Interrelation between inflammation, thrombosis, and neuroprotection in cerebral ischemia

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Abstract

Stroke by mechanism of thrombotic cerebral ischemia is one of the leading causes of death and/or disability worldwide. Current research is under consensus that there are sex-based differences in both the prevalence and presentation of stroke and thrombosis. Here we discuss the interrelation between thrombosis and inflammation and call attention to points in the cerebral ischemic cascade where estrogen may be involved in neuroprotection. Cerebral ischemia triggers a series of events including inflammation, which is deeply interrelated with thrombosis; inflammation not only produces local thrombosis, but thrombosis can also amplify inflammation especially through the synergism of leukocyte and platelet activity. Research involving experimental animal models of cerebral ischemia has shown that sex hormones, especially estrogen, offer a degree of neuroprotection. Mechanisms of this neuroprotection may be linked to certain anti-inflammatory properties of estrogen, as well as estrogen’s regulation of thrombosis through the lowering of coagulation factors, among others. It is also understood that sex hormones alter the function and morphology of platelets and fibrin networks, and changes in platelet and fibrin network morphology offer one of the earliest confirmations of inflammation. Sex hormone levels, inflammatory processes, and thrombotic mechanisms are profoundly interconnected in predicting the outcome of cerebral ischemia.

Keywords: anti-inflammatory; coagulation; estrogen; leukocytes; platelets.

Introduction

Stroke is currently the second leading cause of death and/or disability worldwide, and the existence of a larger aging population suggests that stroke research will become more important in the future (Elkins and Johnston, 2003; Braeuninger and Kleinschnitz, 2009). Thrombotic cerebral ischemia accounts for more than half of all cases of stroke worldwide. It results from an occlusion of cerebral vasculature, reducing or preventing the supply of oxygen to the cerebrum, thus hampering metabolic demand, and ultimately leading to death of brain tissue by ischemic stroke.

Research suggests that there are sex-based differences in the prevalence and presentation of both stroke and thrombosis (Bailey et al., 2009). Sex hormones not only alter procoagulant protein expression (Lowe et al., 2004) and the function of blood and vascular cells (Kadir et al., 1999; Butenas and Mann, 2002; Leng et al., 2004), but differences in platelet function (Liao et al., 2001; Suzuki et al., 2009) and in thrombosis activity (Bailey et al., 2009) have also been noted. Estrogen is to a degree neuroprotective (Liao et al., 2001; Suzuki et al., 2009; Selvamani and Sohrabji, 2010) in certain cases of induced cerebral ischemia, as females appear to suffer less severe consequences of stroke, including lesser neural tissue loss, than their male counterparts (McCullough and Hurn, 2003; Suzuki et al., 2009). In the absence of ovarian hormone production at menopause, females are again at higher risk to strokes than their male counterparts, and this risk continues to increase with age, as women have a longer life expectancy than men (Mitka, 2006; Suzuki et al., 2009). Thus, both sex and age play an important role in the occurrence of thrombotic events and the severity of neural damage subsequent to a stroke.

Platelets and fibrin play an important role in the normal coagulation process where they are involved in the maintenance of hemostasis (Herd and Page, 1994). Their activation may be due to damage of the vessel wall or activation of the endothelium by chemicals, cytokines, and also inflammatory processes (Camera et al., 1999; Butenas and Mann, 2002). Activated platelets synthesize/secrete inducers of platelet aggregation and adhere to the injured vessel wall, as well as aggregate to each other in order to form a platelet-rich plug or thrombus, which secures hemostasis; this plug is then stabilized by fibrin formation as fibrinogen is activated by binding to activated platelets. Fibrinogen is the major plasma protein coagulant protein expression (Lowe et al., 2004), and though plasma levels thereof are decreased by estrogen during the menstrual cycle, these levels are known to be higher in females than in males (Bailey et al., 2009). Although fibrin forms the core matrix of a thrombus, its structure depends also on the cellular elements embedded in its meshwork and the overall rate of coagulation reactions initiated by platelet aggregation (Wohner, 2008). Morphological changes of fibrin networks may therefore occur due to several kinetic and modulating factors present in plasma.

