

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Investigation of Prohibitin Levels in Preeclampsia Cases: A Case Control Study from a Tertiary Hospital

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Abstract

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Introduction: To evaluate the relationship between the effects of prohibitin at the cellular level and the pathophysiology of preeclampsia.

Methods: This study included a total of 120 patients who presented to our clinic at 20–41 weeks of gestation. The participants were divided into three groups: 40 pregnant women with preeclampsia with severe features, 40 pregnant women with preeclampsia, and 40 healthy pregnant women. To measure serum prohibitin levels, 10 cc of venous blood was collected from each participant, and comparisons were made between the groups.

Results: Serum prohibitin levels were significantly higher in pregnant women with preeclampsia with severe features and preeclampsia compared to the control group ($p < 0.001$ for both).

Conclusion: Prohibitin levels were found to be significantly increased in pregnant women with preeclampsia with severe features and those with preeclampsia compared to healthy pregnant women, suggesting that prohibitin may serve as a marker of preeclampsia.

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Introduction

Preeclampsia is among the most significant complications encountered in obstetrics, affecting approximately 2–7% of all pregnancies.¹ Defined as hypertension and proteinuria occurring after the 20th week of pregnancy, preeclampsia is, in fact, a multisystemic and complex syndrome that extends beyond hypertension and proteinuria, affecting the entire body.² Annually, approximately 50,000 maternal and 900,000 infant deaths globally are attributed to preeclampsia and its complications, accounting for around 12% of all maternal fatalities.³ The onset and clinical course of the disease are unpredictable; therefore, robust tools are needed for accurate diagnosis and treatment. Preeclampsia with severe features characterized by severe hypertension, symptoms of central nervous system dysfunction, new onset headache unresponsive to medication, hepatocellular injury, thrombocytopenia, renal insufficiency, pulmonary edema, and cerebrovascular events.⁴

PHB is a pleiotropic protein belonging to the SPFH (stomatins, flotillins and HflK/C) protein family, sharing the SPFH domain that plays a role in both adipocytes and immune cells.⁵ It derives its name from prohibitin, which was found in a search for anti-proliferative genes. Later, a homologous protein with almost 50% sequence homology to PHB was identified as a repressor of estrogen activity (REA, also known as PHB2). After the discovery of PHB2, PHB received the alternative name PHB1.^{6,7}

Prohibitins have been reported to perform numerous functions across various cellular localizations and cell types. The functions attributed to prohibitins include their roles in nuclear transcription, their presence as lipid skeleton proteins in the plasma membrane, their function as mitochondrial morphogenesis proteins within mitochondria, and their regulation of apoptosis.⁸ Furthermore, induced oxidative stress has been associated with prohibitin expression.⁹ In endothelial cells, down-regulation of prohibitin has been shown to result in increased production of mitochondrial reactive oxygen species (ROS) and cellular aging.^{10,11} Given the sequence of activities undertaken by prohibitin proteins, they have been identified as promising therapeutic targets in diverse disease states, including inflammation, obesity, and cancer, although a deeper understanding of their cell-specific functions remains essential.¹²

Considering the pathophysiology of pree-

clampsia and the cellular-level effects of prohibitin, prohibitin has been found noteworthy in elucidating the pathophysiology of preeclampsia. This study aimed to investigate prohibitin (PHB1) levels in cases of preeclampsia-complicated pregnancies and preeclampsia with severe features as compared to healthy pregnancies.

Material and Methods

Following approval from the local ethics committee (meeting number: 12, decision number: 21, date: August 1, 2019), the study was conducted with a total of 120 pregnant women who presented to the Obstetrics and Gynecology Clinic of Firat University Medical Faculty Hospital. The study was designed as a prospective case control study, with participants selected using quota sampling. During blood sample collection, medical consent was obtained from all participants in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki. The participants were at gestational ages ranging from 20 to 41 weeks and were divided into three groups for evaluation: 40 patients with preeclampsia with severe features, 40 patients with preeclampsia, and 40 healthy pregnant women.

The preeclamptic patient group included individuals with blood pressure measurements of 140/90 mmHg or higher recorded at least twice with intervals of six hours or more, along with proteinuria of 300 mg/24 hours or higher, or a dipstick reading of +1 or greater. Preeclamptic patients were further evaluated in two subgroups according to the severity of preeclampsia based on the criteria specified in the introduction section. The control group included normotensive pregnancies with no significant pathology in their obstetric history (e.g., placenta previa, intrauterine growth restriction, or placental abruption) in both their current and previous pregnancies. Pregnant women with a history of diabetes mellitus, chronic hypertension, thromboembolism, thrombophilia, liver or renal disease, fetal anomalies, or multiple gestations were excluded from the study.

