

Protective Role of Vitamin K2 in Vascular Microcalcification: Clinical Implications

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Abstract

Vitamins K (vitamins K1 and K2) are micronutrients with wide range of biological functions. Vitamin K1 (phylloquinone) is of plant origin and principally controls some blood clotting factors synthesized by the liver. Many forms of vitamin K2 (menaquinones) have various biological potencies and functions. This depends on the length of the side-chain. It is synthesized by microbiota of the large intestine besides being synthesized in tissues from phylloquinone by a specific enzyme in the liver and other tissues. Vitamin K2 is essential for preventing vascular microcalcification which affects both small and large arteries and contributes for pathological complications of renal and diabetic diseases. It has anti-osteoporotic action and maintains bone density. Its anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant activities protect against many pathological states. It may account for improving glucose tolerance owing to its insulinotropic effect, and counter-against cancer due to both anti-apoptotic and anti-oxidant actions. It has biological actions on the nervous system including peripheral nerves and protects against Alzheimer's disease.

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Kasr Al Ainy Medical Journal
2023, 29:1–7

1- Introduction

Vitamins K are powerful micronutrients for aging and age-related diseases [1]. They are present in nature in two biologically active forms. Vitamin K1 (phylloquinone, PK) is predominantly present in vegetables, such as lettuce, cabbage, and spinach [2]. Vitamin K2 (menaquinones, MKs), is essentially of microbial origin [3], e.g. in fermented food, and the gut microbiota [4]. Chemically, phylloquinone has phytyl side chain of four prenyl units, whereas menaquinones contain unsaturated side chain with a variable number of prenyl units (from 4 to 14).

Menaquinone-4 (MK4) is the main form in humans and animals. It can be synthesized from PK by the tissue-specific enzyme, UbiA prenyltransferase domain-containing protein 1 (UBIAD1) [5]. PK loses its side chain as it passes in the alimentary tract; the product is menadione. Menadione is transported to target tissues for prenylation by UBIAD1 [6]. MK4 is highly enriched in the liver, kidney, adipose tissue, reproductive organs, bone, and pancreas owing to its expression of UBIAD1 [7].

Distal colon microbiota is the major source of most MKs, however, the most active site of absorption is the terminal ileum owing to the availability of bile salts needed for solubilization of MKs. Hence, dietary MKs, but not locally synthesized MKs, is the principal exogenous source of MKs [8].

Absorbed vitamin K is transported to the liver to be exported included in triglyceride-rich lipoproteins particles, VLDL or to be used for the synthesis of clotting factors. Menaquinones are released into the bloodstream, incorporation with low-density lipoproteins to target tissues for Gla-protein carboxylation [9].

2- Functions

Vitamin K2 (or menaquinones, MKs) is a cofactor of the enzyme γ -carboxylase, which drives the conversion of inactive vitamin K-dependent proteins (VKDPs) (such as osteocalcin and matrix Gla protein) from uncarboxylated to active γ -carboxyglutamate (Gla). A lack of MKs leads to pathological complications, such as vascular calcification, and osteoporosis, or is associated with other disorders, such as diabetes, and chronic degenerative conditions (such as cardiovascular diseases, Alzheimer's disease, and cancer) [10]. In addition, MKs inhibits autophagy and ferroptosis [11] to prevent degenerative disorders and cancer development.

2.1. Activation of vitamin K dependent proteins and the vitamin K cycle

Vitamin K-dependent proteins (VKDPs) are rich in glutamate residues that are acceptors of carbon dioxide in an active reaction, to form a carboxylated protein. This process requires vitamin K in its reduced form (hydroquinol). The native form of vitamin K is in the quinone form. It is reduced by vitamin K reductase

(NADPH-dependent) to the corresponding hydroquinone (or quinol) [12]. The latter is a component of γ -glutamyl carboxylase that catalyzes the carboxylation of uncarboxylated GLA proteins. The latter process is a complex and includes oxidation. The quinol is thus oxidized to epoxide. In the next step, the epoxide is reduced by epoxide reductase, to the quinone form of vitamin K, in a complex process that necessitates the presence of anti-oxidants such as vitamin C or glutathione to eliminate the generated reactive oxygen species. Therefore, vitamin K functions as an antioxidant [13]. Antioxidants play a role in protecting the bi-phospholipid cellular membranes from oxidation [14].

Vitamin K-dependent proteins (VKDPs) include coagulation factors II, VII, IX, and X, as well as matrix GLA proteins (MGPs), osteocalcin (OC), growth arrest-specific protein 6 (Gas6), transforming growth factor beta-inducible protein (TGF β I), and protein S. Coagulation factors are synthesized in the liver and are dependent on vitamin K1. Other proteins are influenced by vitamin K2 or menaquinones (MKs) [15].

2.2. Vascular calcification

Vitamin K2-activated matrix Gla protein (MGP) is a vascular calcification inhibitor [16,17]. Arterial calcification is manifested as scattered intimal and/or medial spots or patches. Intimal calcification occurs in the coronary and small arteries as small dots of calcification, but large artery calcification present as larger patches occupying the media, and is consistent with atherosclerosis [18]. This results in arterial wall hardness and reduced arterial compliance [19]. It has been reported that adequate intake of MKs is associated with reduced coronary artery calcification and all-cause mortality [20].

