Opposing effects of nitric oxide and prostaglandin inhibition on muscle mitochondrial \(\dot{V}O_2\) during exercise

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Nitric oxide (NO) and prostaglandins (PG) contribute synergistically to regulate skeletal muscle blood flow during exercise in humans (5, 14, 15, 28, 32, 33) through endothelium-dependent relaxation of vascular smooth muscle. Some studies employing dual inhibition of NO and PG synthesis have reported an effect on muscle oxidative metabolism and energy cost of contraction (14, 15, 28), suggesting overlapping regulation of oxygen delivery and utilization.

NO is an endogenous, short-lived free radical that mediates vascular smooth muscle relaxation. At low physiological concentrations (nanomolar range), NO also reversibly inhibits mitochondrial oxygen consumption by competitive binding to the heme \(a_3\) site of cytochrome oxidase in competition with oxygen. Higher (mM) concentrations of NO leads to peroxinitrite production that, in turn, irreversibly inhibits complexes I and II of the electron transport chain (6–9, 34, 37, 43). Indomethacin is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) that inhibits cyclooxygenase-mediated formation of PG from arachidonic acid and PG-mediated vasodilation. NSAIDs are hydrophobic acids that release protons from amino, carboxyl, and hydroxyl groups, which, therefore, can also act as ionophores in the inner mitochondrial membrane, resulting in uncoupling of substrate oxidation from ATP production (21, 25–27). At high concentrations, NSAIDs interact with mitochondrial membrane phospholipids, resulting in inhibition of mitochondrial electron transport and ATP production and have been shown to exert a negative inotropic effect on cardiac contractility (21, 26, 27).

Studies examining mechanisms of blood flow control have revealed conflicting findings on whether NO increases or decreases \(\dot{V}O_2\) during contraction. In animals, NO inhibition has been shown to lower muscle \(\dot{V}O_2\) during evoked contractions (2, 20, 22, 30, 31, 41), while other studies show no effect (1, 4) or an increase (35) in muscle \(\dot{V}O_2\) during voluntary exercise. In humans, NO inhibition alone has been found to have little or no effect on \(\dot{V}O_2\) across the exercising leg or forearm measured by the Fick method (15, 28, 33). This contrasts a recent study demonstrating that dietary nitrate that increases the bioavailability of NO reduces oxygen cost during physical exercise accompanied by improvement in mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation efficiency (P/O ratio) and a decrease in state 4 respiration measured ex vivo in isolated mitochondria (23). Another study showed that muscle \(\dot{V}O_2\) measured by PET with radio-water and radio-inhaled oxygen was increased at rest with NO inhibition and higher during exercise with combined inhibition of NO and PG synthesis (14).

To gain further insight into the mechanisms underlying how muscle \(\dot{V}O_2\) is affected during exercise by NO and PG synthesis inhibition in humans, mitochondrial respiration was measured in permeabilized fibers from muscle biopsies taken immediately after knee extension exercise with and without arterial infusion of \(N^2\)-monomethyl-l-arginine (l-NMMA) and/or indomethacin. Accordingly, the study examined two separate regulatory effects on mitochondria, the “physiological” inhibitory effect of NO, and the pharmacological effect of indomethacin on the electron transport chain.
NOS inhibition was expected to increase muscle mitochondrial respiration by reducing the NO inhibition of cytochrome-c oxidase, while NSAID treatment was expected to decrease mitochondrial respiration because of the intrinsic NSAID effect on complex I, rather than due to PG synthesis inhibition. Consistent with their mechanism of action, we hypothesized that inhibition of NOS and PG synthesis would have opposite effects on muscle mitochondrial respiration.

**METHODS**

*Human subjects.* Eight healthy males, aged 24 ± 2 yr, height 175 ± 3 cm, and weight 71 ± 2 kg, volunteered to participate in the study. All subjects were physically active but not involved in organized exercise training. Subjects were informed about the possible risks and discomforts involved in the study before giving their written consent to participate. This study was carried out according to the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethical Committee of Copenhagen (KF 11-042/04).