A thrombotic event is associated with a change in hemostasis and cellular components that play a fundamental role
in blood platelets and fibrin network formation. It is well known that thrombotic events are the most common cause of stroke and resultant cerebral ischemia (Braeuninger and Kleinschnitz, 2009). Furthermore, it is known that cerebral ischemia triggers a cascade of inflammatory processes, among others (Herd and Page, 1994; Gibson et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2007). Inflammation again causes an alteration in platelet activation (Camera et al., 1999; Butenas and Mann, 2002) and possibly further thrombotic events. It is suggested that estrogen provides neuroprotection through certain anti-inflammatory mechanisms, among others (Vegato et al., 2008; Suzuki et al., 2009).

**Cerebral ischemia**

With two-thirds of deaths from stroke complications occurring in developing regions of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa, stroke is the second leading cause of death worldwide. The existence of a larger aging population suggests that stroke research will become more important in the future (Elkins and Johnston, 2003; Wang et al., 2007; Braeuninger and Kleinschnitz, 2009).

Stroke incidence and resultant cerebral ischemia can be linked to coagulation processes. The cascade of blood coagulation is initiated when subendothelial tissue factor is exposed to the flow of blood subsequent to damage or activation of the vessel endothelium by chemicals, cytokines, or inflammatory processes (Butenas and Mann, 2002). The formation of a thrombus at a site of vessel injury is thus a hemostatic process. A thrombotic event, however, is associated with a change in hemostasis and cellular components that play a fundamental role in blood platelet and fibrin network formation. Overactivity of any one component of the coagulation cascade can result in the formation of tight and rigid fibrin networks (Fatah et al., 1992), which can cause blockage of one or multiple cerebral blood vessels, resulting in cerebral ischemia.

Cerebral ischemia is known to trigger a series of complex events initiating with cerebral hypoperfusion and comprising bioenergetic failure of cellular components, excitotoxicity, oxidative stress, biphasic dysfunction of the blood-brain barrier, microvascular injury, hemostatic activation, inflammation, and formation of edema, as well as apoptosis and ultimate necrosis of neuronal, glial, and endothelial cells. This cascade of events is dependent on variables, such as onset and duration of ischemia, effectiveness of reperfusion, and resultant infarct size or tissue loss (Danton and Dietrich, 2003; Gibson et al., 2005; Brouns and De Deyn, 2009; Saenger and Christenson, 2010).

**Thrombosis**

Thrombosis, the most common cause of stroke, is influenced by factors including endothelial injury, blood stasis or turbulent flow, and hypercoagulability of blood (Myers and Wakefield, 2005). Endothelial injury is the most common cause of hemostatic coagulation processes, and it is vital that these processes are understood. Endothelial damage to vasculature initiates a local inflammatory response, promoting a state of prothrombosis, which is driven by tissue factor, adhesion molecules, and proinflammatory cytokines and prothrombotic microparticles (Libby and Simon, 2001). Various disease states are also found to promote tissue factor exposure within vascular walls to blood flow, leading to the initiation of non-hemostatic coagulation processes (Mackman, 2004; Myers and Wakefield, 2005). Thrombosis and inflammation are interrelated (Stewart et al., 1974; Myers and Wakefield, 2005), as inflammation produces local thrombosis, and thrombosis can amplify inflammation (Libby and Simon, 2001). A thrombus, whether formed through hemostatic or non-hemostatic mechanisms, consists of platelets and fibrin as well as trapped red and white blood cells, which stabilize its structure.