In the vascular system, matrix Gla-protein (MGP) is a secretory protein of low molecular weight released by both vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMCs) and endothelial cells (ECs) of the arterial wall [21]. MGP undergoes vitamin K-dependent carboxylation and phosphorylation to become activated with the aim of acquiring extra-negative charges to facilitate binding to matrix calcium ions; thereby inhibiting the calcification process [22]. Dephosphorylated-uncarboxylated MGP (dp-ucMGP) is unable to bind calcium in the extracellular matrix and therefore released in the circulation. The plasma concentration of dp-ucMGP is a monitor of vascular MKs status compared with other components of the MGP [23]. It is correlated with an increased risk for vascular calcification in vulnerable patients such as those on hemodialysis [24], cardiovascular and diabetic patients [25].

2.3. Mechanism and control of vascular microcalcification

Inflammation triggers microcalcification, supporting the assumption that inflammation pivots for calcification [26]. Cell necrosis, associated with atherosclerotic changes, is a potent inducer of pathological calcification. Calcifying dead macrophages were observed in the necrotic core [27].

VSMCs retain high plasticity, which allows them to modulate and switch phenotypes upon exposure to stress signals. VSMC phenotypic switching is triggered by inflammation, growth factors, and injury. Atherosclerosis, hypertension and vascular surgery are all associated with VSMC phenotypic switching [28,29]. VSMC phenotypic modulation is characterized by changes in morphology, protein expression, proliferation, and migration [30]. The contractile function of VSMCs is impaired because of downregulation of contractile proteins and acquisition of proliferation and migration properties. VSMCs are differentiated into osteo-/chondrogenic and macrophage-like phenotypes, which promote further remodeling and calcification [32].

The local tissue factors that modulate VSMC phenotype include growth factors, such as platelet-derived growth factor (PDGF) and transforming growth factor- β [33], angiotensin II [34], nitric oxide [35], growth arrest-specific 6 protein [36], reactive oxygen species [37], and oncostatin M [38]. They are secreted by macrophages M1 to modulate the osteoblastic trans-differentiation of VSMCs [39].

MGP inhibits bone morphogenetic protein-2 (BMP-2), a potent pro-osteoblastic protein, which is extensively expressed in atherosclerotic lesions during inflammation and oxidative stress. This induces an osteogenic gene expression profile in VSMCs [40, 41].

Osteocalcin (OC), which is secreted by osteoblasts. It stimulates insulin and adiponectin expression, leading to improvement of glucose intolerance. On the other hand, insulin and adiponectin stimulate osteocalcin expression in osteoblasts, establishing a positive feedforward loops among bone, pancreas, and adipose tissue [42]. On the other hand, OC modulates vascular calcification by activating adiponectin which inhibits the osteoblastic differentiation of VSMCs [43]. Osteocalcin is considered as a monitor to detect the trans-differentiation of vascular smooth muscle cells into osteoblasts [44]. Therefore, one may suggest that the high serum level of osteocalcin in atherosclerotic patients may be a protective mechanism against vascular calcification [45].

Osteoprotegerin (OPG) is a regulatory factor produced by stromal cells of the bone marrow. It acts as a decoy receptor for the receptor activator of nuclear factor kappa-light-chain enhancer of activated B cells ligand (RANKL) system [46]. Furthermore, OPG counteracts the pro-apoptotic actions of TNF-related apoptosis-inducing ligands, so it is considered a protective factor against vascular calcification [47, 48]. MGP has an anti-calcification action on the microcirculation of the kidneys, heart, and retina, and is postulated to contribute to the microvascular integrity of these organs through its anti-calcific properties [49].

The negative charges of MGPs offer high affinity for binding with free positively charged calcium ions. They chelate matrix calcium to make hydroxyapatite crystals that are accumulated within the vessel wall as inactive complexes [50].

MGP inhibits vascular calcification through the suppression of bone morphogenetic protein-2 (BMP-2).

BMP-2 is among the factors contributing for the transformation of smooth vascular muscle cells to an osteoblastic phenotype [51].

Growth arrest-specific gene 6 (Gas6) is activated by menaquinones. Gas6 undergoes γ -carboxylation to trigger anti-apoptotic activity of Bcl-2. It also inhibits caspase 3, a pro-apoptotic protein, thus preventing the apoptosis induced by inflammation and reducing the trans-differentiation of vascular smooth muscle cells to osteoblasts [52, 53].

Vitamin K affects the gut microbiome activity through regulation of IL-1- α , IL-1- β , and tumor necrosis factor (TNF)- α release from monocyte-derived macrophages [54]. It affects gut microbial composition and the overall bacterial metabolism that may interact with local intestinal factors to prevent colon cancer development [55].

3. Menaquinones protect against glucose intolerance and vascular diabetic complications

MKs supplementation increases insulin sensitivity [56]. These compounds improve the insulin response to glucose load [57]. It is claimed that MK-4 might function as insulin secretagogue via an incretin-like mechanism, (promotion of insulin secretion via elevation of cAMP levels in insulin-producing cells prior to [58].

