Review

Tea flavonoids and cardiovascular health

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Abstract

The two main types of tea are green and black. Both green and black teas are rich dietary sources of flavonoids. Available evidence suggests that regular tea consumption may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. The cardiovascular health benefits of drinking tea are thought to be largely due to flavonoids. Tea intake and intake of flavonoids found in tea have been associated with reduced risk of cardiovascular disease in cross-sectional and prospective population studies. Isolated flavonoids found in tea have also been consistently shown to inhibit the development of atherosclerosis in animal models. A number of possible pathways and mechanisms have been investigated. There is now consistent data indicating that tea and tea flavonoids can enhance nitric oxide status and improve endothelial function, which may be at least partly responsible for benefits on cardiovascular health. There is also evidence, although limited, to suggest benefits of green tea (flavonoids) on body weight and body fatness. Data supporting reduced oxidative damage, inflammation, platelet activation, blood pressure, and risk of type 2 diabetes with tea (flavonoids) remains inadequate to draw any conclusions.

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1. Background

The worldwide consumption of tea is second only to water. Thus any health effects of drinking tea could have a significant impact on public health. Tea has been consumed as a beverage for well over 2000 years, and it is now commonly consumed in most regions of the world. Although tea has historically been thought to promote good health, research into the possible health benefits of tea is more recent.

The term ‘tea’ refers to the plant *Camellia sinensis*, its leaves, and infusions derived from them. Tea can be classified as green and black. Black teas are produced by promoting the enzymatic oxidation of tea flavonoids leading to formation of condensed flavonoids, such as theaflavins and thearubigins. Enzymes involved in polyphenol oxidation are inactivated to produce green tea. Worldwide most tea consumed is black tea. Green tea is more popular in China, Japan and other Asian countries, but its popularity is increasing in Western populations.

This chapter briefly discusses data from population studies, animal models of atherosclerosis and randomized controlled trials to have investigated effects on cardiovascular health-related endpoints. We must still rely on evidence derived from these studies because to date there have been no randomized controlled trials of primary or secondary prevention of cardiovascular disease (CVD) with tea or tea-derived flavonoids.

2. The tea flavonoids

Most phenolic compounds found in tea are polyphenols. Polyphenols are compounds consisting of more than one benzene ring with each containing at least one hydroxyl group (–OH). The main polyphenols present in tea are the flavonoids (Fig. 1). There are six major classes of flavonoids in the diet including flavonols, flavones, flavanols, flavanones, anthocyanins and isoflavones. The most common subclasses of flavonoids in tea are the flavanols (primarily catechins) and flavanols (such as quercetin) (Fig. 1). Also present in tea, but at significantly lower concentrations, are phenolic acids such as gallic acid and cinnamic acid esters of quinic acid.

Research interest in tea has been primarily due to the presence of flavonoids. Health benefits of tea are believed to be largely due to the consumption of these flavonoids. Both green and black teas are rich in flavonoids (Table 1). One cup of
te (2 g of tea leaves infused in hot water for 1–3 min) will provide 150–200 mg of flavonoids. As little as 2–3 cups/day of tea will supply the major contribution to total flavonoid intake in most individuals. Total flavonoid intake from all sources is usually less than 1000 mg/day. Thus in tea-drinking populations tea usually contributes well over half of all flavonoids consumed in the diet.

In green tea, the main flavonoids are the flavanols (catechins). Catechins are a group of flavonoids that include epicatechin (EC), epicatechingallate (EGC), epigallocatechin (EGC) and epigallocatechingallate (EGCG) (Table 1). Catechins are colourless, water-soluble compounds that contribute to the bitterness and astringency of green tea. A typical green tea serving contains approximately 90–100 mg of catechins (Harbowy and Ballentine, 1997). During the production of black tea most of these catechins are oxidized to condensed flavonoids, such as theaflavins and thearubigins.