On the day of the experiment, subjects arrived at the laboratory 1 h prior to the experiment after a light breakfast. A catheter was placed into the femoral artery of the right leg under local anesthesia. Following 30 min of rest, the subject performed one-leg knee extension exercise at 30 W under the following three conditions: 1) Control (CON), 2) either L-NMMA infusion or indomethacin (Indo) infusion, followed by 3) Indo plus N-MMA (Indo double blockade) infusion. Each exercise bout was separated by a 45-min rest period. All eight subjects performed CON and Indo plus N-MMA + Indo, while subjects were randomized to perform an additional bout with either Indo alone (n = 4) or Indo (n = 4). Saline, Indo (120 μg·min⁻¹·kg⁻¹ of leg mass; Alphapharma), and/or Indo plus N-MMA (4 mg·min⁻¹·kg⁻¹ of leg mass; Clinalfa, Bachem) were infused into the femoral artery for 4 min before exercise and were then infused at a rate of 60 μg·min⁻¹·kg⁻¹ of leg mass (Indo) and/or 2 mg·min⁻¹·kg⁻¹ of leg mass (Indo plus N-MMA; maintenance dose) during the 6 min of active exercise. The dosages of Indo plus N-MMA and indomethacin infused were selected on the basis of previous experiments that found a reduction in muscle blood flow during exercise (28).

*Skeletal muscle tissue.* After local anesthesia (1% Lidocaine) of the skin and superficial muscle fascia, biopsies were obtained from the vastus lateralis muscle immediately after exercise in all four conditions; CON, Indo, Indo plus N-MMA + Indo. A small portion of the biopsied muscle (2–3 mg) was placed in relaxing medium (10 mM Ca-EGTA buffer, 0.1 μM free calcium, 20 mM imidazole, 20 mM taurine, 50 mM K-MES, 0.5 mM DTT, 6.56 mM MgCl₂, 5.77 mM ATP, and 15 mM phosphocreatine, pH 7.1) at 2–4°C. Fiber bundles were gently separated under a dissecting microscope with a pair of pointed forceps to maximize surface area of each fiber. The fiber bundles were then permeabilized for 30 min in 3 ml of ice-cold relaxing medium with saponin (50 μg/ml). After chemical permeabilization, the tissue was rinsed in chilled solution of MgCl₂-H₂O (3 mM), K-lactobionate (60 mM), taurine (20 mM), KH₂PO₄ (10 mM), HEPES (20 mM), sucrose (110 mM), BSA (1 g/l), at pH 7.1. The muscle bundles were then blotted and measured for wet weight in a metabolic chamber (28).

*Respirometry.* The Oxymgraph-2k (Oroboros Instruments, Innsbruck, Austria) contains the medium respiration (as above) at a chamber temperature of 37°C.

**RESULTS**

*Human experiments.* ADP-stimulated state 3 mitochondrial respiration (also known as OXPHOS) with substrates for complex I (glutamate and malate) was reduced by Indo (Fig. 1A) compared with all other conditions (CON, 52%; Double Block 63%, and Indo-NMMA 86%, P < 0.05). No differences were observed between CON and Double Block (P = 0.674), while Indo-NMMA tended to be higher than CON (P = 0.10). State 3 O₂ flux with convergent electron input through both complex I and II, with addition of succinate was similarly reduced with Indo (20%) and Double Block (15%) (P < 0.001) compared with CON but was not lowered with Indo-NMMA (Fig. 1B). The substrate control ratio (SCR) indicating the ratio between complex I + II: complex I (GMS3/GM3) was significantly higher in Indo muscle compared with all other conditions, demonstrating the disproportionately large inhibition of complex I by Indo (Fig. 2A). The lower SCR in Double Block and Indo-NMMA (P < 0.05) confirms a permissive effect of NOS inhibition on complex I respiration.

Uncoupled O₂ flux determined by titration of the ionophore FCCP was not increased above state 3 respiration with Indo, indicating inhibition of full electron transport chain capacity by Indo (Fig. 2B). Uncoupled respiration (3U/GS3) was higher in Double Block (P < 0.05) and Indo-NMMA (P < 0.01), indicating tight phosphorylation control in state 3 and a higher electron transport capacity with inhibition of NOS, consistent with an...
effect on cytochrome-c oxidase. This response was also higher than Indo ($P < 0.05$ and $P < 0.01$). There was no limitation on mitochondrial state 3 respiration by ATP synthetase after exercise in Indo and CON, with a UCR of 0.99 and 1.04, respectively, and there was a small but significant limitation of the electron transport chain by ATP synthetase with L-NMMA (UCR = 1.10) and Double Block (UCR = 1.13). These findings also indicate an inhibitory effect of NO on the electron transport chain in human skeletal muscle. In separate dose-response experiments with a portion of the human muscle biopsy, graded titration of indomethacin into the respirometry chamber containing CON muscle caused a linear reduction in state 3 respiration ($P < 0.001$) within and above the physiological range (Fig. 3).

