Plasma Measurement of D-Dimer Levels for the Early Diagnosis of Ischemic Stroke Subtypes

Walter Ageno, MD; Sergio Finazzi, MD; Luigi Steidl, MD; Maria Grazia Biotti, MD; Valentina Mera, MD; GianVico Melzi d’Eril, MD; Achille Venco, MD

Background: Different coagulation abnormalities according to stroke subtypes have been reported. We have assessed the clinical utility of D-dimer, a product of fibrin degradation, in the early diagnosis of stroke subtypes.

Methods: Patients hospitalized after an acute ischemic cerebrovascular event underwent D-dimer assay (STA Liatest D-Dimer) (reference level, <0.50 µg/mL) on days 1, 6±1, and 12±1 and were studied to identify stroke subtypes.

Results: We included 126 patients (mean age, 75.5 years) and 63 age-matched control subjects. Stroke subtypes were cardioembolic in 34 patients (27%), atherothrombotic in 34 (27%), lacunar in 31 (25%), and unknown in 27 (21%). At all 3 measurements, D-dimer levels were significantly higher in the cardioembolic group (mean±SEM, 2.96±0.51, 2.58±0.40, and 3.79±0.30 µg/mL, respectively) than in the atherothrombotic (1.34±0.21, 1.53±0.26, and 2.91±0.23 µg/mL, respectively) (P<.05) and lacunar (0.67±0.08, 0.72±0.15, and 0.64±0.06 µg/mL, respectively) groups (P<.01). The difference was also significant between the latter 2 groups (P<.01). We found no difference between the lacunar group and controls (0.53±0.14 µg/mL). According to day 1 measurements, the optimal cutoff point for predicting cardioembolic stroke was 2.00 µg/mL, resulting in a specificity of 93.2% and in a sensitivity of 59.3%. For predicting lacunar stroke, the cutoff point was 0.54 µg/mL, with a specificity of 96.2% and a sensitivity of 61.3%.

Conclusion: The increasing use of the D-dimer assay in clinical practice could be extended to patients presenting with acute cerebrovascular ischemic events to help predict stroke subtype.

Arch Intern Med. 2002;162:2589-2593

One of the first objectives in the management of patients presenting with acute ischemic stroke is the diagnosis of the subtype. Advances in the diagnostic evaluations of stroke have helped to identify the most common mechanisms, such as atherosclerosis, cardiac embolism, and lacunae. However, as many as 40% of all ischemic events can remain classified as cryptogenic, because no potential mechanisms are detected or because more than 1 mechanism has been recognized. In the early 1990s, a number of clinical studies have shown an abnormal hemostatic function in patients with cerebral ischemia. Markers of fibrin formation were found to be significantly increased after acute ischemic stroke and transient ischemic attack (TIA); most of all, their levels significantly differed according to stroke subtype. When Takano and colleagues hypothesized that assessment of hematologic variables could provide a useful marker for the early classification of stroke subtypes, none of the coagulation and fibrinolytic variables that were evaluated were available in routine clinical practice. In the past decade, one of these variables, D-dimer, a specific product of degradation of cross-linked fibrin, has gained a wide popularity after the results of a number of studies proved its potential role in the diagnostic approach of venous thromboembolic disorders. Reference concentrations of plasma D-dimer (usually <0.50 µg/mL) are a useful negative predictor to rule out venous thromboembolism in patients with clinical suggestions, and several D-dimer assays are now available in many clinical settings for rapid emergency testing. Our study aimed to confirm the results of previous reports and to suggest the potential clinical utility of measurement of plasma D-dimer levels in the early diagnosis of ischemic stroke or TIA subtypes when used as an emergency test in addition to the routine clinical and instrumental assessments.
admitted to the University Hospital of Varese, Italy, with a clinical diagnosis of acute ischemic stroke or TIA according to the definition of the World Health Organization. Immediately after their arrival at the emergency department, or, at latest, the morning after, all patients underwent a computed tomographic scan of the brain to rule out hemorrhagic stroke or other intracerebral processes. During hospital admission, the possible mechanism of the ischemic event was assessed by means of electrocardiography, echocardiography (SONOS 5500; Agilent Technologies, Milan, Italy; probe S4 MHz), and duplex ultrasonography of the cervical arteries (Agilent Sonos 5500; probe 3-11L MHz). Stroke subtype was then classified according to the World Health Organization. "Transient ischemic attack" (TIA) indicates transient ischemic attack.

