Association of Amyloid Pathology With Myelin Alteration in Preclinical Alzheimer Disease

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IMPORTANCE The accumulation of aggregated β-amyloid and tau proteins into plaques and tangles is a central feature of Alzheimer disease (AD). While plaque and tangle accumulation likely contributes to neuron and synapse loss, disease-related changes to oligodendrocytes and myelin are also suspected to play a role in development of AD dementia. Still, to our knowledge, little is known about AD-related myelin changes, and even when present, they are often regarded as secondary to concomitant arteriosclerosis or related to aging.

OBJECTIVE To assess associations between hallmark AD pathology and novel quantitative neuroimaging markers while being sensitive to white matter myelin content.

DESIGN, SETTING, AND PARTICIPANTS Magnetic resonance imaging was performed at an academic research neuroimaging center on a cohort of 71 cognitively asymptomatic adults enriched for AD risk. Lumbar punctures were performed and assayed for cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) biomarkers of AD pathology, including β-amyloid 42, total tau protein, phosphorylated tau 181, and soluble amyloid precursor protein. We measured whole-brain longitudinal and transverse relaxation rates as well as the myelin water fraction from each of these individuals.

MAIN OUTCOMES AND MEASURES Automated brain mapping algorithms and statistical models were used to evaluate the relationships between age, CSF biomarkers of AD pathology, and quantitative magnetic resonance imaging relaxometry measures, including the longitudinal and transverse relaxation rates and the myelin water fraction.

RESULTS The mean (SD) age for the 19 male participants and 52 female participants in the study was 61.6 (6.4) years. Widespread age-related changes to myelin were observed across the brain, particularly in late myelinating brain regions such as frontal white matter and the genu of the corpus callosum. Quantitative relaxometry measures were negatively associated with levels of CSF biomarkers across brain white matter and in areas preferentially affected in AD. Furthermore, significant age-by-biomarker interactions were observed between myelin water fraction and phosphorylated tau 181/β-amyloid 42, suggesting that phosphorylated tau 181/β-amyloid 42 levels modulate age-related changes in myelin water fraction.

CONCLUSIONS AND RELEVANCE These findings suggest amyloid pathologies significantly influence white matter and that these abnormalities may signify an early feature of the disease process. We expect that clarifying the nature of myelin damage in preclinical AD may be informative on the disease's course and lead to new markers of efficacy for prevention and treatment trials.
The progression of Alzheimer disease (AD) pathology occurs several years before the development of dementia. According to the amyloid-cascade hypothesis, the disruption of critical metabolic processes that lead to the ultimate neurodegeneration in AD is initiated by the accumulation of aggregated β-amylloid 1-42 (Aβ1-42) and the assembly of neurofibrillary tangles. Such processes are clearly detrimental to neuronal cell bodies, dendrites, and axonal processes; however, myelin and myelin-producing oligodendrocytes may be equally vulnerable to the impairments caused by Aβ and tau protein hyperphosphorylation. White matter hyperintensities (WMHs) play a role in symptom presentation but are not core features of AD pathology. Postmortem studies have substantiated recent hypotheses of white matter involvement in AD, finding reduced white matter volume and alterations of white matter microstructure. Still, little is known about the relationship between Aβ pathology and myelin alteration.

Recent advancements of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) biomarkers show promise for early detection of AD pathology. Concentrations of specific proteins within CSF, such as Aβ42, total tau protein (Ttau), and phosphorylated tau 181 (Ptau181), are related to the core pathology of AD and differentiatate patients with AD from healthy, age-matched controls. Cerebrospinal fluid biomarkers have additionally been linked to measures obtained with volumetric MRI and diffusion tensor imaging, suggesting that CSF biomarkers are sensitive to structural brain changes during the preclinical stages, onset, and progression of AD. Relationships between CSF biomarkers and brain structure are increasingly important; however, while MRI techniques provide detailed anatomical and microstructural insight, they are influenced by a broad range of microstructural changes. Thus, the biological interpretation of such associations is challenging.

The breakdown of the myelin sheath may be an early phenomenon in AD, but more clinical studies are needed, especially in the preclinical stage. Recent quantitative MRI measures, such as longitudinal and transverse relaxation rates (R₁ and R₂, respectively) and the myelin water fraction (MWF), may provide increased sensitivity to myelin content and these may offer new insights regarding the role of myelin vulnerability in the pathogenesis of AD. Examining relationships between white matter measures and CSF biomarkers related to AD pathology—such as Aβ42 (reflecting cortical amyloid deposition), Ttau (as a marker for the intensity of neurodegeneration), and Ptau181 (correlating with tangle burden)—could provide an appreciation for the extent and timing of myelinated white matter damage in AD. To our knowledge, no studies to date have explored such relations at the preclinical stage of AD. However, evidence of such relationships may support and transform the current understanding of the involvement of myelinated white matter and its alterations during the development of AD.

