Clinical Trial

Effect of a Reduction in Uric Acid on Renal Outcomes During Losartan Treatment
A Post Hoc Analysis of the Reduction of Endpoints in Non-Insulin-Dependent Diabetes Mellitus With the Angiotensin II Antagonist Losartan Trial


Abstract—Emerging data show that increased serum uric acid (SUA) concentration is an independent risk factor for end-stage renal disease. Treatment with the antihypertensive drug losartan lowers SUA. Whether reductions in SUA during losartan therapy are associated with renoprotection is unclear. We therefore tested this hypothesis. In a post hoc analysis of 1342 patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and nephropathy participating in the Reduction of Endpoints in Non-Insulin-Dependent Diabetes Mellitus With the Angiotensin II Antagonist Losartan Trial, we determined the relationship between month 6 change in SUA and renal endpoints, defined as a doubling of serum creatinine or end-stage renal disease. Baseline SUA was 6.7 mg/dL in placebo and losartan-treated subjects. During the first 6 months, losartan lowered SUA by −0.16 mg/dL (95% CI: −0.30 to −0.01; P=0.031) as compared with placebo. The risk of renal events was decreased by 6% (95% CI: 10% to 3%) per 0.5-mg/dL decrement in SUA during the first 6 months. This effect was independent of other risk markers, including estimate glomerular filtration rate and albuminuria. Adjustment of the overall treatment effects for SUA attenuated losartan’s renoprotective effect from 22% (95% CI: 6% to 35%) to 17% (95% CI: 1% to 31%), suggesting that approximately one fifth of losartan’s renoprotective effect could be attributed to its effect on SUA. Losartan lowers SUA levels compared with placebo treatment in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and nephropathy. The degree of reduction in SUA is subsequently associated with the degree in long-term renal risk reduction and explains part of losartan’s renoprotective effect. These findings support the view that SUA may be a modifiable risk factor for renal disease. (Hypertension. 2011;58:2-7.)

Key Words: serum uric acid ■ angiotensin receptor blocker ■ losartan ■ diabetic nephropathy ■ type 2 diabetes mellitus

Over the past decades, serum uric acid (SUA) has emerged as a cardiovascular risk marker. Increased SUA has been shown to predict the risk of hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and cardiovascular disease. More recent data also point to SUA as a risk marker for progression of chronic kidney disease. These observations raise the question as to whether interventions that lower uric acid could confer cardiovascular or renal protection. In this respect, the angiotensin receptor blocker losartan is of potential interest. The drug has been clearly demonstrated to be renoprotective in patients with diabetic nephropathy, with this effect largely attributed to its effects on blood pressure and/or proteinuria/albuminuria. However, it is unclear whether other off-target effects of the drug could contribute to the ultimate improvement in renal outcome with this agent. Importantly, previous studies have shown that losartan lowers SUA. This hypouricemic effect does not occur with other angiotensin receptor blockers and appears to be largely mediated through reductions in the level of human urate transporter 1 (URAT1) and decreased net urate reabsorption in the proximal tubule.

With respect to cardiovascular endpoints, a subanalysis from the Losartan Intervention for Endpoint Reduction in Hypertension Trial showed that the superior effect of losartan could be

Received February 11, 2011; first decision February 28, 2011; revision accepted May 6, 2011.

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The RENAAL trial has been registered at www.clinicaltrials.gov (identifier NCT 00308347).

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Hypertension is available at http://hyper.ahajournals.org

DOI: 10.1161/HYPERTENSIONAHA.111.171488

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partly explained by its effect on SUA.\textsuperscript{11} Whether the same holds true for the long-term renoprotective effect of losartan is unknown but is worth investigating in the context of the increased body of evidence linking uric acid to the progression of chronic kidney disease.\textsuperscript{12} The aim of the present study, therefore, was to assess whether losartan-induced changes in uric acid during initial months of therapy are associated with decreased (long-term) risk of readily measurable renal outcomes in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and nephropathy.