**Animal experiments.** The effect of adding L-arginine, the substrate for NOS with and without NOS inhibition on state 3 respiration in rat skeletal is shown in Fig. 4. State 3 respiration with complex I + II electron supply was reduced with L-arginine compared with CON, while NOS inhibition (L-NMMA + L-arginine) increased state 3 and COX O$_2$ flux (Fig. 5).

**DISCUSSION**

In this study, we measured regulatory aspects of mitochondrial respiration in permeabilized fibers from biopsies of the vastus lateralis following exercise to gain insights into the mechanisms underlying previously reported changes in local muscle blood flow and VO$_2$ in vivo with vasodilator inhibition. The main findings of this study are that 1) arterial infusion of indomethacin suppresses state 3 mitochondrial respiration primarily at complex I of the respiratory chain and 2) inhibition of nitric oxide synthase by L-NMMA increases mitochondrial electron transport capacity and counteracts the limitation of state 3 respiration by indomethacin. These findings confirm the hypothesis that inhibition of NOS increases mitochondrial state 3 respiration, while indomethacin exerts a pharmacological effect of inhibition of mitochondrial respiration. In the muscle samples taken after arterial infusion of indomethacin, state 3 mitochondrial respiration was reduced by 50% with mitochondrial complex I substrates (Fig. 1A). This finding is consistent with other reports of complex I-specific inhibition by indomethacin (16, 25–27, 36). Although it is known that low-dose indomethacin exerts an uncoupling effect in various cell types (21, 24, 25, 27), the results of this study from either the infusion experiment in vivo (Figs. 1 and 2) or the additional
dose-response experiment (Fig. 3) do not support an uncoupling effect in skeletal muscle that would increase mitochondrial \( V_{O2} \). In contrast, the present findings are consistent with reports showing that indomethacin disrupts complex I of electron transport chain by mechanisms linked to leakage of electrons, formation of superoxide anions (\( O_2^- \)), iron release from aconitase, and hydroxyl radical formation (12, 13, 20, 40, 43). When NOS blockade with \( L\)-NMMA was then combined with indomethacin, there was no difference in complex I respiration compared with CON, indicating that during the indomethacin condition alone, NO bioavailability exerts permissive inhibition of complex I to suppress mitochondrial respiration by downstream control of cytochrome-c oxidase. State 3 \( O_2 \) flux with addition of the complex II substrate succinate to provide convergent electron input to the Q-junction was less affected with Indo (20%) and similar to Double Block (15%) (\( P < 0.001 \)) compared with CON and tended to increase with \( L\)-NMMA alone (Fig. 1B). This recovery of respiration with \( L\)-NMMA is likely due to the lower NO concentration and lower \( K_m \) of cytochrome-c oxidase for \( O_2 \), allowing greater electron flux through complex II, which has a lower P:O ratio and thus a higher oxygen consumption for a given molar equivalent of substrate. This is supported by the significantly higher substrate control ratio (GMS3/GM3, Fig. 2A) with Indo, indicating a proportionately greater contribution of complex II substrate to total respiration.

Maximal electron transport capacity was evaluated with the inner mitochondrial membrane uncoupler FCCP in the presence of complex I and II substrates. The inhibitory effect of Indo on the respiratory chain is apparent from Fig. 2B, where the ratio of FCCP to state 3 respiration (uncoupling control ratio, UCR) was lower than 1.0, in contrast to the other conditions, illustrating control of the respiratory chain by the phosphorylation system. This pattern reflects tight coupling of respiration to ATP synthase in CON and shows a lower electron transport through the respiratory chain with indomethacin. This finding together with the lower state 3 respiration rate (Fig. 1A) confirms the inhibition of electron transport by indomethacin. The finding that NOS blockade (both Double Block and \( L\)-NMMA) resulted in a higher UCR compared with CON (Fig. 2B), provides further evidence of an interaction between NO and Indo in the regulation of mitochondrial respiration, i.e., limiting electron transport chain capacity. Thus, NOS inhibition increases state 3 mitochondrial respiration and alleviates the inhibitory effect of indomethacin and NO on the electron transport system. The results from the animal experiments in this study confirm our finding in humans that NO exerts an inhibitory effect on cytochrome-c oxidase and on state 3 respiration. There was a significant dose-response inhibition of state 3 respiration with titration of incremental doses of \( L\)-arginine (Fig. 4). Inhibition of NOS with \( L\)-NMMA alleviated this suppression, such that state 3 \( O_2 \) flux was higher than both the NO donor (\( L\)-arginine) and CON experiments (Fig. 5). The animal experiments also confirm the results from the in vivo infusion experiments that NO availability for cytochrome-c oxidase can exert feedback flux control of OXPHOS. This is consistent with other reports on cytochrome-c oxidase regulation of upstream electron flux in human muscle where mitochondrial \( O_2 \) flux rates at rest and during exercise correlate strongly to the mitochondrial oxygen affinity (\( P_{O2} \)) (23).