We report results from 71 late-middle-aged asymptomatic adults who underwent CSF collection via lumbar puncture and novel MRI using the Multicomponent Driven Equilibrium Single Pulse Observation of T₁ and T₂ (mcDESPOT) technique. These data were acquired to examine AD pathology as indexed by CSF biomarkers and the MWF, a surrogate measure of myelin content. Guided by prior models and observations, we hypothesized that the deposition of Aβ42 and the hyperphosphorylation of tau protein would affect oligodendrocytes and alter myelin sheath integrity. Hence, we predicted decreased Aβ42 and elevated Ttau and Ptau181 levels would be associated with decreased MWF. We additionally hypothesized that proteins that precede Aβ42 formation, including elevated cleavage of the amyloid precursor protein by β-secretase that results in higher soluble amyloid precursor protein (sAPPβ), may stimulate processes of white matter alteration and be associated with myelin content alterations in the preclinical phase.

### Methods

A total of 147 participants were enrolled in the study, from which 71 asymptomatic participants (19 males) between the ages of 48 and 72 years (mean [SD] age = 61.6 [6.4] years) were included based on the availability of assayed CSF and mcDESPOT imaging. Healthy community volunteers were recruited from the Wisconsin Alzheimer Disease Research Center and the Wisconsin Registry for Alzheimer’s Prevention study. Participants underwent assessments that included neuropsychological testing, apolipoprotein E (APOE) genotyping, laboratory tests, clinical measurements, and comprehensive health history characterization. Twenty-eight participants (39%) were carriers of at least 1 APOE ε4 allele and 54 participants (76%) had a parental history of AD. Inclusion criteria consisted of the following: a prior visit for lumbar puncture, no contraindications for MRI, and a subsequent normal MRI scan finding. Cardiovascular health was assessed using the Framingham cardiovascular risk score and further inclusion was limited to participants who scored 27 or greater on the Mini-Mental State Examination. Written informed consent was obtained from all study participants and the study procedures were performed under guidelines approved by the University of Wisconsin Health Sciences institutional review board. Additional participant information is available in the eMethods in the Supplement while demographic information is provided in the Table.
Relationships of Age, CSF Biomarkers, and Imaging Measures

The single greatest risk factor for AD is age, and thus our initial analyses examined the relationship between age and the CSF biomarkers as well as age and the imaging measures (MWF, R$_1$, and R$_2$). To examine the relationships between age and CSF biomarkers, Pearson correlations were calculated in R (version 3.2.1). Significant correlations were defined as $P < .05$, Bonferroni-corrected for 28 independent comparisons.

Age-related changes in R$_1$, R$_2$, and MWF were examined by fitting linear models at each brain voxel contained within a white matter mask (eFigure 2 in the Supplement). Each model examined R$_1$, R$_2$, and MWF as a function of age, while accounting for sex, APOE carrier status, log-transformed normalized WMH volume, and the Framingham cardiovascular risk score due to known effects on brain microstructure. We examined education level and family history as additional nuisance variables; however, no significant relationships were observed by including these variables. Statistical maps were thresholded at a level of $P < .05$, corrected for multiple comparisons using the false discovery rate (FDR) at the voxel level.

Relationships Between CSF Biomarkers and MWF

Voxelwise linear regressions were fit to examine relationships between R$_1$, R$_2$, and MWF and concentration levels of CSF biomarkers. Individual CSF biomarkers, as well as biomarker ratios with Aβ$_{42}$, were used as predictor variables, while age, sex, APOE status, Framingham cardiovascular risk score, and log-transformed normalized WMH volume were covariates. Analyses were constrained to white matter and the FDR corrected for multiple comparisons.

After establishing significant findings between age and relaxometry measures as well as between R$_1$, R$_2$, and MWF and CSF biomarkers, we used additional models to examine whether concentrations of CSF biomarkers moderated the effect of age on the brain’s MWF, R$_1$, and R$_2$. Predictors in these voxelwise models included age, CSF biomarker concentration, and the interactions of CSF biomarker concentration with age, as well as the covariates of sex, APOE, log-transformed normalized WMH volume, and Framingham cardiovascular risk score.
Results

Changes in CSF Biomarkers and Imaging Measures With Age

Age at time of lumbar puncture was not significantly associated with CSF biomarkers (Pearson correlations shown in eTable 1 in the Supplement).

