Peripheral contrast sensitivity in glaucoma and ocular hypertension

Fernando Falcao-Reis, Eamonn O'Donoghue, Rosaria Buceti, Roger A Hitchings, Geoffrey B Arden

Abstract

Contrast sensitivity has been measured in patients with glaucoma and ocular hypertension, the latter graded into high, medium, and low risk clinical groups. Measurements were made centrally and peripherally at 10°, 15°, 20°, and 25° off-axis at each of the four meridians 45°, 135°, 225°, and 315°. A sine wave grating of 1-9 cycles/degree, reversing at 1 Hz was used. It was displayed on a 100-Hz refresh rate monitor. Normal values were established to compare those from 41 eyes from patients with either primary open angle glaucoma (POAG) with minimal field loss detectable on a Humphrey perimeter, or raised IOP and/or disc changes but no field loss (OH). Those with POAG had normal central contrast sensitivity, but at 20° and 25° eccentricity the values were >2 standard deviations above the normal mean. This was also the case for high risk OH, but not for low risk patients. All the high risk patients except one who had abnormal peripheral contrast sensitivity had possible field defects (threshold elevation at one or more points more than 5 but less than 10 dB above normal mean). Only one of those with normal peripheral contrast sensitivity had such 'suspect points'. The results are assessed in terms of screening of glaucoma suspects.

Primary open angle glaucoma (POAG) is diagnosed when a patient has demonstrable visual field defect and either a raised intraocular pressure (IOP) or clinical signs, such as disc changes, which are consistent with a raised IOP, and no other complicating causes for the raised pressure. There are several tests which aid diagnosis. Perimetric loss defines the condition, but its sensitivity is not great enough to detect the earliest pathological changes: 40% of optic nerve axons are lost before any visual defect is apparent. Increases in pressure occur long before field is lost, and the degree of increase in IOP gives an indication of the probability that the patient will subsequently develop a characteristic field loss. However, it is impossible to screen for glaucoma on the basis of ocular pressure measurement only. No level of IOP can be found at which the percentage of 'false positives' and 'false negatives' is acceptable. Examination of the optic nerve head, especially with stereoscopic viewing, is an efficient and effective method of detecting damage to the optic nerve, but it requires expert judgment. A further limitation derives from the fact that patients who do not have any pathological process may have discs which seem abnormal.

Another problem in treating glaucoma is to decide when to begin. It is often considered to be too late to wait until a frank field defect is found and so one should treat patients with raised IOP and/or disc changes but no field loss (OH) in whom the condition is progressing. Estimates from the measurement of IOP are of limited use in deciding when to treat, as is a slight increase in a high cup/disc ratio. Therefore various subclassifications of OH have been devised in an attempt to quantify the risk that field loss may develop, and only patients in high risk groups are treated. This limits the cost of treatment and minimises the possibility of adverse reactions. To a considerable extent risk classification rests on clinical judgment. Recently some other diagnostic methods have been used to detect and grade the small degree of damage to the optic nerve which occurs in OH — for example, colour discrimination measured with desaturated colours or colour contrast sensitivity. The pattern electroretinogram especially has been found abnormal in ocular hypertension and appears to be more successful than the psychophysical techniques in detecting abnormality in glaucoma and high risk OH, possibly because a large retinal area is tested, while psychophysical methods measure only macular or even foveal function.

Another method claimed to detect visual changes in glaucoma and OH is the measurement of contrast sensitivity. Several techniques have been used and testing is as fast, easy to perform, and inexpensive as is required for screening. Unfortunately, early hopes of sensitivity and specificity of that method were not realised. Although losses in contrast sensitivity at low spatial frequency occur in patients suffering from glaucoma and OH, there is an unacceptable overlap with normals, even when the grating pattern is modulated as a function of time (which improves detection of early losses). Another unexploited value of temporally modulated gratings is that with them the Troxler effect is absent, and it is thus possible to measure contrast sensitivity in untrained subjects as far peripherally as 25–30° from the fovea. There have been no previous reports of such measurements in OH patients, but since the first field loss occurs peripherally it seems likely that the first losses of contrast sensitivity will occur in such regions. We have accordingly measured peripheral contrast sensitivity in eyes with early glaucoma and ocular hypertension at different risks of conversion of glaucoma. By the time glaucomatous eyes show the earliest evidence of visual field defect, that is, one spot of 10 dB loss, contrast sensitivity is greatly reduced when measured in the periphery. Determination of contrast sensitivity in four quadrants at 20° or 25° (four points)
served to separate all eyes with glaucoma from normal eyes, while testing at the macula was totally ineffective. Furthermore, in 50% of eyes with high risk ocular hypertension there are definite losses of contrast sensitivity at an eccentricity of 20° and 25°.