**BLOOD SAMPLING AND BIOCHEMICAL ASSAY**

Blood samples were mixed with one-tenth volume of 3.8% sodium citrate anticoagulant and immediately centrifuged at 3000 rpm for 10 minutes. The plasma was divided into aliquots and frozen at -80°C until assayed. Plasma samples were stored with conditions known to independently affect D-dimer levels, such as the concomitant use of anticoagulants, sepsis, malignancy, acute venous thromboembolism, collagenopathy, recent surgery or trauma, or acute myocardial infarction that occurred in the preceding 10 days. We first measured D-dimer levels in the morning after hospital admission (day 1) and then after 6±1 and 12±1 days to evaluate possible changes in the subacute phase according to the different subtype groups. For comparison, D-dimer levels were also measured in a control group of age-matched healthy subjects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Demographic Data*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex, No. M/F Mean Age, y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy controls (n = 63) 31/32 75.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIA (n = 40)              18/22 75.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ischemic stroke (n = 86)  44/42 75.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*TIA indicates transient ischemic attack.

**RESULTS**

We initially enrolled 178 patients who presented with suspected acute ischemic stroke or TIA and 63 healthy controls in the study. All these patients had at least 1 blood sample drawn for the assessment of plasma D-dimer levels. In 8 of the 178 patients, the initial diagnosis subsequently failed to be confirmed. In 1 patient, the second computed tomographic scan of the brain showed small metastases that were not visible in the previous one performed at the emergency department, and in 7 patients the initial diagnosis of a suspected TIA was subsequently denied (2 patients had convulsions, 2 had vertigo, and 3 had an isolated syncope). Plasma D-dimer levels were within the reference range (<0.50 µg/mL) in 7 patients and slightly abnormal in the patient with malignancy. Exclusion criteria were subsequently identified in 44 patients. An acute infection developed in 29. Ten had malignancy; 7, a recent trauma; 2, a recent acute myocardial infarction; 1, deep vein thrombosis in the hospital; 1, a recent surgical procedure; and 1, a chronic rheumatologic disorder (rheumatoid arthritis). Although the primary endpoint of the study was the correlation between stroke subtype and D-dimer level measured on admission, patients were also excluded if the criterion was identified during hospitalization to not interfere with the subsequent assays. Of the 126 remaining patients, 40 had a TIA (mean age, 75.6 years; 18 men) and 86 had an acute ischemic stroke (mean age, 75.7 years; 44 men) (Table 1). Among the 63 healthy controls, the mean age was 75.4 years and 31 were men. We initially compared the 3 measures of D-dimer levels among the patients with acute ischemic stroke, those with TIA, and controls (with a single measure). Patients with stroke and TIA had significantly higher D-dimer levels than controls at all 3 measurements, whereas no statistical difference was found in any of the measurements between the patients with stroke and TIA (Table 2). No correlation was found between D-dimer levels and stroke severity as assessed using the Unified Neurological Stroke Scale (r = 0.2284). We subse-
quenty compared D-dimer levels according to stroke subtypes. Among the 126 patients undergoing evaluation, 34 (27%; mean age, 79.9 years) had a cardioembolic event; 34 (27%; mean age, 74.1 years), an atherothrombotic event; 31 (25%; mean age, 74.7 years), a lacunar event; and 27 (21%; mean age, 74.1 years), an unknown mechanism of acute cerebrovascular ischemia (Table 3). Mechanisms for the cardioembolic event were atrial fibrillation in 21 patients receiving aspirin or not receiving any antithrombotic prophylaxis, congestive heart failure in 8, severe mitral valve disease in 3, ischemic heart disease in 1, and heart valve replacement with a mechanical valve in 1 who spontaneously stopped warfarin sodium treatment 1 week before the event. On day 1, D-dimer levels were significantly higher in the groups of patients with a cardioembolic stroke or a TIA (2.96±0.51 µg/mL) than in the groups with an atherothrombotic (1.34±0.21 µg/mL; P.<0.05) or a lacunar (0.67±0.08 µg/mL; P.<0.01) event (Table 3). There was also a statistically significant difference between these latter 2 groups (P.<0.01), whereas no difference was shown between patients with lacunar events and controls. According to these results, the optimal D-dimer level cutoff point for discriminating the presence or absence of a cardioembolic source was determined to be 2.00 µg/mL, with a specificity of 93.2%, a sensitivity of 59.3%, a positive predictive value of 96.2%, and a negative predictive value of 72.7%, and a negative predictive value of 88.2% (Table 4 and Figure 1). On the other hand, the optimal cutoff point for discriminating a lacunar event was determined to be 0.54 µg/mL, with a specificity of 96.2%, a sensitivity of 61.3%, a positive predictive value of 96.2%, and a negative predictive value of 86.4% (Table 4 and Figure 2). After 6±1 days, D-dimer levels were substantially stable in all 3 groups, whereas after 12±1 days, we found a clear increase in the cardioembolic and atherothrombotic groups, but no change in the lacunar group (Table 3).