Platelets and fibrin play an important role in the coagulation process, where they are involved in the maintenance of hemostasis. Platelets have a life span of 8–12 days, and though devoid of a nucleus, possess many features of classical inflammatory cells. Like neutrophils, they can undergo chemotaxis (Zhang et al., 1993), phagocytose foreign particles, contain and release adhesive proteins, activate complement, interact with foreign bodies, alter vascular tone, enhance vascular permeability, as well as store and metabolize various vasoactive substances, and release inflammatory mediators (Herd and Page, 1994). Structurally, platelet surfaces consist of a typical bilayer membrane composed of lipids, proteins, and carbohydrates. Surface glycoproteins are essential to their function and play a primary role in their adhesion to exposed subendothelial matrix proteins, interaction with thrombin, and exposure of fibrinogen receptors to facilitate aggregation (Roth, 1992; Herd and Page, 1994). Internally, platelets are only capable of limited protein synthesis, and few mitochondria are present, which contribute to energy metabolism of the platelet. In addition, a random cytoplasmic distribution of lysosomes, glycogen granules, and peroxisomes are present (Herd and Page, 1994). Following activation, platelets change shape from a discoid to a spherical form. This process is mediated by a contractile microtubular system, morphologically characterized by an
extension of dendritic pseudopodia (White, 1987; Herd and Page, 1994).

Platelets are activated by a number of stimuli resulting in the expression and/or activation of surface receptors, secretion of vasoactive substances, adhesion, aggregation, and finally, thrombus formation. The activation may be due to damage of the vascular wall or activation of the endothelium by chemicals, cytokines, and also inflammatory processes (Camera et al., 1999; Butenas and Mann, 2002). Upon activation, platelets cover the exposed subendothelial matrix and mediate additional platelet and leukocyte recruitment through the release of microparticles that mediate local leukocyte-leukocyte and leukocyte-endothelial cell interactions – mechanisms which play a role in both thrombosis and inflammation (Wagner and Burger, 2003). Platelets are essential in the initial stages of thrombus formation because they adhere and aggregate at sites of vascular wall injury and then serve as a surface for coagulation reactions; the overall rate of which determines the final structure of fibrin (Wohner, 2008). Thrombi thus form locally in a vessel when injury occurs or endothelial activation takes place – as a hemostatic mechanism to repair the insult. Platelets, during adhesion to endothelium, are activated and release proinflammatory cytokines that further stimulate the endothelium (Weber and Springer, 1997; Wagner and Burger, 2003), promote hemoattraction of leukocytes, stimulate smooth muscle cell and fibroblast proliferation, promote collagen synthesis, and thus contribute directly to lesion progression and maturation (Ross, 1985; Wagner and Burger, 2003).

Fibrinogen is the major plasma protein coagulation factor and the best known precursor of fibrin, playing an important role in platelet aggregation by linking activated platelets, and therefore playing a key role in hemostasis and thrombosis. Activated platelets synthesize/secrete inducers of platelet aggregation, adhere to the injured vessel wall, and aggregate to each other in order to form a platelet-rich plug that secures hemostasis: this plug is then stabilized by fibrin formation as fibrinogen is activated by binding to activated platelets. Thus, not all circulating fibrinogen is functional or clottable. As the tissue repair process takes place, the fibrin plug is digested by fibrinolytic enzymes (Lowe et al., 2004). On the one hand, low levels of plasma fibrinogen are associated with an increased risk for bleeding, as platelet aggregation as well as fibrin plug formation is impaired. Elevated fibrinogen levels, on the other hand, may well be associated with the risk of stroke (Danesh et al., 2005), as elevated fibrinogen synthesis is inclined to shift the hemostatic balance in favor of coagulation/thrombosis.