Material and methods

A TV monitor controlled by a T221 grating generator (Faulkner-West Associates) was used to present a vertical sinusoidal grating in a pattern reversing mode. The refresh rate was 100 Hz. Thus there was no ‘TV flicker’ even for peripheral viewing. Contrasts as low as 0·1% could be generated. The TV screen was surrounded by a white card of 80×80 cm, on which small fixation spots were affixed at appropriate locations. Most of the TV screen was also covered by the card except for an 8 cm round area in the middle. In this hole 6 cycles of the grating could be seen. Patients sat in a chair at 1·2 m from the screen. At this distance stimulus and surround subtended 3-8° and 33° respectively. Spatial frequency was 1·9 cycles/degree. An abrupt reversal (square wave) with a temporal frequency of 1 Hz was used. Both remained unchanged during testing. The mean luminance of the TV screen was 80 cd/m². Daily calibrations of contrast and luminance were carried out with a Tektronix J16 photometer. Room illumination was 10 cd/m². The operator sat at the side of the monitor, facing the patient, to check fixation. Threshold was determined by the method of ascending limits. Contrast, defined in the usual manner, was increased slowly and smoothly by the manual operation of a 10-turn calibrated potentiometer either from zero or from a variable subthreshold value. Patients were instructed to respond as soon as they could detect motion of the pattern. At least three measurements were averaged to determine a threshold at each locus. In a few cases the stimulus lay on a scotomatos region of retina, so no meaningful measurement could be made. In such cases the threshold contrast was arbitrarily given a value of 30%. Pupil diameter was not measured, but none of the patients was treated with miotics.

Patients and subjects wore spectacles when appropriate. Tests were carried out monocularly. The grating had an unchangeable spatial frequency, so no pattern preview was given. No time limit was imposed. Contrast threshold were measured at 10°, 15°, 20°, and 25° eccentricity at the 45°, 135°, 225°, and 315° meridians: these were chosen so that the blind spot was avoided. In addition the threshold was measured with foveal viewing. A full examination – 17 loci each eye – took about 45 minutes. All contrast sensitivity determinations were carried out by the same operator, who was not aware of the patients’ condition.

Forty-one eyes (mean age of patients 57 (SD 8) years, 27% female, 73% male) with glaucoma or hypertension recruited from a glaucoma clinic and 11 eyes (mean age of subjects 49 (SD 12) years, 36% female, 64% male) with normal eyes were examined. Hospital staff members with no ocular or systemic diseases volunteered as controls.

The doctors who carried out the contrast sensitivity test did not recruit the patients and did not carry out any clinical examinations, and were not aware of the field test results.

The patients’ eyes were examined by biomicroscopy, fundoscopy, disc photography, applanation tonometry, and Humphrey computerised static perimetry, and were classified by the usual criteria as suffering from either glaucoma or ocular hypertension (Table 1). Glaucomatous eyes had a reproducible visual field defect defined as one or more spots of sensitivity loss of 10 dB or greater at least in two different occasions plus one adjacent spot of 5 dB. Hypertensive eyes were further classified into three groups. The low risk group had an intraocular pressure below 26 mmHg and a vertical cup to disc (C/D) ratio less than 0·6. Eyes with either an intraocular pressure equal to or greater than 26 mmHg or a C/D ratio equal to or greater than 0·6 were classified as medium risk. The high risk group included eyes with intraocular pressure greater than 26 mmHg and C/D ratio greater than 0·6. Additionally eyes with OH were classified as ‘suspects’ when loci in the sites tested by the Humphrey 30-2 program had a sensitivity loss greater than 5 dB but less than 10 dB.

Exclusions. Patients and normal subjects had a visual acuity of 6/6 or better and no ocular disease particularly cataract or corneal opacities. None had systemic hypertension, diabetes, or other disease.

Results

CENTRAL RETINAL CONTRAST SENSITIVITY

Each patient or observer was asked to look directly at the grating, and contrast sensitivity was measured. The mean value of the macular region in normal control eyes was 0·91% (SD 0·13). This was not significantly less than the contrast sensitivity of low and medium risk OH groups.

