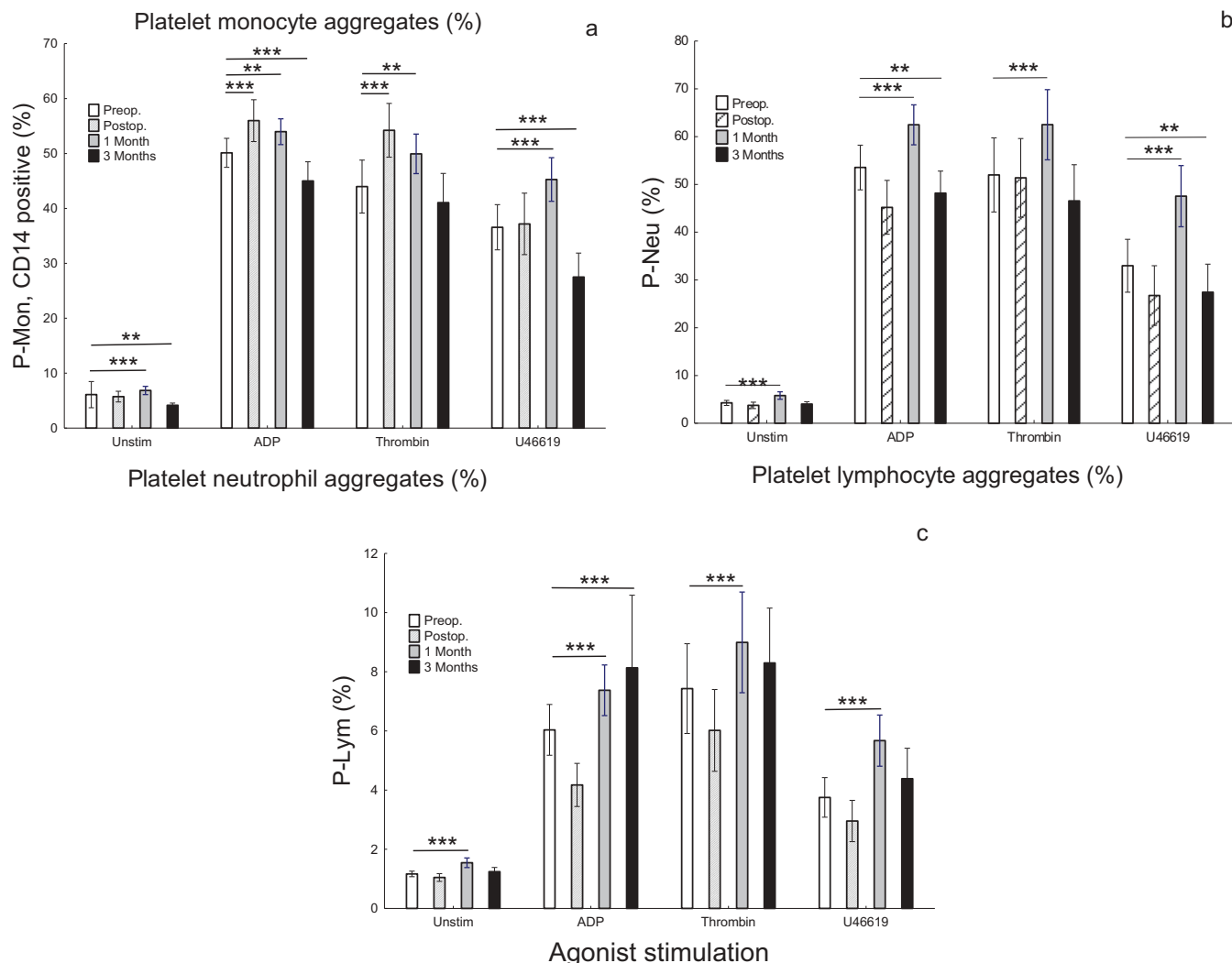


Figure 3. Mean percentages with 95% confidence limits of (a) CD14 positive platelet–monocyte aggregates (P-Mon), (b) platelet–neutrophil aggregates (P-neu), and (c) platelet–lymphocyte aggregates (P-lym) in 54 patients before and after CABG. Unstimulated levels and levels after agonist stimulation by ADP, thrombin, and the thromboxane A_2 analog U46619 are shown. Dashed columns indicate results 4–6 days after surgery, shaded columns at one month, and black columns at three months. $**p < 0.01$ and $***p < 0.001$ for difference between postoperative and preoperative levels are indicated.

