Microperimetry and fundus autofluorescence in patients with early age-related macular degeneration

Edoardo Midena, Stela Vujosevic, Enrica Convento, Antonio Manfre’, Fabiano Cavarzeran, Elisabetta Pilotto

Background: Early age-related macular degeneration (AMD) has been correlated with different functional alterations, but the exact relationship between fundus lesions and overlying sensitivity is not well known. The aim of this study was to compare fundus-related sensitivity (microperimetry) and fundus autofluorescence (FAF) of the macular area with drusen and pigment abnormalities in early AMD.

Methods: 13 consecutive patients with early AMD and visual acuity of 20/20 were studied by means of microperimetry, which automatically analyses macular light differential threshold and fixation patterns. Fundus colour photo and FAF of the macular area were recorded on the same day. Microperimetry was exactly (topographically) superimposed over FAF images.

Results: Macular sensitivity significantly decreased over large drusen (11.2 ± 5.6 dB, p<0.0001) and over pigment abnormalities (13.1 ± 3.6 dB, p<0.0001). When both characteristics were present the reduction was greater if compared with its absence (9.6 ± 4.3 versus 15.0 ± 4.5 dB, p<0.0001). Sensitivity reduction was significant in areas with altered FAF when compared with areas with normal FAF (p<0.0001).

Conclusions: Increased FAF in early AMD has a functional correlate exactly quantified by microperimetry. Retinal areas affected by early AMD retinal sensitivity deteriorates, despite good visual acuity. Microperimetry may allow the early detection of functional impairment caused by these lesions. Both microperimetry and FAF may be useful to monitor AMD progression.
diabetic retinopathy study protocols with a modified early treatment diabetic retinopathy study distance chart transilluminated with a chart illuminator (Precision Vision, Bloomington, Illinois, USA). Visual acuity was scored as the total number of letters read correctly and expressed as the Snellen equivalent.

**Microperimetry**

All patients underwent at least 5 mm pupil dilation with tropicamide 0.5% and 15 minutes mesopic conditions adaptation before examination.

Microperimetry was performed on all subjects using a new automatic fundus-related perimeter: the MP1 Microperimeter (Nidek Technologies, Padova, Italy). This instrument has previously been described in detail. Briefly, for the purpose of this study, the following parameters were used: a fixation target consisting of a red ring 2° in diameter; white, monochromatic background at 4 asb, stimulus size Goldman III with 200 ms projection time; customized radial grid of 61 stimuli covering the central 10° (centred onto the fovea); stimuli were projected randomly onto the 0°, 30°, 60°, 90°, 120°, 150° axes, 1° apart (fig 1). A 4–2–1 double staircase strategy was used with an automatic eye tracker that compensates for eye movements. In order to allow for better clinical correlation between micropereimetric data and retinal details, functional results are always displayed onto a colour digital retinograph, acquired by the charge-coupled device colour camera of the MP1.

**Autofluorescence**

FAF was recorded using a confocal scanning laser ophthalmoscope (Heidelberg Retinal Angiograph, HRA 2; Heidelberg Engineering, Heidelberg, Germany). The optical and technical principles of the HRA have previously been described in detail. In order to amplify the autofluorescence signal of the final image, 10 acquired images were aligned and a mean image was calculated from these, after detection and correction of eye movements were performed by image analysis software. Digital images were saved on hard disc for further analysis and processing. FAF images were graded for different patterns (normal, increased and decreased). Increased or decreased FAF in the central retinal 10° were assumed to be present on the basis of the intensity of the background FAF pattern encountered just immediately peripheral to the superior temporal arcade.

**Colour photos**

Digital colour images were taken by a Topcon TRC 50A 30 degree fundus camera (Topcon, Tokyo, Japan), on the same day as the MP1 and autofluorescence images were taken and immediately saved in JPEG format.

**Image analysis**

For every single retinal point tested with the MP1 on each eye, the presence and type of drusen (small, intermediate, large), pigment (present, absent) and FAF pattern (increased FAF, decreased FAF, normal FAF) were graded. A micropereimetry sensitivity map was also overlaid onto the FAF images using dedicated MP1 software. This software allows for the exact superimposition of sensitivity data to different images separately (FAF, fluorescein angiography, indocyanine green). The superimposition is obtained by the semi-automatic detection of three identical anatomical landmarks on both images (fig 2). This software has previously been tested for validity and repeatability. Thereafter, in every single pair of images correlation between the drusen type, RPE pigment and RPE atrophy (smaller than 125 μm) and distinct FAF pattern was evaluated.

Independent, combined grading of colour fundus images and FAF images was carried out by two trained retinal specialists. In the case of disagreement, arbitration grades were awarded by a different retinal specialist and these results were taken as final.

**Statistical analysis**

All sensitivity data were analysed using an analysis of variance test for repeated measures analysis of variance and a Bonferroni post-hoc test. FAF data were analysed using the chi-square test. To assess interobserver variability, kappa statistics were calculated.

We assumed that data were significant if p was less than 0.05. The SAS statistical package on a personal computer (version 8.4; SAS Institute Inc., Cary, North Carolina, USA) was used for all analyses.

**RESULTS**

Of the 13 patients examined, three were men and 10 were women, with seven left and six right eyes included. The mean age was 76.2 ± 6.55 years and mean visual acuity was 20/20. Anterior segment examination was unremarkable, with no significant media opacities.