Interestingly, thrombi are found to form readily and rapidly in the complete absence of fibrinogen in animal models. However, these thrombi are unstable and fail to resist shear stress, resulting in frequent thromboembolization, with downstream vessel occlusion (Ni et al., 2000; Wagner and Burger, 2003). Fibrinogen/fibrin complexes are thus required to secure thrombus stability for anchorage to the site of injury. In addition, this stability is dependent on fibrinogen/fibrin interaction with platelet integrin (a surface protein), which also slows down the growth of the thrombus (Hawiger, 1995; Ni et al., 2000; Wagner and Burger, 2003). Fibronec tin is known to support platelet adhesion and distribution (Hynes, 1990; Wagner and Burger, 2003). Deficiency of plasma fibronec tin though does not affect initial platelet adhesion (Sakai et al., 2001; Wagner and Burger, 2003), but delays thrombus formation quite substantially as platelets are continuously shed. Therefore, fibronec tin is an important mediator of platelet-platelet interactions within thrombi as they form and grow. This mediation takes place through fibronec tin’s rapid binding to activated integrins, thus cross-linking platelets. Fibrin is then generated, which anchors the growing thrombus to the site of vascular injury (Ni et al., 2000; Wagner and Burger, 2003).

Platelet adhesion and activation are thus regulated by specific proteins on the platelet surface, and fibrinogen as well as fibronec tin plays a fundamental role in the coagulation process (Ni et al., 2000; Lowe et al., 2004). Fibrin assembly (through the coagulation pathway and involvement of the platelets) from fibrinogen proceeds in a highly ordered fashion. Fibrin forms a network, which functions to stabilize the primary platelet plug. Although fibrin forms the core matrix of a thrombus, its structure depends also on the cellular elements embedded in its meshwork. Morphological changes of fibrin networks may therefore occur due to several kinetic and modulating factors present in plasma. Fibrinolysis plays an important role in hemostasis too. Leukocyte-derived enzymes, such as elastase, influence fibrinolysis by direct digestion of fibrin or indirectly modulating it by partial degradation of zymogens and inhibitors of coagulation and fibrinolytic proteases (Wohner, 2008).

Thrombosis research has shown that sex hormones have complex effects on vascular walls, coagulation proteins, and platelets – all which may alter thrombosis. In line with this, females have shown cyclic patterns in their coagulation proteins, which correspond to menstrual cycle patterns (Kadir et al., 1999; Bailey et al., 2009); in addition, they possess slightly higher fibrinogen levels than their male counterparts, though estrogen is known to decrease fibrinogen plasma levels (Mendelsohn and Karas, 1999; Bailey et al., 2009). There also seem to be sex-related differences in platelet function. It is known that isolated female platelets bind more fibrinogen and have a greater maximal aggregation extent than male platelet isolates, and this platelet reactivity is altered in ovariectomized females (Leng et al., 2004; Bailey et al., 2009). Males have been shown to have higher platelet counts and faster clotting times than their female counterparts, thus making them more susceptible to thrombosis – possibly due to the differences in growth hormone secretion between the sexes (pulsatile in males, sustained in females), which in turn influence protein production of coagulation and thrombosis regulators (Wong et al., 2008; Bailey et al., 2009). Isolates of male rat platelets have been shown to display greater maximal aggregation in vitro than platelets isolated from female rats; this aggregation is reduced in male rats that have undergone castration (Emms and Lewis, 1985; Bailey et al., 2009). It has been noted that both megakaryocytes and platelets express the estrogen receptor beta (ERβ) as well as the androgen receptor (Jayachandran and Miller, 2003; Bailey et al., 2009); thus,
Inflammation is characterized by interactions among endothelial cells, platelets, and leukocytes, and causes endothelial activation regardless of the mechanisms by which inflammation itself was activated. Endothelial activation sets off the cell adhesion cascade, which results in the adherence and aggregation of platelets, chemokine deposition by platelets on the activated endothelial surface, the expression of cell adhesion molecules by endothelial cells and platelets, and ultimately, activation of leukocytes. Chemokines activate leukocytes, and further binding to adhesion molecules mediate the process of leukocyte rolling (on the activated ‘sticky’ endothelium), adhesion (through binding to fibrinogen), and transmigration into the subendothelial tissue (Butcher, 1991; Springer, 1994; Diacovo et al., 1996; Kuijper et al., 1996; Weber and Springer, 1997; Konstantopoulos et al., 1998; Wagner and Burger, 2003). Platelets are thus central to both thrombosis and inflammation.