Methods

Study Design

The Reduction of Endpoints in Non-Insulin-Dependent Diabetes Mellitus With The Angiotensin II Antagonist Losartan (RENAAL) Trial was a multinational, randomized, double-blind trial that compared the effects of losartan versus placebo in addition to conventional antihypertensive medication in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and nephropathy. Patients had serum creatinine levels between 1.3 and 3.0 mg/dL (1.5 to 3.0 mg/dL for men ≥60 kg). The study was performed in 250 centers in 28 countries and involved 1513 patients. The study design, the inclusion/exclusion criteria, and the treatment protocol have been reported previously.\textsuperscript{13} In short, after a 6-week screening phase, patients were randomly assigned to either losartan (100 mg) or placebo. Additional antihypertensive medications (calcium channel blockers, β-blockers, centrally acting agents, and diuretics, excluding angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors or other angiotensin receptor antagonists) were permitted to achieve the blood pressure goal of <140/90 mm Hg (systolic/diastolic). All of the patients signed informed consent before enrollment, and the local institutional review board of each participating center approved the study. The mean duration of follow-up was 3.4 years.

Measures and Outcomes

In this study, we performed a post hoc analysis of all of the subjects with uric acid measurements included in the RENAAL Trial. Blood pressure, SUA, serum creatinine, and albuminuria were measured every 3 months, and hemoglobin A1c was measured every 6 months for the duration of the study. Albuminuria was assessed as the ratio of albumin/creatinine concentrations from a first-morning-void urine sample. The Modification of Diet in Renal Disease formula was used to estimate glomerular filtration rate (eGFR).\textsuperscript{14} We assessed the relationship between change in SUA level at month 6 and renal outcomes. The change from baseline to month 6 was chosen because this is the earliest time point at which most variables of interest were available, the treatment effects were considered to be fully manifest, and relatively few renal events occurred before month 6.\textsuperscript{15} Changes in SUA, blood pressure, albuminuria, and hemoglobin A1c were calculated as baseline minus month 6.

The primary renal outcome was defined as a composite of a confirmed doubling of serum creatinine or end-stage renal disease. The latter was defined as the need for chronic dialysis or renal transplantation. All of the endpoints were adjudicated by a blinded endpoint committee using rigorous guideline definitions.

Statistical Analysis

Patients with SUA measurements at baseline and month 6 were included in the present analysis. Mean SUA at each visit during follow-up was calculated in both the losartan and placebo groups. Patient characteristics were summarized according to tertiles of SUA at month 6 in SUA. To identify parameters associated with a change in SUA at month 6, a multivariate logistic regression model was used. Baseline characteristics, as well as month 6 changes in systolic and diastolic blood pressure, hemoglobin A1c, log-transformed albuminuria, and eGFR, were included in the multivariate model. A backward selection procedure was used for selection of covariates for the final model ($\alpha = 0.1$).

The proportion of patients without renal events was estimated using the Kaplan–Meier procedure. Multivariate Cox regression analyses were performed to determine whether changes in SUA were independently associated with renal outcomes. Changes in SUA were included in the Cox model as a continuous variable. All of the analyses were adjusted for risk markers that showed a statistically significant association with month 6 change in uric acid. These included the following: age, sex, treatment assignment (losartan or placebo), eGFR, systolic blood pressure, log-transformed albuminuria, serum albumin, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitor or angiotensin receptor blocker use at baseline, and changes in log-transformed albuminuria and eGFR. Finally, the contribution of therapy-induced changes in SUA on losartan’s renoprotective effect was assessed by time-varying Cox regression models. Relative risk reductions are described in the text as percentage reductions ([1 − hazard ratio]\times 100). Analyses were conducted with SAS (version 9.2; SAS Institute, Cary, NC). A $P$ value <0.05 was considered to indicate statistical significance.

Results

A total of 1342 subjects were involved in the present analysis. In the losartan group, the mean SUA remained 6.7 mg/dL during the first 6 months of therapy. By contrast, in the placebo group, the mean SUA increased from 6.7 mg/dL at baseline to 6.9 mg/dL at month 6, resulting in a mean group difference of −0.16 mg/dL (95% CI −0.30 to −0.01; $P = 0.031$) (Figure 1). The level of SUA in the placebo group continued to increase from month 6 onward. Likewise, the SUA level also started to rise at month 6 in the losartan group. The “apparent” fall observed at 36 months in the placebo group is likely to be linked to “dropout” of patients in the placebo group with high SUA levels. Patients were subsequently classified into tertiles according to the change in SUA at month 6 (Table 1). Relevant baseline characteristics were not different among the tertile groups apart from SUA and albuminuria, which were higher and, respectively, lower in patients who had a decrease in SUA. In addition, these patients had a smaller reduction in systolic blood pressure and albuminuria at month 6.