3. Tea and cardiovascular disease: results of population studies

Evidence from population studies suggests that tea consumption and a higher flavonoid intake may reduce the risk for CVD. Peters et al. (2001) performed a meta-analysis of tea consumption in relation to CVD and estimated that the incidence rate of myocardial infarction decreased by 11% with an increase in tea consumption of three cups per day. The analysis included 10 cohort and seven case-control studies. However, some care is needed to interpret these results because of evidence for a publication bias and geographic heterogeneity. Stronger inverse associations between CVD and tea consumption were found in continental European studies compared to US studies. Two UK studies suggested a positive association between tea consumption and risk of CVD. These observations were not specific to green or black tea, but most of the tea consumed in the populations included in this analysis was black tea. Population studies have also investigated the association between green tea consumption specifically and CVD outcomes. Most of these studies have been conducted among Asian populations and suggest a cardioprotective effect of green tea consumption (Iwai et al., 2002; Kuriyama, 2008; Nakachi et al., 2000; Sato et al., 2010). Furthermore, a recent meta-analysis demonstrated that daily consumption of either green or black tea, 3 cups/day, was associated with reduced risk of ischemic stroke (Arab et al., 2009).

Epidemiological studies have also explored the relationships between dietary flavonoids and CVD. The intake of flavonoids has been related to lower risk of heart disease, stroke and total mortality. In another meta-analysis, Huxley and Neil (2003) assessed the association of dietary flavonol intake with the subsequent risk of coronary heart disease (CHD) mortality. This analysis was based on prospective cohort studies published between 1966 and 2001. Flavonols are a subclass of flavonoids present in tea: tea is often the main contributor to flavonol intake in populations. Seven prospective cohorts of men and women (n = 105,000) were identified including a total of 2087 fatal CHD events. Individuals in the top third were compared with those in the bottom third of dietary flavonol intake. Higher flavonoid intake was associated with a 20% reduction in combined risk ratio after adjustment for known CHD risk factors as well as other possible confounders.

Therefore, population studies strongly suggest a decreased risk of CVD with higher tea consumption. The available data also suggest that the magnitude of the benefit of green and black tea is similar.

4. Atherosclerosis: human and animal model studies

Few human studies have investigated the relationship between tea or flavonoid intake and atherosclerosis. Debette et al. (2008) showed that carotid plaques were less frequent with increasing tea consumption in women. Mursu et al. (2007) showed that high intake of flavonoids was associated with decreased carotid atherosclerosis in middle-aged Finnish men.

In contrast there is a significant literature describing studies using animal models to investigate the effects of flavonoid-rich foods or extracts on the development of atherosclerosis. The apo E deficient mouse and hamsters have been used as animal models to investigate the effects of flavonoid-rich foods or extracts on the development of atherosclerosis (Hodgson and Croft, 2006). In the apo E deficient mouse inhibition of atherosclerotic lesion development has been demonstrated with tea and tea-derived flavonoids, red wine-derived flavonoids, isolated quercetin or catechin, and a pure phenolic acid derivative from honey. Similar inhibition has been found with red grape extracts in the cholesterol-fed hamster (Auger et al., 2004). More recently Loke et al. (2010) showed that isolated quercetin, found in both green and black tea, as well as theaflavin,
an important black tea flavonoid, can inhibit the development of atherosclerosis in the apo E deficient mouse. Overall, the results of studies using animal models clearly show that flavonoids present in tea can inhibit the development of atherosclerosis. Further human studies are needed.

5. Endothelial function

The endothelium is the inner lining of all blood vessels. It functions as a selectively permeable barrier between blood and tissues. Normal endothelial function regulates vasomotor tone, platelet activity, leukocyte adhesion and vascular smooth muscle cell proliferation via a release of several factors including nitric oxide (NO). The development of endothelial dysfunction may contribute to the pathogenesis of CVD. It is considered as an early biomarker for the development of CVD (Schroeder et al., 1999) and cardiovascular events (Schächinger et al., 2000). One of the most important molecules released by the endothelium is NO. This molecule is an important regulator of arterial wall tone. Endothelial dysfunction is characterized by the loss of normal endothelium-dependent and NO-mediated vasodilation in the artery.