The objective of inflammation is therefore to recruit leukocytes rapidly to a site of vascular injury. Endothelial dysfunction or injury promotes activation of the coagulation cascade by exposure of tissue factor (Gimbrone, 1995; Day et al., 2005; Myers and Wakefield, 2005), as well as the activation of inflammatory process (Laursen et al., 2001; Altman, 2003; Myers and Wakefield, 2005). Inflammatory mediators then promote coagulation through further elevation of tissue factor (Drake et al., 1989; Esmon, 2003), which elevates fibrinogen synthesis, and fibrinogen levels will continue to rise under inflammatory conditions (Taylor et al., 1987; Esmon, 2003) unless hemostatic factors counteract this. Tissue factor is a membrane-bound protein that functions as a procoagulant (Libby and Simon, 2001), triggering thrombin generation, which then prompts activation of the coagulation cascade (Nemerson, 1988; Mann et al., 1998; Myers and Wakefield, 2005). Thrombin in turn amplifies the inflammatory response by activating the endothelium, resulting in the formation of more tissue factor (Pendurthi et al., 1997; Miller et al., 1998; Esmon, 2003) and high levels of platelet-activating factor (Bar-Shavit et al., 1986; Esmon, 2003), which is a neutrophil agonist (Lorant et al., 1991; Esmon, 2003) enhancing leukocyte activation and adhesion, as well as increasing inflammatory cytokines (Henn et al., 1998; André et al., 2002, Esmon, 2003). Inflammatory cytokines have been shown to increase platelet reactivity, which increases thrombogenic potential (Burstein, 1997; Esmon, 2003), further linking inflammation and thrombosis.

Monocytes do not express tissue factor unless they are stimulated by inflammatory mediators to transcribe the gene for tissue factor (Wilcox et al., 1989; Brand et al., 1991; Libby and Simon, 2001); thus, their recruitment and activation can lead to thrombogenesis. Activated monocytes that express tissue factor on their surfaces (Rauch and Nemerson, 2000) facilitate monocyte-platelet and monocyte-endothelial interactions through binding mechanisms of cell adhesion molecules (Wakefield et al., 1997; Shebuski and Kilgore, 2002; Myers and Wakefield, 2005). These interactions, driven by inflammatory mediators and tissue factor, lead to accelerated fibrin formation and deposition into a developing thrombus (Shebuski and Kilgore, 2002; Myers and Wakefield, 2005). Thus, the specific interaction between cell adhesion molecules and their leukocyte receptors is what stimulates fibrin formation (Goel and Diamond, 2001; Myers and Wakefield, 2005), and procoagulant microparticles derived both from activated leukocytes and platelets amplify the coagulation process (Frenette et al., 2000; Myers and Wakefield, 2005). Like endothelial cells and activated monocytes, smooth muscle of blood vessels can express tissue factor when exposed through endothelial breakage, thus also contributing to thrombogenesis (Schechter et al., 1997; Libby and Simon, 2001). Besides production of procoagulant tissue factor, the smooth muscle can also undergo inflammatory activation when exposed to thrombin and products of thrombosis (Kranzhofer et al., 1996; Libby and Simon, 2001), thus amplifying the inflammatory response and promoting systemic procoagulant effects due to increased fibrinogen levels in circulation (Libby and Simon, 2001).

The progression of the inflammatory response subsequent to a stimulus hence reflects a balance between prothrombotic and anticoagulant activities. The ability of proinflammatory cytokines to downregulate antithrombotic proteins and
upregulate prothrombotic proteins shifts this balance toward a procoagulant state (ten Cate et al., 1997; Myers and Wakefield, 2005); in addition, these cytokines induce the immune defense mechanism and mediate leukocyte recruitment. Inflammatory cells are important to the process of thrombus recanalization and organization. Although it may seem intuitive that a decrease in inflammation will decrease thrombogenesis, once a clot forms, the presence of neutrophils is important for recanalization (Varma et al., 2003; Myers and Wakefield, 2005).