Widespread age-related changes (P < .05, FDR corrected) were observed, particularly in late myelinating brain regions such as frontal white matter and the genu of the corpus callosum (Figure 1). Myelin water fraction was negatively related to age, suggesting an overall decrease in myelin content with aging. R1 decreased in similar brain regions, including frontal white matter and the genu of the corpus, while R2 decreased with age across most white matter. Summary information is provided in eTable 2 in the Supplement. These findings suggest alterations to microstructural white matter and perhaps specifically in myelin content; however, such changes may be a result of increases of bulk water content or other biologically based changes.25 Such findings are consistent with reported literature of age-related declines of white matter during typical and atypical aging.26

Relationships Between CSF Biomarkers and Imaging Measures

Voxelwise regressions between CSF biomarkers and imaging measures revealed widespread and robust main effect associations. Lower Aβ42 was associated with decreased MWF, R1,
and R₂. R₂ displayed the most extensive relationships, followed by MWF and R₁ (eTables 3-5 in the Supplement). Relationships were primarily located within the left hemispheric angular gyrus white matter for MWF and R₁, while associations with R₂ were found across the left hemispheric temporal and parietal white matter and inferior longitudinal fasciculus. Other less localized white matter regions were additionally implicated (eFigure 3 in the Supplement).

We observed significant negative relationships (P < .05, FDR corrected) between MWF, R₁, and R₂ and CSF biomarkers of Ttau, Ttau/Ab42, Ptau181, Ptau181/Ab42, sAPPβ, and sAPPβ/Ab42. Representative findings between MWF and sAPPβ/Ab42 are shown in Figure 2 while relationships between MWF, R₁, and R₂ and other CSF biomarkers are shown in eFigures 4-6 in the Supplement. We highlight the negative association between MWF and sAPPβ/Ab42 in representative scatterplots in Figure 3. Relationships with MWF were extensive across white matter and discovered in the frontal, temporal, parietal, and cerebellar white matter. Soluble amyloid precursor protein/Ab42 showed the strongest effect with regions known to be preferentially affected by AD, including temporal and frontal white matter, the body of the corpus callosum, and the cingulum. 27 We found negative relationships between CSF biomarkers and R₁ in the cingulum, inferior fronto-occipital fasciculus, and the superior longitudinal fasciculus, with extensive relationships occurring with sAPPβ/Ab42. We also observed negative associations with R₂, with relations between R₂ and Ptau181/Ab42 having the largest impact.

CSF Biomarkers Moderate Myelin Content Age Relationships

We observed significant (P < .05, FDR corrected) age-by-biomarker interactions. In particular, we found relationships between MWF and Ptau181/Ab42 in left hemispheric superior frontal gyral white matter and portions of the left superior longitudinal fasciculus in which higher levels of Ptau181/Ab42 resulted in an increased MWF decline with age (Figure 4). We provide a summary and depiction of the interaction results in eTable 6 and eFigure 7 in the Supplement.

Discussion

Alzheimer disease disrupts critical metabolic processes that ultimately lead to neurodegeneration; however, the effect of AD pathology on white matter—especially myelin—is still incompletely characterized. Using CSF biomarkers of AD together with quantitative relaxometry measures in cognitively asymptomatic middle-aged adults enriched for AD risk, we have demonstrated significant associations between AD pathology and measures of myelin health in vivo. Elevated concentrations of Ttau, Ttau181, and sAPPβ—along with elevated ratios of Ttau/Ab42, Ttau181/Ab42, and sAPPβ/Ab42—were robustly associated with decreased MWF, R₁, and R₂ across widespread brain regions. The effect of age on the trajectory of MWF was moderated by ratios of Ptau181/Ab42 and Ttau/Ab42, with elevated ratios leading to accelerated MWF decline. This is the first study, to our knowledge, to demonstrate relationships between AD pathology and relaxometry measures and further reinforce recent findings that AD pathology has an important impact on white matter microstructure. 4

Our findings provide evidence that risk factors for developing AD are related to alterations of myelin content. Specifically, we find that age highly associates with MWF, R₁, and R₂ decreases. These findings agree with studies showing white matter volume and microstructure to follow a negative gradient throughout later stages of life. 13,28 Our results agree with hypotheses of late myelinating brain regions 29,30 being the first to degenerate with age 26 and implicated in AD. 31 Together, this suggests that white matter alterations may be centrally involved in AD pathogenesis. Analyses of MWF and age were performed using linear regressions as the age range of participants did not appear to capture the nonlinearity of the MWF trajectory. However, the brain follows a nonlinear trajectory 26,32 and thus future studies using larger samples and wider age ranges should examine whether MWF follows such a nonlinear trajectory. Such information would improve understanding about the timing of AD pathology, including the initial periods of myelin decline.