Endothelial function may be assessed in a number of ways. Isolated vessels from animals can be used to assess the effects of potentially vasoactive substances in vitro. The results of several in vitro studies indicate that tea and tea flavonoids cause vasorelaxation of rat aortic rings which is NO and endothelium-dependent (Hodgson et al., 2006). In humans, one of the main methods has been to use ultrasonography to measure flow-mediated dilatation of conduit vessels, such as the brachial artery. This is a non-invasive technique that measures NO-dependent vasodilatation of the artery in response to shear stress induced by increased blood flow.

A number of studies have now investigated the effects of black or green tea, or tea flavonoids on flow-mediated dilatation of the brachial artery. Most of these studies have shown a significant improvement in flow-mediated dilatation (Hodgson et al., 2006). Green and black teas appear to have similar effects. This has been observed in at least four human trials, in healthy and diabetic subjects, after acute and chronic tea consumption (Alexopoulos et al., 2008; Duffy et al., 2001; Jochmann et al., 2008; Kim et al., 2006; Nagaya et al., 2004). In addition, a dose response of improved endothelial function to black tea polyphenols has recently been demonstrated (Grassi et al., 2009). Similar improvements have been demonstrated using flavonoids derived from chocolate/cocoa, but the results of studies using red wine-derived flavonoids are less consistent (Hodgson and Croft, 2006).

Experimental studies have also demonstrated that isolated flavonoids found in tea can enhance NO status. A recent trial by Loke et al. (2008) showed that dietary flavonoids present in green tea, including quercetin and epicatechin, could augment NO status (plasma S-nitrosothiols and nitrite) and reduce endothelin-1 concentrations – a potent vasoconstrictor. A study by Widlansky et al. (2007) also showed that acute EGCG supplementation can improve endothelial function in humans with coronary artery disease.

Therefore, for endothelial function there is evidence from randomized controlled trials that consumption of black and green tea, and specific flavonoids present in tea, can improve endothelial function. This data is quite consistent.

6. Blood pressure

The results of animal models to investigate the effects of tea and flavonoids derived from tea on blood pressure are inconsistent. Results of population studies suggest that long-term regular ingestion of tea may lower blood pressure (Hodgson and Croft, 2006). However, because tea intake is generally associated with a range of lifestyle factors which are related to CVD risk, controlled trials are needed to address the question.

Acutely, tea can increase blood pressure. Both flavonoids and caffeine, present in tea at about 3% of dry weight, cause a transient increase in blood pressure in subjects who avoided caffeine for 12 h or more (Hodgson et al., 2005; Pincomb et al., 1996; Quinlan et al., 1997). The relevance of these acute effects to any longer term effects of regular consumption is uncertain.

In controlled trials, the short-term regular ingestion of tea for up to 8 weeks has not been found to alter blood pressure in largely normotensive individuals (Hodgson, 2006; Hodgson and Croft, 2006). A recent meta-analysis of these trials showed no overall effect on systolic or diastolic blood pressure, whereas analysis of a similar number of trials using flavonoid-rich dark chocolate did show significant blood pressure lowering (Taubert and Roesen, 2007). It is possible that longer-term effects on vasodilator function may be required to alter vascular tone and blood pressure. There have been no controlled trials investigating the longer-term effects of regular ingestion of tea.

Therefore, there is some support for the idea that tea and tea flavonoids can attenuate the development of hypertension. Results of population studies suggest reduced risk of hypertension and lower blood pressure. However, further trials are needed to establish the effect of tea on blood pressure.

