Oral K\textsubscript{3}Citrate Supplementation Mitigates Age-Associated Intervertebral Disc Mineralization in LG/J Mice

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Disclosures: The authors have no competing interests to disclose in relation to this work.

INTRODUCTION: Intervertebral disc mineralization is a prevalent subphenotype of intervertebral disc degeneration, with incidence as high as 100% reported in a study of randomized cadaveric samples. Mineralization of the disc can contribute to increased stiffness of the tissue and exacerbate susceptibility to intervertebral disc herniation, conditions which contribute to back pain. One challenge which has limited the study of disc mineralization and development of therapeutics to mitigate it is small animal models which recapitulate the pathology. We have previously shown the LG/J inbred mouse strain exhibits age-associated intervertebral disc mineralization, with notable features including high amounts of free calcium in mineralized discs and transcriptomic signatures relating to endochondral bone and calcium-phosphate homeostasis. In this study, we build on these findings by further characterizing the phenotype and testing the suitability of oral supplementation of K\textsubscript{3}Citrate to mitigate disc mineralization.

METHODS: Starting at 17 months of age, LG/J mice received 80mM K\textsubscript{3}Citrate continuously supplemented in their drinking water. Prior to euthanasia at 23 months, animals underwent grip strength, open field, and gait analyses to evaluate global impacts of K\textsubscript{3}Citrate on animal locomotion and frailty. Postmortem, motion segments were scanned using \mu\textsubscript{CT}, and detailed histological and spectroscopic analyses were performed on the discs. Plasma chemistry was evaluated by quantitative NMR spectroscopy as a measure of general health and by multiplex ELISA to measure the abundance of various cytokines and proinflammatory markers. Based on observations that LG/J disc mineralization may be driven by dysregulation of the cartilaginous endplates, in vitro studies were conducted using the ATDC5 chondrocytic cell line to investigate the effect of K\textsubscript{3}Citrate on cell differentiation and cartilage mineralization. Significance was measured using a student’s t-test and \chi^2 test, where appropriate, at a significance level of p < 0.05. Mice were kept according to protocols approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) of Thomas Jefferson University.

RESULTS SECTION: Consistent with studies of the effects of K\textsubscript{3}Citrate supplementation in humans, our plasma analyses and behavioral assessments indicated no adverse effects of K\textsubscript{3}Citrate supplementation on LG/J mice. Notably, K\textsubscript{3}Citrate-treated mice demonstrated higher grip strength than the control cohort. \mu\textsubscript{CT} imaging showed significant reductions in the incidence and size of disc mineralization with K\textsubscript{3}Citrate treatment. Histological analyses of control and K\textsubscript{3}Citrate-treated mice revealed that the cartilaginous endplates may be the locus for mineralization in LG/J mice, evidenced by the irregular presence of hypertrophic chondrocytes in the endplates and the apparent spread of these cells into the subchondral bone and NP and AF compartments.

DISCUSSION: Calcification of the cartilaginous endplates of the intervertebral disc is a common feature observed in the aging human population. Such calcifications may also correspond to mineralization of the other disc compartments and the depletion of nutrients in the disc. Here, we show that dysregulation of the endplate chondrocyte differentiation program is a significant contributor to the intervertebral disc mineralization observed in the LG/J mouse model. Importantly, our results provide robust evidence that K\textsubscript{3}Citrate supplementation successfully reduces the incidence and severity of disc mineralization in the LG/J model. This work reinforces the safety of K\textsubscript{3}Citrate as a supplement and provides mechanistic insight into the means through which mineralization of the disc may be mediated.

SIGNIFICANCE/CLINICAL RELEVANCE: This study for the first time demonstrates the ability of an oral citrate supplement to prevent intervertebral disc calcification, a pathology of high clinical relevance. Importantly, this and other research indicate no adverse effects, providing a promising lead for further research on and application of citrate to mitigate this pathology.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: We thank the Summer Undergraduate Research Program (SURP) and Summer Training & Enrichment Program for Underrepresented Persons (STEP UP) Medicine Program of Thomas Jefferson University JCLS for their support of JJ Mundo and Bo Kwakye. Funding sources include: T32AR052273, R01AR064733, R01AR055655, R01AR074813.

IMAGES AND TABLES:

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\caption{Images and tables related to the study.}
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