Investigation of Gastric Emptying Disorders in Patients with Functional Dyspepsia Reveals Impaired Inhibitory Gastric Emptying Regulation in the Early Postcibal Period

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**Key Words**
Accelerated gastric emptying • Impaired inhibitory gastric regulation • Intestinal overload • $^{13}$C breath test

**Abstract**

**Background/Aims:** The aim of the study was to investigate gastric emptying profiles in patients with postprandial distress syndrome (PDS) as a means to understand relationships between gastric emptying and dyspepsia. **Methods:** Gastric emptying times were measured using a $^{13}$C breath test. In addition to comparisons of $^{13}$C half excretion times ($t_{1/2}$ ex) between patients with PDS and healthy subjects, gastric emptying ($\%$dose/h) curves were analyzed using a multipeak curve-fitting technique, and fitted curves were differentiated to measure the slope of curves for each time point. **Results:** (1) During the early postcibal period, the slope of $\%$dose/h curves in 27\% of patients with PDS was larger than the average slope derived from healthy subjects. The $t_{1/2}$ ex was also higher in these patients relative to healthy subjects. (2) During the midpostcibal period, the slope of $\%$dose/h curves in 36\% of PDS patients was larger than the average slope derived from healthy subjects. There was a trend toward lower $t_{1/2}$ ex values for these patients relative to control subjects. (3) When $t_{1/2}$ ex was calculated overall, however, there was no significant difference between healthy subjects and patients with PDS. **Conclusion:** Our findings document abnormal gastric outflow in patients with PDS. In some patients, there appears to be a significant correspondence between PDS-related dyspepsia and accelerated gastric emptying in the early postcibal period, whereas other patients showed a similar correspondence between dyspepsia and impaired inhibitory gastric emptying regulation in the midpostcibal period.

**Introduction**

Although a better understanding of gastric emptying and motility was achieved during investigations of the pathogenesis of nonulcer dyspepsia or functional dyspepsia (FD) [1–7], the relationship between dyspepsia symptoms and abnormal gastric emptying remains poorly understood.

‘Delayed gastric emptying’ was initially assumed to be the main etiology of symptoms in FD. However, mandatory acceleration of delayed gastric emptying by prokinetic agents has been shown to have little efficacy in improving dyspepsia in patients with FD [8]. This finding influenced research in functional gastrointestinal disorders greatly, providing an important clue that questioned...
the physiological mechanism behind delayed gastric emptying and leading to the hypothesis that delayed emptying occurred in response to other disorders in the gastrointestinal regulatory system.

Many clinical studies involving measurements of gastric emptying use half emptying time (t 1/2) as a parameter for evaluating gastric function, despite the fact that identical t 1/2 values may not necessarily correspond to the same extent of gastric emptying. Single-point parameters such as t 1/2 are limited in that they cannot depict dynamic changes in gastric emptying. The aim of this study was to measure changes in gastric emptying velocity continuously in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of gastric emptying dynamics in healthy adults as well as in patients with postprandial distress syndrome (PDS).

**Subjects and Methods**

**Subjects**

Twenty-three healthy volunteers and 11 patients with PDS, but without *Helicobacter pylori* infection, were recruited. The following inclusion criteria were applied: (1) no previous abdominal surgery (except appendectomy), (2) no regular medications and (3) no intake of medications during the previous week that could alter gastrointestinal motor function.

**Experimental Protocol**

All examinations were performed after an overnight fast (the subjects could drink water freely until 30 min before examination). All subjects ingested the test meal within the first 3 min of the examination and then lay in a supine position during the examination. The Institutional Review Board of the Gunma University Graduate School of Medicine approved the study protocol and all subjects gave written informed consent.

**Test Meals**

The liquid test meal (400 kcal in 400 ml K3-S; Kewpie Corporation, Tokyo, Japan), consisting of 64.4% carbohydrate, 17.6% fat and 18% protein, was labeled with 100 mg 13C sodium acetate (Cambridge Isotope Laboratories Inc., Cambridge, Mass., USA).

**Measurement of Gastric Emptying**

A continuous 13C breath test (Breath ID System; Exalenz Bioscience Ltd., Modiin, Israel) was performed. Breath samples were obtained automatically and continuously through an exclusive nasal cannula for 4 h after ingestion of the test meal. The total number of breaths sampled ranged between 90 and 100.