To investigate the parameters associated with a change in SUA at month 6, a multivariate linear regression was performed in the overall population. Allocation to losartan therapy was independently associated with a larger fall in uric acid at month 6. Furthermore, higher baseline SUA, eGFR, and serum albumin, as well as a larger reduction in eGFR and a smaller reduction in albuminuria, were significantly associated with a larger decrease in SUA at month 6 (Table 2).
Table 1. Characteristics of the Overall Reduction of Endpoints in Non-Insulin-Dependent Diabetes Mellitus With the Angiotensin II Antagonist Losartan Trial Population by Treatment Allocation and by Month 6 Change in Uric Acid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Placebo (n=664)</th>
<th>Losartan (n=678)</th>
<th>Uric Acid Decrease ≥0.5 mg/dL (n=457)</th>
<th>Uric Acid Increase ≥0.5 mg/dL (n=450)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age, y</td>
<td>60.2 (7.6)</td>
<td>60.0 (7.3)</td>
<td>60.3 (7.2)</td>
<td>60.2 (7.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men, n (%)</td>
<td>421 (63.4)</td>
<td>422 (62.2)</td>
<td>296 (64.5)</td>
<td>270 (62.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race, n (%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>327 (49.3)</td>
<td>322 (47.5)</td>
<td>228 (49.9)</td>
<td>212 (48.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>92 (13.9)</td>
<td>109 (16.1)</td>
<td>62 (13.6)</td>
<td>65 (14.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>120 (18.1)</td>
<td>124 (18.3)</td>
<td>90 (19.7)</td>
<td>80 (18.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>117 (17.6)</td>
<td>114 (16.8)</td>
<td>70 (15.3)</td>
<td>72 (16.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8 (1.2)</td>
<td>9 (1.3)</td>
<td>7 (1.5)</td>
<td>6 (1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systolic BP, mm Hg</td>
<td>152.9 (20)</td>
<td>152.0 (19)</td>
<td>151.1 (19.1)</td>
<td>152.1 (19.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diastolic BP, mm Hg</td>
<td>82.3 (10)</td>
<td>82.4 (10)</td>
<td>82.3 (10.5)</td>
<td>82.1 (10.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cholesterol, mg/dL</td>
<td>227.9 (56)</td>
<td>225.7 (55)</td>
<td>224.6 (55.1)</td>
<td>226.3 (52.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HbA1C, %</td>
<td>8.4 (1.6)</td>
<td>8.5 (1.6)</td>
<td>8.3 (1.6)</td>
<td>8.5 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum uric acid, mg/dL</td>
<td>6.7 (1.7)</td>
<td>6.7 (1.7)</td>
<td>7.4 (1.8)</td>
<td>6.4 (1.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemoglobin, mg/dL</td>
<td>12.4 (1.8)</td>
<td>12.5 (1.8)</td>
<td>12.6 (1.9)</td>
<td>12.5 (1.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urinary ACR, mg/g</td>
<td>1261 (568 to 2475)</td>
<td>1168 (538 to 2540)</td>
<td>947 (475 to 1964)</td>
<td>1246 (693 to 2682)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum cystatin, mg/dL</td>
<td>3.8 (0.4)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.4)</td>
<td>3.7 (0.4)</td>
<td>3.8 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACEi or ARB</td>
<td>329 (49.6)</td>
<td>368 (54.3)</td>
<td>237 (51.9)</td>
<td>235 (54.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β-blockers</td>
<td>122 (18.4)</td>
<td>128 (18.9)</td>
<td>102 (22.3)</td>
<td>68 (15.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium channel blockers</td>
<td>484 (72.9)</td>
<td>488 (72.0)</td>
<td>323 (70.7)</td>
<td>308 (70.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diuretics</td>
<td>384 (57.8)</td>
<td>394 (58.1)</td>
<td>282 (61.7)</td>
<td>236 (54.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BP indicates blood pressure; ACR, albumin:creatinine ratio; ACEi, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitor; ARB, angiotensin receptor blocker; eGFR, estimated glomerular filtration rate; HbA1C, hemoglobin A1C. Mean (SD) or numbers of patients (%) was provided for normal distributed continuous variables and categorical variables, respectively. Because of the skewed distribution of the albumin:creatinine ratio, urinary albumin:creatinine ratio is presented as median (interquartile range).