Of 793 total retinal points examined (61 for each patient), 310 points presented with drusen (39.1%), 483 points had no drusen (60.9%), whereas 161 points had pigment alterations (20.3%) and 632 were without pigment alterations (79.7%); 697 points had normal FAF (87.9%), 30 decreased FAF (3.8%) and 66 increased FAF (8.3%) (see table 1).

Retinal sensitivity was significantly influenced by both drusen and RPE pigment abnormalities (analysis of variance p<0.0001). In particular, retinal sensitivity was not significantly decreased over small or intermediate drusen (p>0.05), whereas it was significantly decreased over large drusen when compared with an absence of drusen (15.0 ± 4.5 versus 11.2 ± 5.6 dB, Bonferroni test p<0.0001). Retinal sensitivity was also decreased when pigment abnormalities were found compared with their absence (13.0 ± 4.5 versus 13.1 ± 3.6 dB, p<0.0001). If RPE pigment abnormalities were associated with large soft drusen sensitivity reduction was even
higher if compared with its association with small or intermediate drusen (9.6 ± 4.3 versus 12.3 ± 0.6 dB, p<0.0001) (table 2). In all eyes fixation was central and stable.

The association between the FAF pattern (normal FAF, decreased FAF and increased FAF) and the presence of drusen was significant (p<0.0001). Increased and decreased FAF was found in only 27 of the examined points without drusen (6.4%), one of the examined points with small and intermediate drusen (1.7%) and in 32 of the examined points associated with large soft drusen (20.4%). Of 67 hyperpigmented points without drusen, seven (10.4%) presented with decreased FAF, four (6.0%) with increased FAF and 56 (83.6%) with a normal FAF pattern. When large soft drusen were associated with hyperpigmentation, 24 (26.4%) presented with increased FAF, one (1.1%) with decreased FAF and 66 (72.5%) with a normal FAF pattern. There were no points with small drusen and pigment abnormalities, and there were only three points with intermediate drusen associated with pigment abnormalities characterized by normal FAF (table 3).

The mean sensitivity was significantly decreased over areas with altered FAF (increased and decreased) when compared with areas with normal FAF (9.7 ± 5.5 and 10.2 ± 6.4 dB versus 14 ± 4.7 dB, p<0.0001).

The overall interobserver variability resulted in a kappa of 0.74 (95% confidence interval 0.64–0.84).

DISCUSSION

In the past, macular function in early AMD was studied by means of visual acuity, macular recovery function, central visual field sensitivity and spatiotemporal contrast sensitivity determination. More recent studies used short wavelength automated perimetry for the study of cone sensitivity, and a photopic and scotopic fine matrix mapping technique for the study of cone and rod sensitivity. Retinal sensitivity loss was documented regardless of good visual acuity in patients with early AMD. The fine matrix mapping technique detected more rod than cone sensitivity decreases. Both studies agreed that functional alterations correlate with funduscopic abnormalities (large soft drusen and pigmentary RPE changes). Conventional (automatic) perimetry has been used in the past to study early AMD, but the quantification of retinal thresholds over small and discrete retinal lesions were beyond the possibilities of the technique. Microperimetry, also known as fundus-related perimetry, allows for a detailed examination of macular function, giving a highly reproducible evaluation of retinal sensitivity at selected points, by a continuous eye tracking system. The semiautomatic MP1 software developed for this study allowed us an exact, point-to-point correlation between fundus lesions and FAF and sensitivity values. We found a significant sensitivity reduction over the areas characterized by large soft drusen using microperimetry.

Table 1 Fundus characteristics and fundus autofluorescence data of the studied population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patient ID</th>
<th>Pigment Drusen</th>
<th>Autofluorescence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No N (%)</td>
<td>Yes N (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>25 (41.0)</td>
<td>36 (59.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>33 (54.1)</td>
<td>28 (45.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>35 (57.4)</td>
<td>26 (42.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>58 (95.1)</td>
<td>3 (4.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>29 (47.5)</td>
<td>32 (52.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>59 (96.7)</td>
<td>2 (3.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>53 (86.9)</td>
<td>8 (13.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>57 (93.4)</td>
<td>4 (6.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>56 (91.8)</td>
<td>5 (8.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>55 (90.2)</td>
<td>6 (9.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>61 (100.0)</td>
<td>0 (0.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>57 (93.4)</td>
<td>4 (6.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>54 (88.5)</td>
<td>7 (11.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>632 (79.7)</td>
<td>161 (20.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hyper, increased autofluorescence; Hypo, decreased autofluorescence.
although this is not in accordance with previously published data obtained with traditional perimetry. Sensitivity deterioration was greater when pigment abnormalities were associated with drusen. Large soft drusen and RPE pigment alterations were mutually independent, and large soft drusen had a greater impact on retinal sensitivity than RPE pigment abnormalities alone. This fact can be explained by RPE and photoreceptor mechanisms with the consequent death of RPE cells. Clinical entities characterized by the accumulation of lipofuscin thus point to RPE cell dysfunction with secondary functional correlates. Therefore, comparing fundus morphological features with functional data may allow for a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying this pathological process, and may suggest a more appropriate follow-up for patients.

Further prospective studies on larger samples are needed in order to obtain a better understanding of the evolution of large soft drusen and pigment abnormalities characterized by increased FAF and decreased sensitivity, and whether patients with these characteristics are at greater risk of developing advanced stages of AMD when compared with areas with clinical features of early AMD and normal FAF.

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**REFERENCES**
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