Accordingly, inflammation leads to an imbalance between the pro- and anticoagulant properties of endothelium that can lead to local stimulation of the coagulation cascade (Nathan, 2002; Wagner and Burger, 2003). Early inflammatory responses may consequently contribute to damage, whereas late/delayed inflammatory responses are necessary to facilitate repair.

As mentioned previously, cerebral ischemia triggers inflammatory processes (Herd and Page, 1994; Gibson et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2007). The first inflammatory cells that enter the brain subsequent to trauma are neutrophils, followed by monocytes, and later on, resident microglia, astrocytes, and neurons are also activated (Morganti-Kossmann et al., 2001). Leukocytes and, after a few hours post-injury, microglia secrete proinflammatory cytokines and chemokines, the severity of which play detrimental roles in the pathophysiology of stroke (Morganti-Kossmann et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2007; Suzuki et al., 2009). Significant leukocyte influx into cerebral parenchyma and tissue remodeling are characteristics of cerebral ischemia/reperfusion (Barone et al., 1995; Wang et al., 2007). Interestingly, infarct volume has been shown to be reduced significantly through the inhibition of neutrophil infiltration, as it is evident that neutrophils wield the most damage to ischemic lesions once reperfusion is undertaken (Connolly et al., 1996; Guha and Mackman, 2001; Wang et al., 2007).

In areas of ischemia/reperfusion injury, platelets colocalize with leukocytes – an interaction linking hemostatic thrombotic and inflammatory responses (Ostrovsky et al., 1998; Libby and Simon, 2001). The inflammatory reaction subsequent to cerebral ischemia is characterized by neutrophil adherence to blood vessels 4–6 hours after onset of ischemia and their infiltration into the neural tissue with subsequent release of proinflammatory mediators, potentiating injury (Hallenbeck, 1996; Wang et al., 2007), by resultant accumulation and activation of monocytes in the area of lesion. Platelets promote accumulation of both neutrophils and monocytes at sites of injury, and neutrophil-platelet aggregates specifically influence cellular responses by inducing further leukocyte activation, enhancing cell-adhesion molecule expression, and generating signals that promote platelet integrin (surface protein) activation and chemokine synthesis (Ott et al., 1996; Furman et al., 1998; Libby and Simon, 2001). Chemokines stimulate cytoskeletal reorganization of neutrophils and monocytes to facilitate their motility, proliferation of fibroblasts and astrocytes for glial scar formation, apoptosis and necrosis of neurons, and the phagocytic ability of macrophages and microglia to remove the debris of damaged tissue (Morganti-Kossmann et al., 2001).

**Neuroprotection**

Sex hormones target the central and peripheral nervous systems, affecting brain development and differentiation and influencing neuronal functions (Manthey and Behl, 2006; Drača, 2009). In humans, it is accepted that premenopausal or cyclic women present with a lower incidence of ischemic stroke than men; this distinction is, however, no longer present when postmenopausal or acyclic women are compared to men. Furthermore, the ischemic stroke risk increases in both sexes with age (Wolf, 1990; Gibson et al., 2005; Braeuninger and Kleinschnitz, 2009). Thus, sex hormones must have a role in neuroprotection and the decline thereof with age.

Experimental animal studies have not only reported that young females present with smaller cerebral infarcts and thus less neural tissue injury than their male counterparts (Alkayed et al., 1998; Braeuninger and Kleinschnitz, 2009), but also that high endogenous estradiol levels during the estrus cycle seem to correlate with smaller infarct size in females (Carswell et al., 2000; Braeuninger and Kleinschnitz, 2009). This advantage is abolished in ovariectomized animals, due to the loss of endogenous female sex hormones (Simpkins et al., 1997; Alkayed et al., 1998, 2000; Hawk et al., 1998; Liao et al., 2001; Gibson et al., 2005; Park et al., 2006; Drača, 2009; Selvamani and Sohrabji, 2010), and the consequences of cerebral ischemia in aged animals are more severe than in young animals (Davis et al., 1995; Alkayed et al., 1998).

