Influence of water content of inspired air during and after exercise on induced bronchoconstriction

L-P. Boulet, H. Turcotte

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ABSTRACT: This study looked at the influence of inspired air water content on exercise-induced bronchoconstriction (EIB).

On separate days, 12 mild asthmatics (4M, 8F), aged 18–39 yrs (mean: 27 yrs), performed four six minute steady-state exercises on ergometer at 80% of their maximum workload. Exercises were randomized to the following inspired air conditions; dry air (0% relative humidity (RH)) during exercise followed by dry (DD) or humid air (100% RH) (DH) after exercise, humid air during exercise followed by dry (HD) or humid air (HH). Room temperature was kept constant (22±1°C) at all visits. Forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁) was measured before and every 5 min for 25 min after exercise.

Ventilation (V(E)) was not significantly different whether the exercise was done under dry or humid air. There was a residual bronchodilatation at the end of exercises performed in humid air, while at this time FEV₁ was already lower than baseline when exercise was done in dry air conditions. The maximal fall in FEV₁ is greater after those performed in dry air; DD (29±5.6%) and DH (30±5.8%) than in humid air; HD (12±4.9%) and HH (20±4.9%) (p<0.05). The time-course of recovery from bronchoconstriction was significantly improved when inhaling dry air after exercise. However, the difference found in the maximal % fall in FEV₁ after exercise when recovery was in dry compared to humid air did not achieve statistical significance.

In conclusion, EIB is influenced by the changes in water content during and after exercise. Bronchoconstriction following exercise is minimal if exercise is done in humid air and recovery in dry air, and maximal if the exercise is performed in dry air and recovery in humid air.


Most asthmatics develop a bronchoconstriction after exercise. This has been attributed to heat and water exchange required to condition the inspired air during exercise-induced hyperventilation [1, 2]. More recently, McFADDEN et al. [3] showed that inspired air conditions during recovery after exercise could also influence the magnitude of IH-induced bronchoconstriction (EIB). They showed that bronchoconstriction induced by exercise while breathing cold dry air was worse when warm humid air was inhaled during the recovery period, compared to when cold dry air was inhaled during recovery. They suggested that this resulted from a rapid warming of the airways, with reactive hyperaemia and possibly oedema.

The observations of MIHALYKA et al. [4] were in keeping with the latter observations. They showed that inspired air water content during the recovery from isocapnic hyperventilation (IH) was a major determinant of the magnitude of IH-induced bronchoconstriction: after hyperventilation in warm dry air, recovery in warm humid air induced a greater response than a recovery in warm dry air. They suggested that the condensation of water during recovery in humid air could have induced an airway hypoosmolarity, thus adding another stimulus to airway narrowing. This last study, however, explored neither the effects of inspired air conditions during recovery of an IH in humid air, nor the effect of exercise.

Although isocapnic hyperventilation is usually a good model of exercise-induced asthma, other factors may influence this response.

Furthermore, SMITH et al. [5] were unable to reproduce the observations of McFADDEN et al. [3]. They did not find an enhancement of EIB with rapid rewarming.

This study was done to determine the influence of acute changes in water content of inspired air during and immediately after exercise on the magnitude of EIB.
Table 1. — Subject characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Age yrs</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>FEV₁ / (% pred)</th>
<th>FVC / (% pred)</th>
<th>PC₂₀ / mg·mt⁻¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>1.87 (63.6)</td>
<td>2.75 (79.3)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.34 (109.5)</td>
<td>3.74 (103.3)</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.29 (121.0)</td>
<td>3.96 (80.8)</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2.60 (82.8)</td>
<td>3.29 (88.0)</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2.01 (65.0)</td>
<td>2.91 (79.5)</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.09 (81.7)</td>
<td>5.39 (115.4)</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>3.01 (103.9)</td>
<td>3.52 (102.6)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>4.03 (119.9)</td>
<td>4.28 (115.4)</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2.79 (87.2)</td>
<td>3.75 (94.0)</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>4.10 (100.0)</td>
<td>5.37 (105.3)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>3.23 (78.4)</td>
<td>4.71 (99.4)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>2.55 (84.7)</td>
<td>3.49 (98.3)</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean 26.9 SF, 4M 2.99 (91.4) 3.93 (96.8) 1.57

FEV₁: forced expiratory volume in one second; FVC: forced vital capacity; PC₂₀: provocation concentration of methacholine producing a 20% fall in FEV₁.

Methods

Subjects

We studied 12 mild asthmatics (4M, 8F), nonsmokers, aged 18 to 39 yrs (mean: 26.9 yrs) with exercise-induced asthma (table 1). Baseline provocation concentration producing a 20% fall in forced expiratory volume in one second (PC₂₀) ranged from 0.06–8.4 mg·ml⁻¹. Asthma was stable and controlled by a β₂-agonist on demand, added to inhaled beclomethasone in two (400 and 1,000 µg·day⁻¹) and budesonide (800 µg·day⁻¹) in one subject. None took cromoglycate, theophylline or oral corticosteroids. The study was approved by our local Ethics Committee and signed informed consent was obtained from the subjects.

