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# Phospholipid transfer protein (PLTP) deficiency impaired blood-brain barrier integrity by increasing cerebrovascular oxidative stress



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#### ABSTRACT

Phospholipid transfer protein (PLTP) regulates lipid metabolism and plays an important role in oxidative stress. PLTP is highly expressed in blood-brain barrier (BBB), but the role of PLTP in BBB integrity is not clear. In this study, BBB permeability was detected with in vivo multiphoton imaging and Evans blue assay. We found that PLTP deficient mice exhibited increased BBB permeability, as well as decreased expression of tight junction proteins occludin, zona occludens-1 (ZO-1) and claudin-5 in brain vessels. Cerebrovascular oxidative stress increased in PLTP deficient mice, including increased levels of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and lipid peroxidation marker 4-hydroxy-2-nonenal (HNE) and reduced superoxide dismutase (SOD) activity. Dietary supplementation of antioxidant vitamin E increased BBB integrity and tight junction proteins expression via reducing cerebrovascular oxidative stress. These findings indicated an essential role of PLTP in maintaining BBB integrity, possibly through its ability to transfer vitamin E, and modulate cerebrovascular oxidative stress.

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## 1. Introduction

Phospholipid transfer protein (PLTP) is a key protein in lipid and lipoprotein metabolism, and facilitates the transfer of several amphipathic compounds including phospholipids, unesterified cholesterol, and  $\alpha$ -tocopherol [1–3].  $\alpha$ -Tocopherol is the main isomer of antioxidant vitamin E, exchange of  $\alpha$ -tocopherol between lipoproteins and cells is modulated by PLTP in vivo [2,3]. PLTP deficiency leads to elevated oxidative stress via reduced  $\alpha$ -tocopherol content, increased reactive oxygen species (ROS) level and decreased superoxide dismutase (SOD) activity in peripheral arteries and brain [4–7]. Compared with the whole brain, PLTP mRNA expression level is 6.8-fold higher in cerebral vessels [8], suggests a potential role of PLTP in blood–brain barrier (BBB), but whether PLTP can affect BBB integrity is not clear.

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BBB is comprised of brain microvascular endothelial cells and acts as a physical and metabolic barrier between the brain and the rest of the body [9]. The main structures responsible for the maintenance of the integrity and function of BBB are the intercellular tight junction proteins [10]. One of the main factors inducing BBB impairment is oxidative stress, which increases BBB permeability and disturbs expression of tight junction proteins zonula occluden-1 (ZO-1), occludin, and claudin-5 [11,12]. Several in vivo and in vitro studies supported a beneficial effect of vitamin E on protecting the function of BBB via its antioxidant effect [13–15]. So we raise a hypothesis that lack of vitamin E due to PLTP deficiency may increase cerebrovascular oxidative stress and impair the integrity of BBB.

This study aimed to investigate the role of PLTP in BBB integrity. BBB permeability was examined with in vivo multiphoton imaging and Evans blue assay, tight junction proteins occludin, ZO-1, claudin-5 expression were determined with Western blot, oxidative stress was represented by levels of ROS and 4-hydroxy-2-nonenal (HNE) and SOD activity. We found increased BBB permeability in PLTP deficient mice for the first time, as well as decreased expression of tight junction proteins occludin, ZO-1 and claudin-5 in brain vessels. Cerebrovascular oxidative stress increased in PLTP

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deficient mice, including increased levels of ROS and lipid peroxidation marker HNE and reduced SOD activity. Vitamin E supplementation attenuated cerebrovascular oxidative stress, rescued BBB impairment induced by PLTP deficiency.

# 2. Materials and methods

#### 2.1. Animals

All mice were on the homogeneous C57BL/6 background. PLTP deficient mice were generated by Dr. X.C. Jiang's laboratory [16]. Mice were fed a standard chow diet or a vitamin E (Sigma, St. Louis, MO) – supplemented chow diet (800 mg/kg, 2 months) [17,18]. Mice were matched for sex and used between 8- and 9-month of age. All procedures were approved by the Animal Care Committee of Peking University Health Science Center in China.