7. Oxidative stress

The antioxidant flavonoids found in tea are suggested to be responsible for reduced CVD risk. More than 50 studies now convincingly show that flavonoids possess potent antioxidant activity in vitro. However, despite the many animal and human studies in this area, there remains limited evidence that flavonoids can actually inhibit oxidative damage in vivo (Halliwell
et al., 2005; Manach et al., 2005). This is likely to be due partly to poor bioavailability of some flavonoids as well as metabolic transformation that may alter the antioxidant activity of these compounds. Good support for a lack of systemic antioxidant activity of flavonoids in vivo comes from studies showing that inhibition of atherosclerosis in animal models is not associated with markers of change in oxidative damage (Waddington et al., 2004; Auger et al., 2004). Thus, it is possible that antioxidant activity is not an important mechanism for benefits of tea flavonoids on endothelial function, atherosclerosis and CVD risk.

8. Cholesterol reduction

Results of in vitro studies, studies in animal models and population studies suggest that flavonoids could reduce blood cholesterol concentrations (Hodgson, 2008). Most human intervention studies to have investigated the effects of tea on blood cholesterol concentrations have found little or no change with increased flavonoid intake from black tea. For black tea, there have been at least seven randomised controlled trials, with all but one showing no significant effect (Hodgson, 2000, 2008; Manach et al., 2005). Despite the favorable results from animal experiments, results of human studies investigating the effects of green tea (Tsubono and Tsugane, 1997; Unno et al., 2005; Van het Hof et al., 1997) are not consistent.

Overall, the lipid lowering effects of tea in humans appear to be for the most part quite small. The discrepancies between experimental and clinical data may be explained by the fact that most animal studies were performed with high doses of tea and tea components.

9. Inflammation

Inflammation is thought to play a significant role in the initiation and progression of vascular disease. Inflammatory processes in the vascular wall may be mediated by a range of factors, such as cytokines, eicosanoids and NO, which in turn modulate cellular signaling, cell growth and differentiation and a variety of other cellular processes. Results of in vitro studies suggest that flavonoids present in tea and other foods have effects on inflammatory mediators consistent with anti-inflammatory effects (Sies et al., 2005). However, to date there is little support for anti-inflammatory effects in randomized controlled trials. Several studies have shown no effect of regular ingestion of tea for up to 8 weeks on circulating C-reactive protein concentrations, a non-specific marker of inflammation (Hodgson, 2008; Lee et al., 2005). Effects of tea on other inflammatory markers remain less clear.

10. Platelet function

Too much platelet activation results in an increased susceptibility to aggregation and clotting. This can contribute to thrombosis, myocardial infarction and stroke. In vitro studies have shown that isolated flavonoids at high physiological concentrations can reduce platelet aggregation and markers of platelet activation (Rein et al., 2000). Randomized controlled trials in humans have also investigated the effects of flavonoid-rich foods and beverages on platelet function (Holt et al., 2006). Studies to have investigated the effects of tea on platelet function are not consistent. Four of five trials to assess effects of tea on ex vivo platelet aggregation found no effect (Hodgson, 2008 (references therein, Hodgson et al., 2001; Hodgson, 2002). There have however been two trials that have shown that regular ingestion of tea for 4 weeks results in a reduction in circulating p-selectin concentrations (Hodgson et al., 2001; Lee et al., 2005), which is a marker of platelet activation. Additional trials are needed to establish the effects of tea on platelet function.

11. Homocysteine

An elevated plasma concentration of total homocysteine (tHcy) is associated with an increased risk for CVD. There remains little evidence that this association is causal. Thus, tHcy concentrations may be a marker of other metabolic changes linked to risk of CVD. Homocysteine is an intermediate in methionine metabolism, and its metabolism can be influenced by several dietary factors including polyphenols and caffeine (Hodgson et al., 2003, Olthof et al., 2001). Results of controlled intervention studies suggest that polyphenols (Olthof et al., 2001) and caffeine (Verhoef et al., 2002) can raise homocysteine. In spite of this, results of cross-sectional population studies generally show that a higher intake of tea is associated with lower tHcy (Hodgson et al., 2006; de Bree et al., 2001, Nygard et al., 1997). A controlled intervention study using high doses of tea solids found that tea solids increased tHcy (Olthof et al., 2001), but a dose more representative of a usual tea intake did not alter tHcy (Hodgson et al., 2003). Thus, any acute effects of tea polyphenols and caffeine to elevate homocysteine acutely do not appear to translate into effects following regular consumption.