Osteocalcin has a role as a gluco-regulatory factor. It potentiates glucose utilization by both increasing insulin secretion and promoting adiponectin expression [59, 60]. MKs improve insulin resistance through their anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant effect.

MKs deficiency is associated with diabetic peripheral neuritis [61], as they facilitate synthesis and repair of the myelin sheath in the peripheral nervous system. Demyelination results in deterioration of the structural and molecular features of the nerve fibers, which leads to peripheral neuropathy [62]. In addition, one of the anti-oxidant effects of MKs is through inhibition of arachidonic acid-induced oxidative damage to oligodendrocytes by indirectly blocking 12-lipoxygenase [63].

Studies on diabetic nephropathy revealed that the renal functions are also affected with vitamin K. The plasma dpucMGP level is correlated with albuminuria and inversely associated with the estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) denoting that vitamin K deficiency may deteriorate renal functions.[64,65].

4. The role of menaquinones in prevention of locomotor disorders

Bone mineralization is influenced by osteocalcin because of its high affinity for hydroxyapatite, which result in the formation of a stronger skeleton and minimizes susceptibility to fracture [66]. Gene induction of osteocalcin in human mesenchymal stem cells is enhanced by MK2-7 which is initially influenced by vitamin D3. MK2-7 affects genes involved in cell growth and differentiation. Hence, supplementation of

both MK2-7 and vitamin D3 potentiates the development of bone and reduces bone structure deterioration [67].

Moreover, MK2-7 upregulates osteoprotegerin, a decoy receptor for receptor activator of nuclear factor kappa-B ligand (RANKL). RANKL binds to receptor activator of NF- κ B (RANK) to activate NF- κ B. The latter is essential for osteoclast activity which promotes bone resorption [68]. This mechanism is, also, important for the use of MKs as anti-inflammatory agents.

Gla-rich protein (GRP) has beneficial effect on preventing osteoarthritis by inhibiting calcification of articular cartilage. In osteoarthritic cartilage undercarboxylated GRP (ucGRP) was more evident than carboxylated GRP (cGRP), as an evidence of MK inadequacy. Besides, it is associated with ectopic articular calcification. [69].

Efficient vitamin K status is associated with higher physical performance score [70]. Muscle strength and physical performance rather than muscle mass expresses effect of vitamin K on muscle quality rather than muscle mass [71], probably due to improving mitochondrial function [72].

5. Menaquinones protection against cancer

MKs inhibit the proliferation of cancer cells through induction of cell cycle arrest. MKs interferes with the binding of NF- κ B to the cyclin D1 promoter, thus inhibiting cell cycle turnover [73]. Moreover, mitochondria apoptosis is induced by vitamin K2 *via* mitogen-activated protein kinase pathways [74]. In addition, vitamin K2 can inhibit cancer cell growth by inducing autophagy [75], depending on the level of cellular expression of Bcl-2 [76].

6. Menaquinones biological effects on the nervous system

Protein S and Gas6 are among GLP that was reported to prevent apoptosis of neuronal cells[77], oligodendrocyte loss, and microglial activation [78], suggesting its protective role against Alzheimer's disease[79,80]. Disruption of microglial homeostasis leads to the activation of neurotoxic astrocytes, synaptic loss and neuronal death which induce inflammation and neurodegeneration. Overactivation of microglia trigger inflammatory cascades in the central nervous system. MKs inhibit the nuclear translocation of NF- κ B in microglia, resulting in the inhibition of NF- κ B signaling and the suppression of inflammatory cytokines, i.e. IL-1 β , IL-6 and TNF- α [81].

Protein S protects neuronal system against ischemic injury; having a beneficial role for prevention of vascular-mediated cognitive impairment [82]

7. Conclusion

Menaquinones is essential in prevention of vascular calcification and injury that may lead to aortic aneurysm and cardiac valvular disorders. MKs biomedical significance may be encountered in chronic non-communicable diseases as diabetes, chronic kidney

diseases, bone, cardiovascular, and neurodegenerative disorders. Mechanism of action is reported to achieve these tasks including anti-inflammatory, anti-oxidant and/or anti-apoptotic, besides chelating calcium in the vascular tissue. Many of the findings related with menaquinones deficiency necessitate further clinical and biomolecular studies.

Abbreviations:

BMP-2: morphogenic protein-2
 dp-ucMGP: dephosphorylated-uncarboxylated MGP
 Gas6: growth arrest-specific gene 6
 Gla: γ -carboxylglutamate
 MGP: matrix Gla protein
 MKs: menaquinones,
 OC: osteocalcin
 OPC: osteoprotegerin
 PDGF: platelet-derived growth factor
 PK: phylloquinone
 RANK: receptor activator of NF- κ B
 RANKL: nuclear factor kappa-light-chain enhancer of activated B cells ligand
 UBIAD1: UbiA prenyltransferase domain-containing protein 1
 VKDPs: vitamin K-dependent proteins
 VSMCs: vascular smooth muscle cells

Funding: This research received no funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable

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