Detailed medical histories and obstetric evaluations were obtained for all participants. Data recorded included maternal age, body mass index (BMI), gravidity, parity gestational week, gestational week at birth, systolic/diastolic blood pressure and mean arterial pressure (MAP) measurements.

For the determination of serum prohibitin (PHB1) levels, 10 cc of venous blood was collected

in plain tubes. After the diagnosis of preeclampsia with severe features or preeclampsia, 10 cc of venous blood was taken from the patients, centrifuged at 5,000 rpm for 10 minutes, and stored at -86°C in Eppendorf tubes until analysis. Healthy pregnancies were verified through the absence of elevated blood pressure on routine examination cards, and further blood pressure measurements were taken before blood samples were collected and appropriately prepared for storage. Serum prohibitin levels were subsequently measured using the human prohibitin enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay kit [Shanghai Sunredbio Technology Co. Ltd., Catalog No.: 201-12-2131, China], following the kit instructions. Absorbance values were read spectrophotometrically at 450 nm using the Multiskan FC Microplate Photometer [Thermo Scientific, USA], and test results were reported in ng/ml, with a sensitivity of 0.0724 ng/ml and a measurement range of 0.1-30 ng/ml.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 22.0. Categorical variables were summarized as numbers and percentages, while continuous variables were presented as means and standard deviations. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to assess whether continuous variables met the normal distribution assumption. A one-way analysis of variance was used for the general comparison of continuous measures among more than two groups. The statistical significance level was accepted as 0.05 for all tests.

Results

The study included a total of 120 pregnant women, aged 18–44 years, comprising 40 women with preeclampsia with severe features, 40 with preeclampsia, and 40 healthy controls. There were no statistically significant differences in maternal age, body mass index, or mean gestational age between the three groups ($p > 0.05$). However, systolic, diastolic, and mean arterial blood pressure values were statistically significantly higher in the preeclampsia with severe features group compared to the preeclampsia and control groups ($p < 0.001$ and $p < 0.05$, respectively). Additionally, there were significant differences in systolic, diastolic, and mean arterial blood pressure values between the preeclampsia and control groups [Table 1].

Table1. Demographic and obstetric data of the study groups

	Group			p-value
	Preeclampsia with severe features (n=40)	Preeclampsia (n=40)	Control (n=40)	
Maternal age	30.7 ± 6.8	30.8 ± 5.7	30.1 ± 5.1	>0.05
BMI	28.9 ± 4.1	30.9 ± 4.0	29.3 ± 4.3	>0.05
Gravidity	1 ± 1	2 ± 2	2 ± 2	0.417
Parity	1 ± 1	1 ± 1	2 ± 1	0.289
Gestational week	29 ± 4	29.5 ± 5	30 ± 4	0.216
Gestational week at birth	32.83 ± 4.27	35.11 ± 3.84	38 ± 2	<0.001
Systolic BP[mmHg]	168.46 ± 12.88	141.87 ± 7.90	107.5 ± 11.93	<0.001
Diastolic BP[mmHg]	113.20 ± 6.73	92.12 ± 5.97	71.36 ± 7.42	<0.001
MAP[mmHg]	132.85 ± 7.7	109.1 ± 4.2	82.86 ± 8.4	<0.001

Values are given as mean ± standard deviation.

n: number, BMI: body mass index, BP: blood pressure, MAP: mean arterial pressure

When comparing serum prohibitin levels across groups, the preeclampsia with severe features group showed statistically significantly higher levels compared to the control group [$p < 0.001$]. Similarly, prohibitin levels in the preeclampsia group were significantly elevated compared to the control group [$p < 0.001$]. However, no statistically significant difference was observed between the preeclampsia with severe features and preeclampsia groups ($p > 0.05$) [Table 2].

Table2. Comparison of the laboratory test results and prohibitin values between the study groups

	Prohibitin(ng/ml)	Min	Max	p-value*
Preeclampsia with severe featuresa (n=40)	5.3988 ± 7.63748	.10	26.50	>0.05
Preeclampsiab (n=40)	5.0051 ± 6.59079	.59	30.00	a-b
Contr (n=40)	2.6079 ± 2.35926	.10	9.95	<0.001 a-c b-c
Total [n=120]	4.3373 ± 6.05898	.10	30.00	

*One-way analysis of variance. Values are given as mean ± standard deviation.

n: number, min: minimum, max: maximum.