### Table 2. D-Dimer Levels*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>D-Dimer Level, Mean ± SEM, µg/mL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control subjects</td>
<td>0.53 ± 0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patients</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIA</td>
<td>1.17 ± 0.35†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acute ischemic stroke</td>
<td>1.74 ± 0.13§</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*AT indicates acute ischemic attack. †P.<.05, patients with TIA vs controls. ‡P.<.05, patients with acute ischemic stroke vs controls. §P.<.10 compared with patients with TIA. ¶P.<.09 compared with patients with TIA. *P.<.08 compared with patients with TIA.

### Table 3. D-Dimer Levels According to Stroke Subtypes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stroke Subtype</th>
<th>D-Dimer Level, Mean ± SEM, µg/mL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Day 1†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE (n = 34)</td>
<td>2.96 ± 0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AT (n = 34)</td>
<td>1.34 ± 0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAC (n = 31)</td>
<td>0.67 ± 0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRY (n = 27)</td>
<td>1.08 ± 0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*CE indicates cardioembolic; AT, atherothrombotic; LAC, lacunar; and CRY, cryptogenic. †AT vs LAC, P.<.01; AT vs CE, P.<.02; CE vs LAC, P.<.009; AT vs CRY, P.<.07; CE vs CRY, P.<.003; and LAC vs CRY, P.<.04. ‡AT vs LAC, P.<.002; AT vs CE, P.<.02; CE vs LAC, P.<.009; AT vs CRY, P.<.07; CE vs CRY, P.<.01; and LAC vs CRY, P.<.01. §AT vs LAC, P.<.03; AT vs CE, P.<.02; AT vs LAC, P.<.009; AT vs CRY, P.<.06; CE vs CRY, P.<.01; and LAC vs CRY, P.<.05.

The results of our study demonstrate that D-dimer levels significantly differ among stroke subtypes after an acute ischemic event and that measurement of D-dimer levels can be reliable in the early diagnosis of the mechanism underlying the acute cerebrovascular disorder. Our results support previous pathophysiological findings and suggest some important clinical implications. As described by Fisher and Francis and by Takano and colleagues, significant differences exist in the levels of plasma D-dimer among stroke subtypes. This finding seems to apply also to patients presenting with a TIA. Despite the rapid reversibility of the clinical signs, D-dimer levels remain increased for at least 2 weeks. These data support those of Fon and colleagues, who showed a persisting increase in D-dimer levels 1 and 3 months after the acute event in patients with TIA and are in contrast with those of Fisher and Francis, who failed to show a correlation between D-dimer levels and TIA.

Hemostatic abnormalities after cerebral ischemia apparently are not related to the extent of the neurological damage, in terms of clinical severity or duration of the symptoms, but to the mechanism responsible for the cerebrovascular ischemia. Patients with cardioembolic events have significantly higher levels than patients with different etiologic factors, and patients with lacunar events have D-dimer levels within the reference range, thus suggesting the possibility of a nonthrombotic mechanism underlying the occlusion of small vessels. Thrombus formation in the cardiac chambers is in most cases caused by blood stasis, leading to a fibrin-rich clot very similar to venous thrombi. Thrombi originating in the large arteries are mostly platelet rich, and fibrin formation is secondary to platelet activation. Finally, little is known about the mechanism responsible for small penetrating artery occlusion. Fisher and Francis hypothesized that in subjects with lacunar disease, thrombi are too small to produce detectable elevations of plasma D-dimer levels. Another possibility is a nonthrombotic, lipohyalinotic, degenerative process of the vessel walls related to arterial hypertension or diabetes.