The difference between the normals and the high risk group was greater, though the significance was only 0·1>p>0·05. Glaucomatous eyes showed a significant loss of sensitivity (p>0·001). Of greater interest is the distribution of contrast sensitivity in the population. This is shown in Fig 1. For central viewing, in two out of eight cases of glaucoma the thresholds were just below the upper limit of normal. This sort of overlap has previously been reported and explains why central contrast sensitivity (CS) is not an adequate screening technique.

### Table 1: Classification criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Low risk</th>
<th>Medium risk</th>
<th>High risk</th>
<th>Glaucoma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IOP (mmHg)</td>
<td>&lt;21</td>
<td>≥21, &lt;26</td>
<td>≥26</td>
<td>≥26</td>
<td>Any</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C/D ratio</td>
<td>&lt;0·6</td>
<td>≤0·6</td>
<td>&gt;0·6</td>
<td>≤0·6</td>
<td>≥0·6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual field</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>Normal or suspect</td>
<td>Normal or suspect</td>
<td>Normal or suspect</td>
<td>Abnormal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Suspect: one or more spots >5 dB <10 dB.
Abnormal: one or more spots ≥10 dB plus 1 spot >5 dB.
PERIPHERAL CONTRAST SENSITIVITY

Normals
Mean values for measurements in all four quadrants and the SD are shown in Table 2. Contrast sensitivity at most eccentric positions was considerably less than with central fixation, and decreased with eccentricity. The upper limits of normal (mean + 2 SD) were represented by the horizontal dotted lines on the graph of Fig 1. These results are consistent with previous findings.15 16 19

Glaucoma
The distribution of individual results is shown for peripheral CS in Fig 1. Fig 2 shows the average contrast thresholds at each retinal position. Note that for normals the symbols are at the mean plus 2 SD. In the superior quadrants of the visual field the difference between glaucomatous eyes and controls at 10° and 15° is small, but in the lower quadrants it is quite evident. In the two most peripheral loci (20° and 25°) the difference between the two groups is clear in all quadrants. For glaucomatous patients, contrast sensitivity, averaged over the four quadrants (Fig 5) is significantly lower than for the normals (the p values range from <0.005 to <0.001 depending on eccentricity). Note that the difference between normal and glaucomatous eyes is less in the superior nasal quadrant, where the scotomata are less frequent.

Not only are the differences between means significant, but the discrimination between affected and normal is nearly complete if the results from each of the four quadrants are averaged as in Fig 1.

There is only one false negative at 10° and none at 15°, 20°, and 25°. It might be considered that this averaging biased the result, since contrast sensitivity would be zero over a scotoma. Contrast sensitivity is not directly related to luminance incremental threshold (which is measured by perimetry, but evidently when increment threshold is infinity (that is, the stimulus lies on an absolute scotoma) the contrast threshold must also be immeasurably high. Only five eyes had a threshold higher than 30%. Among these one glaucomatous eye had a threshold higher than 30% at four retinal loci in one quadrant. These were scored as 30% (see ‘Methods’ section). Thus the results given in the figures underestimate the difference between normal and glaucomatous eyes.

OCULAR HYPERTENSION

Low risk group
Some differences between normal persons and OH patients can be observed. Low risk OH eyes had an average contrast sensitivity that was consistently less than the upper limit of normal (Fig 3) at all retinal eccentricities. When the results of all quadrants were averaged, the results

---

**Table 2 Mean contrast sensitivity of four quadrants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of patient</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Low risk OH</th>
<th>Medium risk OH</th>
<th>High risk OH</th>
<th>Glaucoma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Retinal position</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance*</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10°</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>1.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance*</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15°</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>2.27</td>
<td>2.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance*</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>&lt;0.1</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20°</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance*</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25°</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>6.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>4.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance*</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significance* Test of normal against each class of patient: figure is probability that the result could be obtained by chance. NS=not significant.
Peripheral contrast sensitivity in glaucoma and ocular hypertension

Figure 3 Contrast sensitivity at eccentric loci in low risk hypertensive eyes. Results are compared with upper limit of normal (mean ± 2 SD). Each symbol represents the mean of thresholds of all eyes at a given locus. Thresholds are similar in all quadrants. Mean contrast sensitivity is consistently under the upper limit of normal.

were also under the upper limit of normal for all eccentricities (Fig 5). As might be expected, the differences between this group and normal controls were not statistically significant (Table 2). Fig 1 shows the individual results, averaged over four quadrants, for the low risk group: only in two individuals, at 20°, were the results above the upper limit of the normal mean. Even in some low risk patients there was evidence of retinal damage, and a proportion of patients progressed to frank glaucoma. The few high thresholds encountered may indicate such lesions, but to provide evidence for this would require prolonged follow-up. More important, the finding that most low risk patients have results within our normal range shows that there is a low incidence of false positives.