Discussion

This study showed that pregnant women with preeclampsia with severe features and preeclampsia had higher serum prohibitin levels than healthy pregnant women. The underlying biological mechanisms linking organ dysfunction in preeclampsia are not yet clear, and as a result, preeclampsia remains a disease of theories. While the precise cause of hypertensive disorders in pregnancy remains unclear, several hypotheses suggest that issues in placental implantation and trophoblastic invasion are key contributors to the disease.^{13,14} The initial step are inadequate or abnormal trophoblastic invasion of the uterine decida and spiral arteries during early pregnancy is generally considered a primary etiological factor in the development of preeclampsia and restriction of intra-uterine growth. Predisposing genetic, immunological and preexisting maternal risk factors may affect this abnormal placentation.¹⁵ As stated in many studies, impaired placental vascularity causes inadequate placental perfusion, which in turn causes the release of antiangiogenic factors into the systemic circulation and endothelial dysfunction occurs.¹⁶ There is no curative treatment for PE, except the delivery of the placenta. As a result, management protocols for PE are supportive, including hypertension management, seizure prophylaxis, delivery at the optimal time, prevention of maternal and fetal mortality/morbidity due to the disease.¹⁷ In the current study, the preeclampsia with severe features and preeclampsia group had significantly higher negative perinatal outcomes, such as preterm birth and maternal systolic, diastolic and mean blood pressures.

Apoptosis, although essential for normal placental development, can also play a role in pathological conditions of the placenta. The presence of these cells is associated with various stages of placental development, such as trophoblast attachment and invasion, trophoblast differentiation and cycle, spiral artery transformation, and parturition.^{18,19} Furthermore, apoptosis has been shown to be essential in establishing maternal immune tolerance to paternal antigens expressed by trophoblasts.^{20,21} Complicated pregnancies, such as those with preeclampsia or intrauterine growth restriction, show a high incidence of trophoblast apoptosis. Changes in the regulation of trophoblast apoptosis may contribute to the pathophysiology of these disorders.^{22,23}

It has been reported that prohibitins have multiple functions, including roles in nuclear transcription across various cellular localizations and cell types, anti-oxidation, anti-inflammation, functioning as a lipid cytoskeletal protein within the plasma membrane, acting as a mitochondrial morphogenesis protein within the mitochondria, and serving as a regulatory protein in apoptosis.²⁴ Prohibitin expression has also been associated with induced oxidative stress. Nuell et al. reported that the downregulation of prohibitin in endothelial cells resulted in increased production of mitochondrial reactive oxygen species (ROS) and led to cellular senescence.²⁵ Under normal conditions, low ROS concentrations play essential roles in cell signaling and homeostasis.²⁶ However, oxidative stress can occur when the balance between ROS formation and the detoxification actions of antioxidant proteins is disrupted. The overproduction of reactive oxygen molecules as a result of placental oxidative stress in preeclampsia has an effect on endothelial dysfunction.²⁷ This data supports the idea that prohibitin is a factor of oxidative stress.

Mishra et al. determined that prohibitin protected cells and tissues against the induction of apoptosis.²⁸ Thus, it is plausible that increased levels of prohibitin in preeclampsia may function to prevent trophoblast apoptosis. In a study by Allaire et al., trophoblast apoptosis was shown to be elevated in pregnancies complicated by preeclampsia.²⁹

The association of prohibitin with oxidative stress was further investigated by Jupe et al., who observed that prohibitin overexpression in intestinal epithelial cells reduced oxidative stress in inflammatory bowel disease.³⁰ In another study undertaken by Rusterholz et al., inflammation was found to be markedly increased in preeclampsia, and factors triggering inflammatory responses [such as infections and rheumatic diseases] were suggested to raise the likelihood of developing preeclampsia.³¹ While this finding may contradict our results, it is possible that elevated prohibitin levels in our study reflect a compensatory mechanism to mitigate oxidative stress.

Studies showing that prohibitin expression is increased in autoimmune diseases.³² It has been shown that preeclamptic pregnant women have autoantibodies that activate the angiotensin receptor and that autoantibody-mediated receptor activation contributes to the pathophysiology associated with

preeclampsia. This pathophysiology strengthens the possibility that preeclampsia is a pregnancy-related autoimmune disease.³³ Similarly, in the current study, the serum prohibitin level was found to be higher in the preeclampsia with severe features and preeclampsia group than in the control group and it was statistically significant. High serum prohibitin levels in preeclampsia patients suggest that there is a relationship between prohibitin and angiotensin receptor systems, and this finding is in agreement with the literature.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this is the first study to evaluate serum prohibitin levels in pregnant women with preeclampsia. This study revealed that prohibitin levels were significantly elevated in the severe preeclampsia and preeclampsia groups compared to the control group, highlighting prohibitin as a noteworthy biomarker. This novel biomarker appears to hold potential for managing pregnant women with preeclampsia. The relatively low number of cases and single-center experience can be considered as the major limitations of the research. To elucidate the role of prohibitin levels in the prediction of preeclampsia, as well as to evaluate their potential as a biomarker for clinical practice, it is essential to conduct studies with large patient cohorts.

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