The female sex hormone 17β-estradiol has been shown to be the principal circulating estrogen protecting the brain from damage, by reducing infarct size after experimental cerebral ischemia, through attenuation of markers of apoptosis by activation of mediators of cell survival signaling pathways. It seems that when administered several days before inducing cerebral ischemia, physiological levels of estradiol attenuate brain injury through the suppression of neuronal apoptosis and genomic actions by acting through mechanisms of the classical nuclear estrogen receptors (Liao et al., 2001; Prewitt and Wilson, 2007; Jia et al., 2009; Suzuki et al., 2009); this is, however, not the case with acute administration of 17β-estradiol at the time of injury, as this does not reduce the extent of infarction (Dubal et al., 1998; Suzuki et al., 2009).

In studies of the neuroprotective extent of estradiol, researchers have shown that a single high-dose injection (1 mg/kg) of 17β-estradiol administered to male rats immediately before experimental cerebral ischemia was capable of reducing cortical tissue loss, and that castration of male rats, resulting in the loss of testosterone, did not alter these results (Toung et al., 1998). Moreover, injection of exogenous 17β-estradiol was only neuroprotective in the male brain, revealing that endogenous estrogen is sufficient to protect the female brain and that exogenous 17β-estradiol had no additional protective effect (Toung et al., 1998). Thus, the hypothesis that estrogen is a major mediator of sex differences displayed in stroke is heavily strengthened (Drača, 2009).

17β-Estradiol salvages the brain from ischemic injury, even enhancing recovery and reducing infarct size in ovariectomized (Simpkins et al., 1997; Selvamani and Sohrabji, 2010) and reproductively senescent or aged females (Alkayed et al., 1998).
In the case of acyclic females, this is subject to administration of 17β-estradiol at the onset of senescence or ovariectomy and not in older acyclic females (Bake and Sohrabji, 2004; Suzuki et al, 2009; Selvamani and Sohrabji, 2010). Ischemic injury itself has been found to increase the expression of ERα in the cerebral cortex, without influencing ERβ expression. Consequently, it is believed that it is this ERα re-expression after ischemic injury that mediates 17β-estradiol’s profound neuroprotection against ischemia (Dubal et al., 2001; Suzuki et al., 2007, 2009).

Cerebral ischemia triggers a complex series of events, including excitotoxicity, inflammation, and formation of edema, as well as apoptosis and necrosis (Danton and Dietrich, 2003; Gibson et al., 2005; Saenger and Christenson, 2010) – all of which are reduced by estradiol through free radical scavenger action, among others (Demopoulos et al., 1972; Singer et al., 1996; Gibson et al., 2005; Draça, 2009). Estradiol seems to target neural cells by indirect transcriptional mechanisms and by direct mechanisms, stabilizing neurotransmission, inhibiting apoptosis, reducing cerebral edema, and exerting anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects (Manthey and Behl, 2006; Draça, 2009). Figure 1 proposes further points at which estradiol wields an influence in neuroprotection against cerebral ischemia.

Postischemic inflammation strongly contributes to the extent of cerebral injury, and 17β-estradiol may exert protection through anti-inflammatory (Figure 1) actions (Vegeto et al., 2008; Suzuki et al., 2009). In fact, the presence of initial neural inflammation is negatively correlated with serum estradiol levels (Wang et al., 2007). The proposed anti-inflammatory action of estradiol is strengthened by findings that 17β-estradiol is neuroprotective when administered immediately upon ovariectomy but not when administered after 10 weeks of hypoestrogenicity, demonstrating that a prolonged period of hypoestrogenicity disrupts not only the neuroprotective but also the anti-inflammatory actions of estradiol (Suzuki et al., 2007, 2009). The first cellular response in inflammation is the activation and accumulation of neutrophils (Morganti-Kossman et al., 2001). It is evident in models of transient cerebral ischemia that tissue loss is reduced significantly through the inhibition of neutrophil infiltration, as it is apparent that neutrophils wield the most damage to ischemic lesions once reperfusion is undertaken (Connolly et al., 1996; Guha and Mackman, 2001; Wang et al., 2007). It would seem that neutrophil accumulation is also negatively correlated with serum estradiol levels (Liao et al., 2001), strengthening evidence for the neuroprotective role of the female sex hormone even more. The anti-inflammatory properties of 17β-estradiol in the cerebral circulation thus influence the incidence, outcome, and severity of injury in stroke.