Medium risk group
The medium risk group included only three eyes and results for each quadrant are not shown. Fig 5 shows the mean contrast sensitivity of all quadrants, and it can be seen that is within normal limits.

High risk group
Fig 4 shows the mean results obtained in each locus in the four quadrants. These are compared with the upper limit of normal from the normal population. For 10° and 15° off fixation the two sets of symbols overlap, but for 20° and 25° in seven of the eight determinations the OH eyes' thresholds were significantly raised.

The exception was the upper nasal quadrant at 25°. Therefore the results for all four quadrants were averaged, as shown in Fig 5. Loss of sensitivity in the two most peripheral positions is very evident in Fig 5, and this difference between high risk OH and normals is significant (0.005>p>0.001). Abnormal thresholds at 25° and 20° were found in 50% and 40% respectively of high risk eyes (30% and 24% of total OH eyes).

Discussion
In this study simple techniques were used to measure contrast sensitivity in patients' peripheral retina. Such measurements can be made reliably in our population, which, however, is selected: the patients know they are in several clinical trials and are highly motivated. Likewise our normal values are not obtained from spouses, and are not strictly age matched. However, this is not of importance for this project, in which the relation between peripheral and central contrast sensitivity (in the same individuals) is to be compared. Problems related to general screening are discussed below.

We have shown that, by comparison with normal people, patients with glaucoma have raised contrast thresholds for gratings of low spatial frequency, but this is true only for peripheral retina. (It would be difficult to investigate high spatial frequencies in the retinal periphery.) Abnormal peripheral contrast sensitivity in glaucoma has already been reported. In addition we have investigated patients with OH, and in some of these too contrast thresholds are raised. In patients with no definite field defects, but with clinical signs which suggest that retinal damage is occurring, there seems to be a highly significant loss of peripheral contrast sensitivity. This might be expected, for it is known that in experimental glaucoma those neurons responsible for the detection of low spatial frequencies and of movement, which subserve the magnocellular system, are selectively affected early in the course of disease.

Furthermore, the present results show normal
contrast sensitivity in the retinal periphery of patients with low and medium risk OH. In these patients there is only a low probability that field loss will later develop. Thus it is plausible that the 50% of cases of high risk OH eyes with abnormalities represent that subpopulation which will progress to frank field loss. If so, this would represent a significant improvement in deciding the prognosis of all suspects.

These findings once more raise the possibility that contrast sensitivity might be useful for glaucoma screening. Our results cannot be extrapolated to the entire age group at risk, in which contrast sensitivity losses occur for a variety of reasons.

One way of improving the discrimination would be to test separately in the central and peripheral retina. It should be noted that, for example, Atkin et al found. ¹¹ This suggests that our estimate of the upper limit of normal was if anything too high, and the discrimination attainable between normals and OH and glaucoma in the peripheral retina is the more interesting. Thus it is likely that measurements in the retinal periphery might reliably detect (and quantify) retinal damage which precedes field loss.

In order to make screening practicable, our technique requires modification. The prime need is to increase the speed of the test and to use forced-choice methods to minimise the subjective elements. In addition it appears that tritan colour vision losses are more prominent than luminance losses.¹² and this is the case especially for the retinal periphery.¹³ Once modifications in technique along such lines have been tested, an alternative to prolonged field testing seems possible.

Falcao-Reis acknowledges the assistance of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon.

This work was supported by grants from Wellcare Trust, Moorfields locally organised research fund, and from the Woolston Trust (GBA).


Table 3  Analysis of results in 20 patients with high risk OH

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abnormal CS*</th>
<th>Normal CS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normal visual field</td>
<td>1 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspect visual field</td>
<td>8 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Contract sensitivity. Values of CS are the mean of four quadrants at 25° Fisher exact, p = 0.000238.
Peripheral contrast sensitivity in glaucoma and ocular hypertension.

F Falcão-Reis, E O'Donoghue, R Buceti, R A Hitchings and G B Arden

doi: 10.1136/bjo.74.12.712

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://bjo.bmj.com/content/74/12/712

Email alerting service

These include:
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/