12. Body weight, body composition and visceral fatness

Green tea is thought to exert a beneficial effect on body weight and composition. There remain almost no data to support an effect of black tea on body weight and composition. Excess visceral fat is specifically associated with metabolic activities linked to poor health, and an increased risk for CVD specifically. Emerging data suggest that regular consumption of green tea may increase energy expenditure and reduce body fatness. Several studies have now shown that green tea, or preparations...
containing green tea flavonoids and caffeine significantly increase 24 h energy expenditure (Dulloo et al., 1999; Rumpler et al., 2001; Westerterp-Plantenga et al., 2006). In addition, acute and long-term studies have shown that green tea catechin ingestion can increase fat oxidation during exercise (Venables et al., 2008; Takashima et al., 2004). The magnitude of the increase is usually between about 3% and 7%, (about 250–600 kJ/day). The increase in energy expenditure is thought to come about via synergistic effects of tea flavonoids and caffeine, however the relative contributions of these components is not clear (Dulloo et al., 1999; Rumpler et al., 2001). Low doses of caffeine alone, such as those present in tea, appear not to significantly alter energy expenditure (Dulloo et al., 1999; Rumpler et al., 2001). This increase in fat oxidation could contribute to longer-term beneficial effects of high catechin green tea on body weight and composition.

An increase in fat oxidation could contribute to longer-term beneficial effects on body weight and composition. If a small increase in energy expenditure (~5%) is sustained over months a significant reduction in fat mass or body weight could result. Two recent meta-analyses of results from human intervention studies suggest that green tea (flavonoids) with caffeine reduces body weight by approximately 1–1.5 kg over 12 weeks (Hursel et al., 2009; Phung et al., 2010). Almost all studies conducted in Asian populations have shown positive results and results of the few studies in Caucasian populations are mixed. It was concluded by Hursel et al. (2009) that additional studies in Caucasian cohorts are needed. Background caffeine intake may influence the effectiveness of green tea and it is possible that green tea/catechins may be more effective in low to moderate caffeine users.

Therefore, results of randomized controlled trials suggest that green tea can reduce visceral fat during medium-term consumption, but additional studies in Caucasian cohorts are needed. The effects of black tea remain unclear. Benefits of green tea on body weight and body fatness would likely contribute to reduced risk of CVD.

13. Type 2 diabetes

The development of type 2 diabetes results in a significant increase in the risk of CVD. Limited data from epidemiological studies suggests that tea consumption is associated with a decreased risk of diabetes (Iso et al., 2006; Song et al., 2005; Panagiotakos et al., 2009) and a reduced level of fasting blood glucose in non-obese people (Polychronopoulos et al., 2008). However, additional prospective population studies are needed to investigate the relationship of tea consumption with risk of type 2 diabetes. Results of studies in animal models (Wu et al., 2004) and human intervention studies (MacKenzie et al., 2007; Fukino et al., 2005; Ryu et al., 2006) do not provide clear support for benefits of tea consumption on glucose and insulin metabolism. Further human studies are needed before drawing any conclusion on the effects of tea on blood glucose control and type 2 diabetes.

14. Conclusions

Available data suggests that tea is likely to provide protection against CVD. Results of population studies suggest a decreased risk of CVD with higher green and black tea consumption. Results of studies using animal models of atherosclerosis are consistent with results of population studies. The effects of tea flavonoids to enhance nitric oxide status and to improve endothelial function may be at least partly responsible for benefits on risk of CVD. In addition, there is limited but consistent data to support a benefit of regular consumption of green tea on body fatness and the development of obesity.

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