# 2.2. Multiphoton in vivo microscopy analysis

In vivo multiphoton imaging was performed as previously described [19]. Mice were anesthetized intraperitoneally with 750 mg/kg urethane and 50 mg/kg chloralose and the cranium was firmly secured in a stereotaxic frame. A square cranial window about  $2\times 2$  mm was then opened with a high-speed drill, to gain direct access to the brain parenchyma. The tissue was kept humid constantly by subsequent additions of 200  $\mu l$ -drops of 0.9% saline. Tetramethylrhodamine (TMR) – conjugated dextran (40 kDa, 0.1 mL of 10 mg/ml, Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) was injected via the tail vein. At the end of the experiment mice were killed by decapitation and brains were harvested, frozen and conserved at  $-80\,^{\circ}\text{C}$  until use.

In vivo images were acquired using a multiphoton microscope (Leica TCS SP5 MP, Chicago, IL) with 850 nm excitation and  $20\times/1.0$  water immersion objective, 2 mm working distance. Once the area of interest was defined, 200  $\mu$ m-thick stacks in the *Z*-axis (5  $\mu$ m steps) were obtained with the Leica ASF software, every 5 min for a total time of 30 min.

# 2.3. Evans blue assay

Evans blue assay was carried out as previously described [20]. 2% Evans blue dye (4 ml/kg) was injected intravenously and allowed to circulate for 2 h. Then mice were perfused transcardially with physiological saline until no blue color was evident in effluent. The brain was removed, placed in formamide and incubated for 48 h in the dark at 60 °C. The absorbance of eluted Evans blue dye in formamide solution was measured using a spectrophotometer at 650 nm, and normalized to plasma levels.

# 2.4. Isolation of brain capillaries

Brain capillaries were isolated using dextran gradient centrifugation as described [19]. The cortex and hippocampus were carefully dissected and the meninges were removed in ice–cold PBS containing 2% fetal bovine serum (FBS). The brain was homogenized and dextran (70 kDa, Pharmacia) was added to a concentration of 16%. The samples were then centrifuged at 6000g for 15 min. The capillary pellet located at the bottom of the tubes was collected and sequentially filtered through a 100  $\mu m$  and 45  $\mu m$  cell strainer. The capillaries remaining on top of the 45  $\mu m$  cell strainer were collected in PBS.

# 2.5. Western blot analysis

Isolated brain capillaries were lysed in RIPA buffer, and Western blot analysis was carried out as previously described [21]. The protein concentration of each homogenate was determined using a

BCA kit (Pierce). Extracts (60  $\mu$ g of protein) were subjected to electrophoresis, and separated proteins were transferred onto PVDF membranes, which were then immunostained with the following primary antibodies against occludin (1:500, Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA), claudin-5 (1:500, Abcam, San Diego, CA), ZO-1(1:500, Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) and  $\beta$ -actin (1:5000, Sigma, St. Louis, MO). The membranes were incubated with peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibodies, and immunoreactive bands were visualized with an ECL system.

#### 2.6. Cerebrovascular oxidative stress assessment

Cerebrovascular oxidative stress was determined as described [17]. Isolated brain capillaries were incubated for 30 min in darkness in the presence of 10 mM dichlorofluorescein diacetate. Fluorescence intensity ( $\lambda$ exc 485 nm,  $\lambda$ em 530 nm) was read in a flexstation 3 microplate reader (molecular devices), normalized for protein concentration. SOD activity was measured using a spectrophotometric assay kit (Sigma–Aldrich) [17]. Level of HNE-protein adducts was measured by dot blot [22]. 1  $\mu$ g of protein was loaded on a nitrocellulose membrane, blocking with 5% milk, and probing with an anti-HNE antibody (1:1000, alpha-diagnostics, St. Louis, MO). The membranes were incubated with peroxidase-conjugated secondary antibodies, and immunoreactive bands were visualized with an ECL system.

# 2.7. Statistical analysis

All data in the text and figures are expressed as mean  $\pm$  SEM of at least three independent experiments [19,21]. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Dunnett's or Tukey–Kramer's post hoc tests was performed to compare groups. Mean values were considered significantly different at \*P < 0.05 or \*\*P < 0.01.

#### 3. Results

#### 3.1. PLTP deficiency increased BBB permeability

PLTP is highly expressed in cerebral vessels [8], we examined the impact of PLTP deficiency on BBB through multiphoton microscopy of TMR-dextran and transendothelial transport of Evans bluelabeled albumin.