We additionally show robust associations between CSF biomarkers and myelin content as measured by MWF, R₁, and R₂. Amyloid pathology has classically been linked with processes underlying neuronal degeneration; however, studies have revealed myelin and oligodendrocytes to be especially vulnerable to impairments of Ab pathology. 5 Myelin basic protein, a canonical protein component of myelin, has recently been shown to bind Ab and inhibit Ab fibril formation, possibly playing a role in regulating the deposition of Ab42 and the
formation of amyloid plaques in parenchyma. Therefore, the loss of myelin and decreases in concentrations of myelin basic protein may promote accelerated Aβ42 depositions and result in increased amyloid plaque formation. Studies have additionally demonstrated that myelin abnormalities occur prior to axon defects from tau proteins inhibiting axon transport, meaning that myelination defects precede overt amyloid and tau pathologies.

Interestingly, we observed strong associations of decreased myelin content with increased ratios of sAPPβ and Aβ42, with sAPPβ/Aβ42 having the greatest sensitivity. β-Amyloid is a product of amyloid precursor protein cleavage by β-secretase, which ultimately leads to the formation of amyloid plaques. Animal studies using immunohistochemistry and electron microscopy on the triple-transgenic AD mouse, which harbors the amyloid precursor protein transgene, have found localized alterations in myelination and oligodendrocyte marker expression prior to the manifestation of amyloid and tau pathologies. Findings from these previous studies in the context of the current study raise questions about the role of sAPPβ in myelin alterations of AD pathology. The remaining challenge of deciphering the causal mechanisms of these changes is determining if aberrant proteolytic processing of the amyloid precursor protein causes subsequent myelin damage or if degradation of myelin results in altered amyloid precursor protein processing. We need further animal and human studies to elucidate this causal pathway.

Our findings also indicate that the strength of the relationship between MWF and age is altered by the ratios of Ptau181/Aβ42 and Ttau/Aβ42. While tau pathology may follow amyloid pathology, hyperphosphorylation of tau protein also occurs during the repair of the myelin sheath. Increased concentrations of Ttau and Ptau181 may reflect initial benefits to remyelination and the effects of moderate myelin breakdown with aging. One hypothesis is that extensive time-limited repair and/or unsuccessful repair could lead to protein aggregation and deposition as neurofibrillary tangles.

Limitations
This study has several limitations. First, while the sample provides a powerful cohort for investigating relationships of CSF biomarkers and brain microstructure, the enriched risk for AD (large percentage of family history positive– and APOE ε4–positive individuals), as well as the low percentage of males...
(19%), could limit the generalizability of our findings. Family history was found to have a nonsignificant effect on the findings of the current study. APOE status was included as a nuisance variable; however, it is possible that APOE allele status may impact brain aging and that future studies examining such relationships could be informative. Second, while qualitative agreement has been observed between mcDESPOT MWF and histology, and strong evidence has been provided to support the application of mcDESPOT MWF, future studies investigating the specificity and sensitivity of mcDESPOT-derived MWF measurements compared with additional factors—such as changes to brain volume, water content, iron load, or microstructural lipids and proteins—are necessary. While there was an overlap in findings with MWF, R_s, and R_s, associations in different brain structures between brain measures were also observed, suggesting that these measures are complimentary but may elucidate differential microstructural processes. Last, cross-sectional analyses have permitted us to examine the associations between CSF biomarkers and neuroimaging measures. However, these findings should be explored in larger samples and extended in longitudinal samples to evaluate the time course of these relationships.

Conclusions

Myelin alterations in AD are suspected but understudied in human populations. Using a quantitative MRI technique sensitive to myelination, we measured CSF biomarkers and myelin content to examine the relationships between AD pathology. Our findings show, for the first time to our knowledge, that decreased concentrations of Aβ42 and elevated...
concentrations of Ttau, Ptau181, sAPPβ, and their ratios with Aβ42 are closely associated with brain myelin content. Furthermore, we show that the age-related decline in myelin content is influenced by the levels of CSF biomarkers. These findings provide further evidence of white matter involvement, and particularly myelin content, in the pathogenesis of AD and suggest that such alterations may be one of the earliest characteristics of the disease process.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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