Follow-up characteristics

| Change in uric acid, mg/dL       | 0.2 (1.4) | 0.0 (1.3) | -1.3 (0.8) | 0.0 (0.2) | +1.5 (0.9) |
| Change in systolic BP, mm Hg    | -0.3 (20) | -5.4 (19) | -0.4 (19) | -2.3 (19) | -6.0 (21) |
| Change in diastolic BP, mm Hg   | -0.7 (11) | -2.7 (10) | -0.6 (10) | -1.2 (9) | -3.5 (10) |
| Change in urinary ACR, %        | +4.7 | -28.8 | +2.6 | -13.2 | -29.7 |

To convert the values of serum uric acid to micromoles per liter, multiply by 59.48. To convert the values of serum creatinine to micromoles per liter, multiply by 88.4. To convert the values for cholesterol to millimoles per liter, multiply by 0.0259.

Discussion

This study demonstrates that losartan treatment in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and nephropathy lower SUA levels compared with placebo. Although SUA increased in the placebo group, this effect was attenuated with losartan in the treated group. A significant lower risk for renal events was observed per reduction in SUA over time on losartan’s renoprotective effect. When the treatment effect was adjusted for the residual SUA (the last measurement before the occurrence of the renal endpoint), the treatment effect of losartan on the doubling of serum creatinine/end-stage renal disease endpoint attenuated from 22% (95% CI: 6% to 35%) to 17% (95% CI: 1% to 30%); that is, ≈4% of 22% (one fifth) of the benefit of losartan could be attributed to its effect on SUA.
The mechanisms through which losartan exerts its hypouricemic effect are well described. The proximal tubule has been mate to be 22%.

Figure 2. Kaplan–Meier curves for renal outcomes (doubling of serum creatinine or end-stage renal disease). The renal event rates in subjects with a month 6 reduction in SUA ≤-0.5 mg/dL, serum uric acid (SUA) change between and 0.5 mg/dL, or an SUA increase ≥0.5 mg/dL were, respectively, 9.5, 12.3, and 14.3 events per 100 patient-years.

Table 2. Covariates Associated With a Change in Serum Uric Acid at Month 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk Markers</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>χ²</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline uric acid</td>
<td>0.253</td>
<td>191.6</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change urinary ACR</td>
<td>0.526</td>
<td>148.4</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment assignment (losartan or placebo)</td>
<td>0.477</td>
<td>57.6</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change eGFR</td>
<td>-0.032</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline eGFR</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline serum albumin</td>
<td>0.263</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline ACEi or ARB use</td>
<td>-0.143</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baseline systolic blood pressure</td>
<td>-0.004</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>0.067</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>0.134</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.090</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

eGFR indicates estimated glomerular filtration rate; ACEI, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitor; ARB, angiotensin receptor blocker; ACR, albumin:creatinine ratio. Covariates that showed a P value <0.1 in the multivariate analysis are presented in the table. Covariates are ordered by decreasing significance based on the χ² statistics. The natural log-transformed value of urinary ACR and change in natural log-transformed urinary ACR were used in all of the regression analyses.

Figure 3. Hazard ratios for incident renal outcomes (doubling of serum creatinine or end-stage renal disease) as function of month 6 change in serum uric acid (SUA). The relation is corrected for baseline and change in other risk markers.

identified as the primary location of uric acid secretion and reabsorption. A central role in proximal tubule urate reabsorption has been ascribed to URAT1. URAT1 is located in the lumen of proximal tubule cells and reabsorbs uric acid (as urate) in exchange for intracellular anorganic anions. Losartan increases urate excretion by inhibition URAT1-mediated renal tubule urate reabsorption. Early studies in the healthy population demonstrated that the peak uricosuric effect was already observed 2 to 4 hours after administration. The time course of this effect suggests that it is losartan itself rather than its active metabolite that blocks URAT1 and causes the reduction in SUA. Theoretically, the distinct uricosuric effect of losartan could lead to increases in urinary uric acid concentration, which could lead to supersaturation of uric acid and, in the extreme case, precipitate uric acid nephropathy. However, the risk of development of uric acid crystals during losartan therapy is reduced because of the drug’s urinary alkalizing effects. Treatment with losartan raises urinary pH, which is attributed to the blockade of angiotensin II–induced stimulation of bicarbonate reabsorption. This increase in urinary pH offsets the formation of uric acid crystals and reduces the risk of acute uric acid nephropathy.