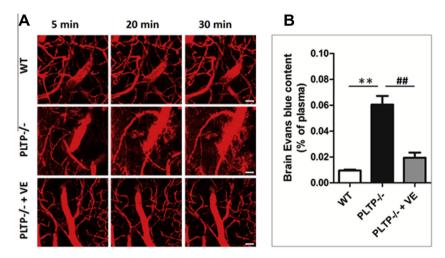
Multiphoton imaging revealed an in intact BBB in wild type (WT) mice, while considerable leakage of TMR-dextran into the brain parenchyma in PLTP deficient mice (Fig. 1A). Similarly, Evans blue assay revealed significantly greater leakage in PLTP deficient mice compared with WT littermates (P < 0.01, Fig. 1B). Both results suggested BBB integrity was impaired in PLTP deficient mice.

# 3.2. PLTP deficiency reduced occludin, claudin-5 and ZO-1 expression

Since the integrity of BBB is mainly mediated by the presence of tight junction, we next examined whether PLTP deficiency affects tight junction protein levels. We investigated expression of occludin, claudin-5 and ZO-1 in brain capillaries by Western blot. All the three proteins decreased significantly in PLTP deficient mice: level of occludin decreased by 56% (P < 0.01, Fig. 2C), claudin-5 expression decreased by 35% (P < 0.05, Fig. 2D), and ZO-1 expression decreased by 52% (P < 0.01, Fig. 2B) compared with WT, indicated that PLTP deficiency disturbed tight junction protein expression, which provided a molecular basis for BBB impairment.

# 3.3. PLTP deficiency increased cerebrovascular oxidative stress level

Lack of PLTP elevated oxidative stress in peripheral arteries and brain [4,17]. To confirm the impact of PLTP on cerebrovascular



**Fig. 1.** Increased BBB permeability in PLTP deficient mice. (A) In vivo time-lapse multiphoton imaging of TMR-dextran (MW = 40,000; red) leakage from cortical vessels in wild type (WT), PLTP-/-, and vitamin E supplemented PLTP-/- mice (PLTP-/- + VE). Typical profile with n = 6 mice per genotype. Scale bar, 20  $\mu$ m. (B) In vivo assessment of Evans blue dye extravasation. Evans blue (2%, 4 ml/kg) was injected intravenously into wild type (WT), PLTP-/-, and vitamin E supplemented PLTP-/- mice (PLTP-/- + VE) (n = 6) and allowed to circulate for 2 h. Brain dye content was then assessed spectrophotometrically and normalized to plasma levels. Data are means  $\pm$  SEM (\*\*P < 0.01 vs. WT; ##P < 0.01 vs. PLTP-/-). VE, vitamin E. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

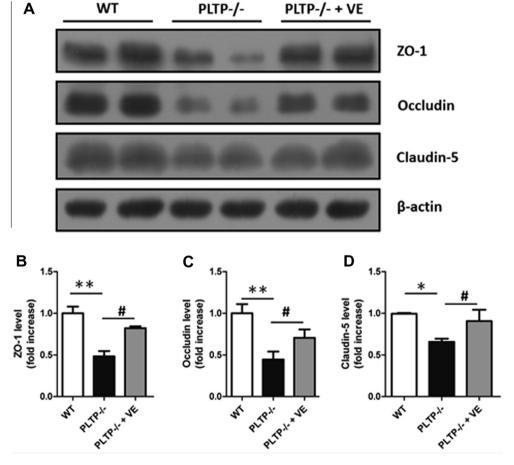
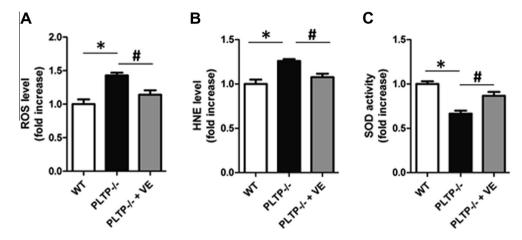


Fig. 2. Decreased expression of tight junction proteins in brain vessels of PLTP deficient mice. (A) Representative Western blots of the expression of ZO-1, occludin, and claudin-5 in brain vessels of wild type (WT), PLTP-/-, and vitamin E supplemented PLTP-/- mice (PLTP-/- + VE) (n = 6). β-Actin was used as a loading control. Quantitative analysis of the expression levels of ZO-1 (B), occludin (C), and claudin-5 (D). Data are means ± SEM (\*P < 0.05, \*\*P < 0.05 vs. PLTP-/-). VE, vitamin E.