not change, whereas circulating P-Mons were increased at one month. Increased platelet reactivity to agonist stimulation *ex vivo* was found up to three months after surgery, and larger responses were detected among PLAs than among single platelets in the present study. Of interest is that agonist stimulated platelet P-selectin expression correlated with the corresponding formation of PLAs at one and three months, as shown in Supplementary Table III. Thus, platelet sensitization appears to be of importance for the increased reactivity of PLAs after CABG surgery.

Platelets that are adhered to the endothelium and platelets binding to leukocytes are involved in the recruitment of leukocytes to the vessel wall and the initiation of vascular inflammation and atherosclerosis [4,6–8,29]. Binding via P-selectin glycoprotein ligand-1 is crucial in the interaction between platelets and the microvascular endothelium as well as in interactions with leukocytes and the formation of PLAs [29,30]. Neutrophils can be activated by high mobility group box 1 protein expressed in platelets, and neutrophil extracellular traps play a key role in interaction with platelets [31]. Platelet binding to monocytes increases their adhesiveness and transendothelial migration, and platelet binding to neutrophils promotes transmigration and their

recruitment to inflammatory sites [4,29,30]. Recent work has shown a crucial importance of platelets in guiding neutrophils and inflammatory monocytes to their exit points in the microvasculature [32]. The present data showing increased circulating P-Mons and P-Neus, as well as increased responses to agonist stimulation *ex vivo* one month after the CABG operation, may be interpreted as reflecting inflammatory and prothrombotic challenges to the vasculature. The P-Mon and P-Neu responses were lower than before the operation after three months, indicating wound healing and subsiding inflammation, whereas signs of mildly increased platelet reactivity persisted. Clearance of activated platelets and neutrophils from the circulation and the associated decrease in platelet–leukocyte aggregates may have contributed to this finding [28,33]. Platelets participate in the regulation of CD4 positive T-cells with implications for immune responses and vascular inflammation [8,34]. Our findings of increased platelet binding to lymphocytes and increased agonist stimulated formation of P-Lyms one month after the CABG procedure are of interest in this context.

Activated platelets and formation of PLAs may increase the risk of thrombosis after CABG. The present data support the need for efficient antiplatelet therapy during the first three months after

the operation. Dual antiplatelet therapy may be an option for a limited period of time also among stable patients undergoing elective CABG.

Limitations

We were not able to include all screened patients as we required a follow-up examination of surviving patients three months after the operation, and good-quality blood samples for flow cytometry with minimal *in vitro* artefacts at all time points. The patients were treated with different low doses of ASA after the operation [16] but we do not believe this has confounded our findings since flow cytometry of single platelets or PLAs is not influenced by the thromboxane pathway of platelet activation [17–19] and the flow cytometric data reported here did not vary between the ASA treatment groups.

Conclusions

We conclude that elective CABG in ASA-treated patients with stable coronary artery disease evoked mild signs of platelet activation up to three months after the operation. Increased platelet–leukocyte interactions that may facilitate vascular inflammation and thrombosis were found especially one month after the operation. Our findings support further studies of the clinical implications of protracted platelet activation after CABG.

Supplementary data

Supplementary data for this article can be accessed [here](#).

Acknowledgment

The authors are grateful for the expert technical assistance of Maud Daleskog.

Funding

The Swedish Research Council/Medicine, the Swedish Heart-Lung Foundation, Karolinska Institutet and the Stockholm County Council.

Conflict of interest

None of the authors have any conflict of interest to report in relation to this work.

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