Emerging evidence demonstrates an association between SUA and adverse renal outcomes. Whether this relationship is causal is unclear. Indeed, whether SUA is a marker of renal function decline or a risk factor for progressive renal function loss remains a matter of ongoing debate. In the kidney, SUA is filtered, secreted, and reabsorbed. As glomerular filtration rate (GFR) declines, the fractional excretion of uric acid increases. However, this process does not completely counterbalance the fall in GFR. Consequently, SUA levels start to rise. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that changes in SUA are a result of renal disease and have no direct pathogenic role. However, a series of experimental and epidemiological studies have challenged this view. Recent experimental studies have shown that increased uric acid levels increase activity of the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system, stimulate renal inflammation, enhance endothelial dysfunc-
tion, and impair renal autoregulation resulting in glomerular (and systemic) hypertension. Each of these effects contributes to the initiation and progression of renal disease. In addition, epidemiological studies consistently show that increased SUA levels predict renal function decline, independent of other renal or cardiovascular risk factors. For example, Hovind et al showed recently that increased uric acid is independently associated with development of nephropathy, although that study was performed in a cohort with type 1 diabetes mellitus. These experimental and clinical studies support the view that uric acid may be involved in the pathogenesis of renal disease.

The most compelling way to evaluate whether uric acid is a marker or risk factor for renal disease is to evaluate whether “direct” therapy that lowers uric acid confers renoprotection. A couple of studies have highlighted the relevance for renal outcomes of manipulating SUA concentrations. It appears that reductions in SUA conferred by allopurinol slow down progressive renal function loss in diabetic and nondiabetic individuals in whom SUA increased <1 mg/dL after 1 year of therapy. Thus, when estimating the effects of a drug on renal or cardiovascular endpoints using risk markers, the effect of the drug on all of the risk markers including SUA should be taken into account rather than focusing on the marker that the drug is registered for.

Limitations of this study include the post hoc nature of the analyses. Although our data are derived from a double-blind, placebo-controlled, randomized trial, the analyses according to change in SUA are no longer randomized. Although we adjusted for all of the available baseline covariates and changes in covariates, residual confounding cannot be completely excluded. Unfortunately, 24-hour urate excretion was not measured in RENAAL participants. This precludes the possibility of determining the fractional excretion of uric acid during losartan therapy. The reduction in uric acid in subjects with the highest baseline uric acid level could indicate a regression to the mean phenomenon. However, the fact that we adjusted our multivariate analyses for baseline uric acid and the fact that the month 6 uric acid level (residual uric acid) remained an independent predictor for the primary renal outcome makes this assumption as an explanation for our findings less likely. Finally, the results of this study can only be generalized to the, admittedly large, population of patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and nephropathy.

In conclusion, losartan lowers SUA levels when compared with placebo treatment in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus and nephropathy. This change in SUA is independently associated with a lower risk of doubling of serum creatinine or end-stage renal disease such that approximately one fifth of losartan’s renoprotective effect could be attributed to SUA. These data indicate that a reduction in SUA observed during the initial months after starting losartan contributes to its renoprotective effect.

Perspectives
Increasing data suggest that uric acid may be a risk factor for renal disease progression. The results of the current study indicate that the effect of losartan on SUA explains part of its renoprotective effect. These findings support the postulate that uric acid–lowering therapy slows the progression of chronic kidney disease. Prospective randomized, controlled trials on
hard endpoints are needed to confirm that uric acid–lowering therapy delays the progression of renal disease.

**Sources of Funding**

The Reduction of Endpoints in NIDDIM With the Angiotensin II Antagonist Losartan Study was funded by Merck & Co. This post hoc analysis was funded by a grant from the Dutch Top Institute Pharma (project T6-202).

**Disclosures**

B.M.B., M.E.C., D.d.Z., and H.-H.P. have received financial support from Merck for their participation in the steering committee. S.S. has been previously but is not currently an employee of Merck.

**Acknowledgments**

We acknowledge the supportive role of all of the Reduction of Endpoints in NIDDIM With the Angiotensin II Antagonist Losartan investigators, support staff, and participating patients.

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Yan Miao, Stefan A. Ottenbros, Goos D. Laverman, Barry M. Brenner, Mark E. Cooper, Hans-Henrik Parving, Diederick E. Grobbee, Shahnaz Shahinfar, Dick de Zeeuw and Hiddo J. Lambers Heerspink

Hypertension. 2011;58:2-7; originally published online May 31, 2011; doi: 10.1161/HYPERTENSIONAHA.111.171488

Hypertension is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
Copyright © 2011 American Heart Association, Inc. All rights reserved.
Print ISSN: 0194-911X. Online ISSN: 1524-4563

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
http://hyper.ahajournals.org/content/58/1/2

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