**Fig. 3.** Increased ROS and HNE levels and decreased SOD activity in PLTP deficient mice. ROS level (A), HNE level (B) and SOD activity (C) in brain vessels of wild type (WT), PLTP-/-, and vitamin E supplemented PLTP-/- mice (PLTP-/- + VE) (n = 6). ROS level was measured with dichlorofluorescein diacetate assay, SOD activity was detected using a spectrophotometric assay kit, HNE level was determined with dot blot. Data are means  $\pm$  SEM (\*P < 0.05 vs. WT; \*P < 0.05 vs. PLTP-/-). VE, vitamin E.

oxidative stress, we demonstrated that in PLTP deficient mice, ROS level increased by 43% compared with WT mice (P < 0.05, Fig. 3A), lipid peroxidation marker HNE increased by 26% (P < 0.05, Fig. 3B), while SOD activity decreased by 34% compared with WT littermates (P < 0.05, Fig. 3C). Our results suggested that increased BBB permeability in PLTP deficient mice may be due to elevated oxidative stress at BBB.

# 3.4. PLTP deficiency induced cerebrovascular damage is reversed by vitamin E supplementation

PLTP mediates exchange of vitamin E from blood to endothelial cells, PLTP deficiency leads to vitamin E depletion, thus increases oxidative stress [4-6,17]. To demonstrate whether impaired BBB integrity in PLTP deficient mice is due to elevated oxidative stress, we fed PLTP deficient mice with vitamin E supplemented diet for 2 months [17,18], and examined effect of vitamin E supplementation on BBB permeability, tight junction expression and levels of oxidative stress markers. We first found that vitamin E supplementation significantly restored BBB integrity in both multiphoton microscopy of TMR-dextran (Fig. 1A) and Evans blue assay (Fig. 1B), as well as increased tight junction occludin, claudin-5 and ZO-1 (Fig. 2), probably through decreasing ROS and HNE, while increasing SOD activity (Fig. 3), indicated that impaired BBB integrity caused by elevated oxidative stress due to lack of vitamin E in PLTP deficient mice can be rescued by chronic vitamin E supplementation.

#### 4. Discussion

The current study was undertaken to investigate the role of PLTP in BBB integrity in vivo. We first found that PLTP deficient mice displayed leakage of both endogenous and exogenous macromolecules from blood to brain parenchyma, indicating that BBB integrity was impaired. Tight junction proteins have an indispensible role in maintaining BBB integrity [23], our results further showed that expression of the main tight junction proteins occludin, claudin-5 and ZO-1 decreased in brain vessels of PLTP deficient mice. Disruption of tight junction protein has been widely found in inflammation, ischemia and metabolism diseases, while oxidative stress is recognized as a hallmark of these neurological disorders [24,25]. PLTP deficient mice showed increased oxidative stress and decreased SOD activity in brain [17]. We also demonstrated that levels of ROS and lipid peroxidation marker HNE increased,

while SOD activity decreased in cerebral vessels of PLTP deficient mice, indicated that PLTP deficiency increased cerebrovascular oxidative stress, led to disturbed tight junction proteins expression and impaired BBB integrity.

How did PLTP deficiency induce increased oxidative stress and BBB impairment? PLTP is highly expressed cerebrovascular endothelial cells and involved in HDL biogenesis and remodeling at the BBB [8]. PLTP mediates transfer of many amphipathic compounds including α-tocopherol, phospholipids and unesterified cholesterol [1-3]. In vivo study has found that PLTP deficiency decreased level of α-tocopherol in mouse brain, but not contents of cholesterol, phosphatidylcholine, sphingomyelin or n-3/n-6 fatty acids ratio [17].  $\alpha$ -Tocopherol is the main isomer of antioxidant vitamin E. Lack of vitamin E in periphery vessels and brain due to PLTP deficiency increases levels of ROS, cholesterol oxides, and decreases SOD activity [4-6,17], which leads to impairment of endothelial function in periphery aorta [3,4] and increases vulnerability to toxic effect induced by  $A\beta_{25-35}$  [17]. It has been reported that chronic dietary supplementation of vitamin E can prevent Aβ<sub>25-35</sub> - induced memory deficits, reduced cerebral oxidative stress and toxicity in PLTP deficient mice [17]. In this study, our results also showed that vitamin E supplementation decreased oxidative stress in brain vessels, and restored tight junction proteins expression and BBB integrity, indicated that PLTP maintained BBB integrity by mediating transfer of vitamin E.

In summary, we demonstrated for the first time that PLTP deficiency increased BBB permeability and decreased tight junction expression by elevating cerebrovascular oxidative stress, provided a potential role of PLTP in maintaining BBB integrity.

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