Studies in isolated hindlimb and diaphragm muscle in dogs and rats have reported a lower muscle \( V_{O2} \) during high-intensity evoked contractions with NOS inhibition (2, 20, 22, 31, 41, 42). These findings have been interpreted as an \( O_2 \) delivery limitation owing to reduced muscle blood flow. Consistent with this interpretation, there are reports of no effect (1, 4) or an increase (35) in muscle \( V_{O2} \) during “submaximal” exercise in animals where increased \( O_2 \) extraction compensates for a lower blood flow. In humans, NOS inhibition alone has no effect on \( V_{O2} \) across the exercising leg, but when combined with PG synthesis, inhibition by indomethacin, a significant reduction in blood flow is compensated for by varying levels of \( O_2 \) extraction (14, 15, 28, 33). In studies showing a reduced muscle \( V_{O2} \), improved economy of force development has been proposed on the basis of the sparing of muscle phosphocreatine and unchanged lactate (2, 28), but this contrasts with the concept that NO increases oxidative phosphorylation efficiency (10, 23). In theory, our results would not support an improvement in efficiency of the phosphorylation system with combined inhibition of NOS and PG synthesis, since the suppression of mitochondrial respiration by Indo was most...
pronounced at complex I, which has a higher P:O ratio (3 protons pumped) compared with complex II (2 protons pumped). Accordingly, the higher substrate control ratio (GMS3/GM3) with indomethacin (Fig. 2A) indicates a proportionately greater reliance on complex II-supported respiration, which would elicit a lower efficiency or increase oxygen consumption for a given ATP synthesis. This upstream respiratory chain regulation together with the downstream effect of alleviating the inhibition of cytochrome-c oxidase by NO would provide the explanation for a “higher” muscle VO2 for a given ATP production during combined inhibition of NOS and PG synthesis during exercise (14). However, our findings of a 15% reduction in state 3 respiration with combined inhibition are more in line with reports of a lower muscle VO2 during exercise (15% reduction in state 3 respiration with combined inhibition of NOS and PG synthesis during exercise (14)).

In summary, the results of this study indicate that indomethacin depresses state 3 mitochondrial respiration, especially at complex I of the electron transport chain. The finding that both state 3 respiration and uncoupled O2 flux is enhanced by NOS inhibition conforms to the view that NO exerts an inhibitory effect on the electron transport chain. The combined effects of NOS and PG synthesis inhibition are consistent with findings of a lower muscle VO2 during exercise in humans. The observation of an increase in muscle VO2 as found previously (14) in these conditions would be dependent on NOS inhibition exerting a more dominant local effect than indomethacin. The present findings indicate that blood flow and oxygen consumption during exercise can be regulated both at the level of the vasculature and in the adjacent muscle mitochondria by similar, parallel signals.

**Perspectives and Significance**

The findings in this study have both physiological and pharmacological implications for our understanding of the integrated control of O2 delivery and O2 consumption during exercise. This study raises the interesting question of what variable is regulated in the tight coupling between blood flow and metabolic demand. On the one hand, the PG + NOS involvement in the regulation of blood flow and oxygen consumption during exercise should be considered.
inhibition pathways have a solid physiological basis in the control of vascular function setting the level of muscle vasodilation. On the other hand, if the locus of control by these same regulators is initiated in mitochondria, downstream from blood vessels, then the metabolic signal established at the level of the mitochondria could contribute to the regulation of the vasodilatory signal to fine-tune the match between blood flow and metabolic demand. This would represent a highly efficient control system governing metabolic work for the organism with the engagement of multiple organ systems in O$_2$ delivery.

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DISCLOSURES

No conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, are declared by the authors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author contributions: R.C.B., Y.H., and B.S. conception and design of research; R.C.B., T.F., Y.H., and B.S. performed experiments; R.C.B. and T.F. analyzed data; R.C.B., Y.H., and B.S. interpreted results of experiments; R.C.B. and T.F. prepared figures; R.C.B. drafted manuscript; R.C.B., Y.H., and B.S. edited and revised manuscript; R.C.B., T.F., Y.H., and B.S. approved final version of manuscript.

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