Study design

Expiratory flows were measured with a PFT II Vitalograph spirometer. During and after exercise, the subjects breathed through a mouthpiece connected to an Otis-McKerrow respiratory valve (Collins cat. no 021023) (fig. 1). The inspiratory line was connected to a two-way valve allowing the delivery of either dry or humid air and a rapid change from one to the other without dry air or humid air contamination. Dry air (Canox) was humidified through a Mist0₂gen ultrasonic nebulizer containing a normal saline solution and adjusted to give saturated inspired air; no aerosol was inhaled directly. The osmolarity of the inspired air was measured at the mouthpiece on four occasions (mean: 320.5±19.0 mosm) and compared to the osmolarity of the normal saline.
solution (292.5±0.6 mosm). This trivial increase in salt concentration should not contribute to the fall in forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁) observed in humid air [6-8]. Dry air was inhaled from a 50 l meteorological balloon filled and continuously replenished during exercise and recovery to supply enough air for the whole study. Ventilation was measured on the expiratory branch with a Fleisch No. 3 pneumotachograph. Relative humidity of the inspired air was measured with an Omega RH-201 hygrometer, at the entry of the respiratory valve, during exercise and recovery periods. Temperature was also measured at the inspiratory port.

The subjects came to the laboratory on five different days within the period of one month. Before the tests, β-agonists were withheld for 8 h. At each visit, baseline FEV₁ had to be greater or equal to 60% of predicted or the test was postponed. On the first visit, subjects had a physical examination and an evaluation of the stability of their asthma. To determine the maximum workload, a progressive incremental exercise test was performed on ergometer according to the method described by Jones [9]. Airway responsiveness to methacholine was measured according to method described by Cockcroft et al. [10]. On the four other days, at the same time of the day, a six minute steady-state exercise was performed on ergometer at 80% of the maximum workload of each subject as determined on day 1. Room temperature and humidity were kept constant (22±1°C and 40±10%, respectively) at all visits. Before each test, subjects remained at room temperature and humidity for 30 min and baseline FEV₁ was measured. Before each exercise, FEV₁ was obtained after breathing in the circuit for 5 min. FEV₁ was measured immediately and 1, 3, 5,
7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 20 and 25 min after exercise. For these measurements, subjects inspired through the breathing circuit, expired in the spirometer’s mouthpiece and then immediately returned to the breathing circuit. Exercises were randomized to the following inspired air conditions: dry air (0% RH) during exercise followed by dry air (DD) or humid air (DH) (100% RH) during recovery, humid air during exercise followed by dry (HD) or humid air (HH) after exercise.

Statistical analysis

Baseline FEV₁ on the four study days were compared by analysis of variance. For each subject, pre-exercise and baseline FEV₁ were compared using paired t-test. The % fall in FEV₁ from 1 to 25 min after exercise were compared by analysis of variance. A Student-Newman-Keuls test (SNK) was performed to identify differences between groups. Results are expressed as mean±SEM. The global means of the four curves were compared using the GLM procedure of a SAS statistical package with group and subject as class and the polynomial model FEV₁ = time time² class group [11].

Results

Baseline FEV₁ was ±60% predicted in all subjects and was not significantly different between the study days (HH: 2.99±0.19 l, 91±5.0%; HD: 3.14±0.19 l, 96±4.9%; DD: 3.08±0.20 l, 94±5.4%; DH: 3.14±0.19 l, 96±4.8%; p>0.05, analysis of variance (ANOVA)).

Inspired air temperature was stable (±1°C) during the study; humidity rapidly reached 0 or 100% and then remained stable. Baseline FEV₁ was not significantly different on the four study days. The mean fall in pre-exercise FEV₁, from baseline was 2.3±1.6% (HH: 3.4±1.9%, HD: 3.8±1.3%, DD: 1.2±1.8%, DH: 0.9±1.2%). The fall in FEV₁ measured after 5 min breathing dry or humid air immediately before exercise was not significantly different between the groups inhaled dry or humid air (p=0.11, paired t-test). Minute ventilation (VE) during exercise was not significantly different whether the exercise was done with dry or humid air (52.0±3.0 vs 50.0±6.6 l·min⁻¹).

Immediately after exercise, subjects who exercised in humid air showed residual bronchodilatation, while at this time those who exercised in dry air conditions had already started to bronchoconstrict (fig. 2).

The maximal % fall in FEV₁ following exercises performed in dry air was significantly greater than when exercising in humid air (mean maximal fall in FEV₁±SEM): HD: 12.3±4.9%, HH: 19.8±4.9%, DD: 28.6±5.6% and DH: 30.0±5.8%; SNK (p<0.05).

No significant difference was found in the maximal % fall in FEV₁ when recovery was in dry compared to humid air: HH and HD (p>0.05), DH and DD (p<0.05).