**Data Analysis**

Gastric emptying was evaluated from half excretion time (t 1/2 ex; reflecting t 1/2) as defined by Ghoos and coworkers [9–11]. In addition, slopes of gastric emptying curves (%dose/h curve) were also determined. To analyze gastric emptying profiles, %dose/h curves were analyzed by fitting data to a curve using nonlinear regression analysis (Gauss-Newton method) [12–16]. The fitted curves were derived from the sum of 2 or more Gaussian components. Convergence to a curve was judged as fit when the percentage of change of the residual sum of squares was less than 0.01% and the value of the residual sum of squares was less than 15.00. Differentiation was used to calculate the slope of each curve at each time point. Analyses were performed using Igor Pro, version 4.09J (WaveMetrics Inc., Lake Oswego, Oreg., USA).

**Statistical Analysis**

Results were expressed as means ± SD. Student t tests were performed to compare means, and statistical significance was defined by a p value <0.05.

**Results**

**Three PDS Cases Demonstrated Accelerated Gastric Emptying during the Early Postcibal Period**

In 3 of 11 patients (27%), the slope of the %dose/h curve was greater than the mean slope value (+ 1 SD) for 23 healthy subjects (19.79 ± 7.15) during the early postcibal period (table 1). Figure 2 shows the gastric emptying profiles of these 3 PDS patients, who all demonstrated %dose/h curves that ascended steeply relative to healthy
subjects (open circles; fig. 2a). The $t_{1/2}$ ex in 2 of these 3 patients was greater than the average of healthy subjects in the very early postcibal period. Interestingly, the slopes of the curves in these 3 patients were lower than healthy subjects in the subsequent period. 

**Fig. 2.** Abnormal gastric emptying profiles in PDS during the early postcibal period. 

- **a** Rapid gastric emptying. Each PDS patient’s %dose/h curve ascended more steeply than the average of healthy subjects in the very early postcibal period. Interestingly, the slopes of the curves in these 3 patients were lower than healthy subjects in the subsequent period.
- **b** Differentiated value (slope) of %dose/h curves. In 3 patients with PDS, the slopes of differentiated curves remained higher than healthy subjects in the very early postcibal period, and then appeared to shift in a downward direction relative to healthy subjects.

Four PDS Cases Demonstrated Accelerated Gastric Emptying during the Midpostcibal Period

The gastric emptying profiles of 4 patients with PDS (36%) are shown in figure 3a. Relative to the %dose/h average during the first 15 min of the experiment, showed a significant dip below the average slope of healthy subjects (open circles) immediately thereafter (approximately 30 min).

**Fig. 3.** Abnormal gastric emptying profiles in PDS during the midpostcibal period. 

- **a** Rapid gastric emptying. The slopes of %dose/h curves in 4 PDS patients were greater than those of healthy subjects during the midpostcibal period.
- **b** Differentiated value (slope) of %dose/h curves. In 4 patients with PDS, the differentiated curves remained higher at the beginning of the midpostcibal period relative to healthy subjects.
curves of healthy subjects (open circles), the curves for these 4 patients were somewhat elevated in the midpostcibal period. The slope of the %dose/h curve in each of these 4 patients was greater than the average slope (+1 SD) of healthy subjects (4.68 ± 2.52; table 1), whereas the t 1/2 ex for 3 of these 4 patients was smaller than the average (–2 SD) t 1/2 ex in healthy subjects (3.70 ± 0.63 h; table 1).

These results suggest that accelerated gastric emptying specifically during the midpostcibal period occurred in a portion of PDS patients. Differences in slope are shown in figure 3b. At the beginning of the midpostcibal period, the differentiated %dose/h curves (slope of %dose/h curves) for healthy subjects (open circles) shifted downward gradually, indicating a decrease in the rate of gastric emptying; in contrast, the slopes of these curves remained elevated in the 4 patients with PDS. These results provide evidence for impaired inhibitory gastric regulation in the midpostcibal period.

**Discussion**

The physiological role of gastric accommodation, which may relate to the symptoms of patients with FD, has been a recent focus of research attention [17–20].

Despite the dynamic changes observed in the %dose/h curves described above, there was no significant difference between mean t 1/2 ex values for 11 patients with FD (3.47 ± 1.66 h) relative to 23 healthy subjects (3.70 ± 0.63). This result indicates that, relative to multipoint dynamic analyses, comparisons of single-parameter measures of gastric emptying (t 1/2 ex) are more limited in their sensitivity of detecting altered patterns of emptying.