The results of our study support the clinical utility of D-dimer testing in the emergency setting. Previous reports were based on assays performed with the reference standard method, the enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay. In clinical practice, these conventional enzyme-linked immunosorbent D-dimer assays are of little use, because they are very labor intensive and time-consuming and because they are designed for batch analysis, not a routine emergency test. The STA Liatest D-Dimer assay used in this study is a fully automated quantitative latex assay and offers several advantages because it is simple and rapid to perform. It has been compared with excellent results.
with reference standard methods in the field of venous thromboembolism.\(^\text{14-16}\) We suggest that levels above the cutoff point of 2.00 µg/mL should offer a reliable suspect for a cardioembolic source and that levels below 0.54 µg/mL can be diagnostic for a lacunar event in the absence of clear alternative hypotheses. In addition to the standard procedures, measurement of D-dimer levels in patients presenting with an acute ischemic cerebrovascular event can be a specific marker to rapidly address the diagnosis in the emergency department, to direct more aggressive diagnostic procedures, or to address secondary prevention when a diagnosis has not been reached, despite results of instrumental tests.

Our study presents some practical limitations. First, our results are based on etiologic classifications proposed by other groups. When such guidelines were applied, the clinical accuracy of the initial stroke subtype diagnosis was shown to be subsequently confirmed in only 62% of the cases.\(^\text{2}\) Second, no extra tests were systematically performed to search for less common causes of stroke, and some cases of patent foramen ovale or aortic arch atheroma, to name a few, may have been missed. Most of our patients with a cardioembolic stroke or TIA had atrial fibrillation, which is the most frequent cause. The presence of increased plasma levels of D-dimer in patients with atrial fibrillation was already shown.\(^\text{17-19}\) The results observed in the cardioembolic group might have been partly influenced by the hemostatic abnormalities of atrial fibrillation. Third, in the diagnostic approach of venous thromboembolism, the D-dimer assay is approved as a negative predictor to rule out deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism. It has a low specificity because several conditions such as sepsis, malignancy, recent trauma or surgery, and recent thrombosis can increase D-dimer levels. In the diagnostic approach of a cardioembolic stroke, it is of paramount importance to rule out all of these concomitant conditions.

A future direction for the use of the D-dimer assay can be in the choice of the best treatment for secondary prevention. Lip and colleagues\(^\text{19}\) have previously shown that warfarin but not aspirin reduces plasma D-dimer levels in patients with atrial fibrillation. The benefit of oral anticoagulants in patients with atherothrombotic strokes or TIAs has been suggested but not yet proved. It is likely that some but not all patients receive more benefit from warfarin than from antiplatelet agents. As already suggested by Lowe and Rumley,\(^\text{20}\) high levels of D-dimer may suggest a role for anticoagulants, even in noncardioembolic strokes.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The plasma D-dimer assay is a simple method now easily available as an emergency test that can reliably identify stroke subtypes in association with the common routine instrumental tests. Further clinical studies with dif-

### Table 4. Predictive Value of D-Dimer Assay

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stroke Subtype</th>
<th>Cutoff D-Dimer Value, µg/mL</th>
<th>Sensitivity, % (95% CI)</th>
<th>Specificity, % (95% CI)</th>
<th>NPV, %</th>
<th>PPV, %</th>
<th>LR+</th>
<th>LR−</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cardioembolic</td>
<td>≥2.00</td>
<td>59.3 (38.8-77.6)</td>
<td>93.2 (85.7-97.4)</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>8.69</td>
<td>0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacunar</td>
<td>&lt;0.54</td>
<td>61.3 (42.2-78.1)</td>
<td>96.2 (89.2-99.2)</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>86.2</td>
<td>15.94</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\) CI indicates confidence interval; NPV, negative predictive value; PPV, positive predictive value; LR+, positive likelihood ratio; and LR−, negative likelihood ratio.

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1.** Receiver operating characteristic curve for cardioembolic subtypes with a D-dimer level of greater than 2.00 µg/mL. Sensitivity was 59.3%; specificity, 93.2%.

![Figure 2](https://example.com/figure2.png)

**Figure 2.** Receiver operating characteristic curve for lacunar subtypes with a D-dimer level of less than 0.54 µg/mL. Sensitivity was 61.3%; specificity, 96.2%.
different assays are warranted to support these findings and to test the possibility of incorporating the D-dimer assay in diagnostic decision trees.

Accepted for publication April 22, 2002.

This study was presented at the meeting of the International Society on Thrombosis and Haemostasis, Paris, France, July 10, 2001.

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REFERENCES


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