Response: Ouabain and Serum Sodium

We are grateful to Gasowski et al for raising an interesting point on plasma sodium and ouabain. They found a significant association between these 2 variables in a cross-sectional study of 369 individuals.1 This finding, in conjunction with those from experimental studies in rats,2 which showed that the increase in blood pressure induced by an increase in cerebral spinal fluid sodium was secondary to an increase in ouabain content in the hypothalamus, and could be prevented by the intracerebroventricular administration of Fab fragments, which bound ouabain, suggests that the effect of plasma sodium on blood pressure may be, in part, through increasing ouabain concentration both in plasma and in the hypothalamus.

In our article,3 we looked at 3 types of studies of changing salt intake and demonstrated that when salt intake is increased or decreased, there is a parallel change in plasma sodium. Small changes in plasma sodium alter extracellular volume, which may influence blood pressure. At the same time, changes in plasma sodium may also affect blood pressure directly. It is an important attempt that Gasowski et al tried to reproduce these findings using the data of their cross-sectional study, presumably trying to answer an important question of whether habitual salt intake is related to plasma sodium. However, addressing this question would need careful measurements of both plasma and urinary sodium in a large number of individuals under controlled conditions because of a large day-to-day variation in salt intake. In addition, the concentration of sodium in plasma is closely and rapidly controlled by the movement of fluid between the intracellular and extracellular compartment, changes in sodium excretion, and by the activity of thirst center,4 which, in rat, is influenced by changes in plasma sodium of <1%.5 Such small and potent changes in plasma sodium are technically difficult to detect. The methods used in the cross-sectional study by Gasowski et al made it even more difficult to look at the relationship between salt intake and plasma sodium. First, only one 24-hour urine collection was made, which certainly does not represent an individual’s habitual salt intake. Furthermore, blood sample was taken several days after the urine collection ("usually within 2 weeks of urine collection\" as stated in the original publication\>). It is therefore not surprising that they could not reproduce our findings from well-controlled clinical trials.

Gasowski et al also misquoted our results by stating that “a progressive increase in salt intake from 10 to 250 mmol/d by a daily amount of 50 mmol caused an increase in plasma sodium in normotensive subjects, but not hypertensive patients.” In our article, we clearly indicated that only normotensive individuals were studied using this protocol (ie, progressive increase in salt intake). However, our acute salt reduction studies in which both hypertensive subjects and normotensive subjects were studied, showed a similar decrease in plasma sodium when salt intake was reduced from ~350 to 10 mmol/d. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that hypertensive individuals would not show an increase in plasma sodium with increasing salt intake.

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Hypertension. published online May 9, 2005;
Hypertension is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
Copyright © 2005 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/early/2005/05/09/01.HYP.0000168321.32058.d6.citation

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