![Figure 1](image-url) Possible points of estradiol’s influence in neuroprotection against cerebral ischemia.

Estradiol affects thrombosis activity through the lowering of coagulation factors and platelet aggregation. It displays anti-inflammatory mechanisms and lowers the negative consequences of cerebral infarction through free radical scavenger action.
by attenuating ischemia-induced inflammatory responses (Suzuki et al., 2009).

Not only does estradiol exert protective anti-inflammatory actions subsequent to cerebral ischemia, but it also has a role in thrombosis (Figure 1) regulation (Wong et al., 2008; Bailey et al., 2009), the alteration of which may result in cerebral ischemia. Coagulation factors and proteins are lowered by the presence of estrogen, though some factors (i.e., fibrinogen) are inherently higher in females than in males (Mendelsohn and Karas, 1999; Bailey et al., 2009); in addition, there are cyclic patterns in these coagulation proteins that correspond to the menstrual cycle in females (Kadir et al., 1999; Bailey et al., 2009). Functionally, female platelet isolates, though capable of binding more fibrinogen and displaying a greater maximal aggregation extent than male platelet isolates (Leng et al., 2004; Bailey et al., 2009), actually do not aggregate as quickly as the larger number of male platelets do, thus to some degree rendering females less susceptible to thrombosis. In the absence of estradiol in acyclicity, female platelets are again more susceptible to thrombosis (Wong et al., 2008; Bailey et al., 2009). Platelets are indeed found to express ERβ, which is hypothesized to have a direct effect on platelet function (Peters et al., 2002; Jayachandran and Miller, 2003; Bailey et al., 2009). Thus, it becomes clear that there are not only sex-based differences in coagulation processes but also age-based differences; as in a hypoestrogenic state, females not only have higher coagulation factors but also higher maximal platelet aggregation capabilities than males, rendering them more prone to thrombosis in an acyclic state.

Finally, it must be noted that estradiol replacement is not universally neuroprotective. It has been suggested that the neuroprotective effects of estrogen are more evident in transient than in permanent models of cerebral ischemia (Macrae and Carswell, 2006; Selvamani and Sohrabji, 2010). This is suggested due to findings that in severe ischemic injury, there are no sex differences in infarct size and also no reduction of the infarct with 17β-estradiol administration (Vergouwen et al., 2000; Selvamani and Sohrabji, 2010). Permanent ischemia leads to severe metabolic impairment in the cerebral cortex, which results in necrosis of many neurons in the region within several hours following injury. Regions surrounding the core of ischemia can be salvaged from apoptosis through the powerful neuroprotective action of 17β-estradiol (Prewitt and Wilson, 2007; Suzuki et al., 2009), but the effects of estradiol at the ischemic core are only visible in transient ischemic models. Conclusively, 17β-estradiol protects the brain through suppression of neuronal apoptosis during the initial 24 hours after injury, in part by suppressing the inflammatory response, and enhances neurogenesis within the first 96 hours after ischemic stroke (Suzuki et al., 2009).

Conclusions

Platelets are central to both thrombosis and inflammation. Not only is platelet localization essential to thrombus initiation, formation, and stabilization, but in areas of ischemia/reperfusion injury in cerebral ischemia, platelets and leukocytes colocalize, linking hemostatic thrombotic and inflammatory responses. Estrogen is neuroprotective in a myriad of mechanisms—a few of which include anti-inflammatory actions and regulation of coagulation factors affecting thrombosis ability. The cascade of cerebral ischemia, its association to inflammation and thrombosis, and their connection to each other are thus intricately intertwined.

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