### Table 1. The slope of %dose/h curves and gastric emptying

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Early postcibal period</th>
<th>Midpostcibal period</th>
<th>t 1/2 ex, h</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy subjects (n = 23)</td>
<td>19.79 ± 7.15</td>
<td>4.68 ± 2.52</td>
<td>3.70 ± 0.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid GE in the early postcibal period</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Case 1</td>
<td>27.19 (&gt;19.79+7.15)</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>7.12&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 2</td>
<td>34.19 (&gt;19.79+7.15)</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 3</td>
<td>52.78 (&gt;19.79+7.15)</td>
<td>-0.49</td>
<td>26.64&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid GE in the midpostcibal period</td>
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<tr>
<td>Case 1</td>
<td>14.42</td>
<td>10.01 (&gt;4.68+2.52)</td>
<td>2.12&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 2</td>
<td>22.98</td>
<td>8.34 (&gt;4.68+2.52)</td>
<td>2.15&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 3</td>
<td>23.06</td>
<td>9.25 (&gt;4.68+2.52)</td>
<td>2.12&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case 4</td>
<td>20.12</td>
<td>9.56 (&gt;4.68+2.52)</td>
<td>2.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GE = Gastric emptying.

<sup>a</sup> Above healthy subject average + 2 SD, <sup>b</sup> Below healthy subject average – 2 SD.
osmotic changes in chyme may be particularly important in regulating rapid emptying of liquids during the very early postcibal period, before other regulatory mechanisms are fully operational [21].

The inhibitory effect of nutrients in the duodenum on gastric emptying can be long lasting [22]. It has been suggested that impaired gastric accommodation, or antrpyloro dysmotility, in patients with PDS relates to excessive gastric outflow in the very early postcibal period, which then results in delayed gastric emptying. Accelerated gastric emptying in the early postprandial period has also been reported by Kindt et al. [23]. Thus, it appears that delayed gastric emptying may be induced not only by gastric dysmotility, but also by too rapid gastric emptying in the very early postcibal period.

The other subgroup of PDS patients showed rapid gastric emptying during the midpostcibal period. Since undiluted gastric contents have a composition that is poorly tolerated by the duodenum, inhibitory regulation of gastric emptying is necessary during this period to adjust for differences in the intraluminal milieu of the small intestine versus that of the stomach. Regulation of gastric emptying compensates for minute-to-minute variations in the volume, composition and physical state of the duodenum.

Although rapid gastric emptying in patients with FD has not previously been a focus of attention, analyses of abnormal gastric emptying profiles during each postcibal period are necessary to elucidate relationships between gastric emptying and dyspepsia. Orderly delivery of gastric chyme to the duodenum at a rate that does not cause overload is essential for maximizing the digestive and absorptive functions of the small intestine. When calorie overload does occur in the intestine, symptoms similar to those during dumping syndrome result.

Previous studies investigating the effect of prokinetic agents on dyspeptic symptoms associated with delayed gastric emptying reported the inefficacy of such medications [8, 24, 25]. One reason for these results may be that dyspeptic symptoms are the direct result of abnormal gastric emptying or gastric dysmotility, and not impaired regulation of gastric emptying. In other words, whereas no dyspeptic symptoms occur during the process of digestion and absorption during normal gastric emptying, dyspeptic symptoms result when the stomach and intestine cannot adequately adapt to various external stimuli, including certain nutrients, food intake per se or psychological stress.

According to Rome III diagnosis criteria, epigastric pain syndrome is closely related to gastric acid [26, 27].

Epigastric pain syndrome symptoms, which include unrecognized gastroesophageal reflux disease, but not meal-related symptoms, have been shown to respond to proton pump inhibitors. In contrast, the wide variety of pathological problems involved with dyspepsia in PDS has promoted controversy in determining effective therapeutics for PDS. Because an effective response to acid inhibitors eliminates the etiology of dyspepsia caused by gastric acid, preliminary administration of these agents can clarify the etiology of PDS. We therefore propose a two-step therapeutic path for treatment of FD as follows: (1) administer an acid inhibitor to evaluate the influence of gastric acid and (2) if the acid inhibitor is not efficacious, investigate the gastric emptying profile for abnormalities. On-demand administration of prokinetics or anticholinergic drugs should be tried for adjusting the delivery of gastric chyme to an optimal rate for the small intestine.

In conclusion, this report presents data identifying abnormal gastric emptying profiles by detailed analysis of the slope of %dose/h curves in patients with PDS. These data suggest that some patients with PDS may be impaired in orderly delivery of gastric chyme to the duodenum and that such disorders could lead to dyspeptic symptoms.

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Disclosure Statement

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