The time-course of post-exercise FEV₁ for the four inspired air conditions is illustrated in figure 3. Significant differences between the four study days were found only when comparing FEV₁ at the same time post-challenge. Bronchoconstriction was minimal on HD day; it was of larger magnitude on HH day, but significantly different from HD only at 9 min. On DD day,

Fig. 3. - Time-course of the fall in FEV₁ and recovery for the four inspired air conditions. Exercises performed in dry air induced more bronchoconstriction than those performed in humid air. The fall in FEV₁ was less when the recovery occurred in dry air, whether the exercise was done in dry or humid air. (10->, 11->: from this point, mean of only 10 or 11 subjects). FEV₁: forced expiratory volume in one second. - - - - : dry humid (DH); — — — : dry dry (DD); — — — — : humid humid (HH); — — — — : humid dry (HD).
brachonconstriction was greater than on day HH, but the
difference was significantly different only at 3 min. The
maximal fall in FEV, was observed after DH air condi-
tions. This was significantly different from DD day only
at 7 min (SNK: p<0.05).

The global means of the four curves were, however,
significantly different (HH: -10.46, HD: -5.64, DD:
-14.12 and DH: -19.47, SNK: p<0.05), suggesting a
difference between each of the four groups for the time-
course of recovery. Recovery from bronchospasm was
improved when inhaling dry air, whether the exercise
was done in dry or humid air (fig. 4A). The worst
condition was to exercise in dry air and recover in
humid air, while the best was to exercise in humid air and
recover in dry air (fig. 4B).

Discussion

This study shows that in asthmatics, changes in water
content of inspired air during exercise and recovery from
exercise modify the magnitude of exercise-induced bronchospasm. Bronchospasm was maximal if the effort
was performed breathing dry air and recovery breathing humid air. Moreover, although the difference
was not significant at each time point of the curves, the
time-course of recovery was altered by the conditions of
the air breathed during recovery, the recovery being
slower in humid air.

McFadden et al. [3] have suggested that vasconstric-
tion of the bronchial circulation is induced by exercise in
cold air and that the vasoconstriction is followed by a
post-exercise hyperaemia. A rapid rewarming of the
airways, amplified if warm air is inhaled during the
recovery, could then contribute to EIB. There is, however,
evidence that vasodilatation occurs during airway
cooling and drying, suggesting that these other factors
may also be involved [12, 13].

Stimulus for EIB is perhaps more related to
hyperosmolarity of airway secretions due to water loss
than to heat loss [14-17]. Inhalation of hyperosmolar
saline can induce a bronchospasm which correlates
well with the degree of response to exercise [6]. The
present study shows that airway obstruction is worse when
exercise is conducted in dry air. This may be due to an
increased airway hyperosmolarity following exercise-
duced hyperventilation. The total water loss may in-
crease when inhaling dry air during exercise. This may
explain why subjects had already begun to
bronchoconstrict immediately after the end of exercise,
while most of those inhaling humid air during the
exercise were still in their bronchodilatation phase.

Our results, showing a worsening of EIB when
recovery is in humid air, are in keeping with the report
from Mihalyka et al. [4] and suggest that water gradient
is a major determinant of the airway response to
exercise. Mihalyka et al. suggested that condensation
of water on a cool airway may lower osmolarity and that
this hypoosmolarity of airway fluid may act as an
additional stimulus to airway narrowing. An increase in
mucus secretion could also be part of the explanation.

Since bronchoconstriction was minimal when subjects
inhaled dry air after exercising in humid air, the increase
in EIB when humid air is inhaled after an exercise in dry
air does not seem to be due to the humidity "gradient"
per se or to the acute change in airway osmolarity. This
is in keeping with the data of McFadden et al. suggesting
that factors that increase the speed of rewarming or
reduce the heat and water loss during recovery from
exercise increase EIB.

Humidification of the airways during exercise protects
against the effects of dry air inhaled in the recovery period.
The mechanism involved in this protective effect may
simply be a reduction in water loss from the airways.

These observations have clinical implications as
changes in inspired air humidity conditions during and

![Figure 4](image-url)
after exercise may influence the degree of EIB. If an asthmatic performs an exercise outdoors when the air is cold and dry then recovers indoors in hot and humid air, EIB may be worse than if he recovers outdoors. Clinical observations, such as those reporting that exercise-induced asthma is often less severe in a dry and cool rather than in a warmer and more humid environment are in keeping with our results [18].

In conclusion, EIB is influenced by the changes in water content during and after exercise. Bronchoconstriction following exercise is greater if the exercise is performed in dry air and this effect is worsened by recovery in humid air.

References


In conclusion, the bronchospasm induced by the effort is influenced by the modifications of the content in eau of l'air inspiré pendant et après l'effort. La bronchoconstriction après l'effort est maximale quand l'effort est exécuté dans l'air humide et la récupération assurée sous air sec. Par contre, elle est maximale quand l'effort est exécuté dans l'air sec et la récupération dans l'air humide.