Effect of Cold Stimulation Induced Pain on Galvanic Skin Response in Medical Undergraduates of Kathmandu University School of Medical Sciences (KUSMS)

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ABSTRACT

Background: Pain, a complex neurophysiological process is known to elicit sympathetic responses which are monitored by measuring galvanic response of the skin. Galvanic skin response (GSR) is a change in potential recorded from the surface of the skin and represents pseudomotor activity.

Objectives: To evaluate the changes in skin conductance during the pain induced by cold stimulation.

Methods: Our study was an experimental study with the sample size of 40 including 20 males and 20 females from medical undergraduate students. Acute pain was induced by cold pressor test (immersion of hand in cold water at 4°C). Changes in GSR were recorded by the AD instrument. Statistical analysis was done by using Paired “t” test.

Results: Results showed that skin conductance was significantly increased (P<0.05) from 4.24±2.53 microSiemens to 5.36±2.7 microSiemens in male and from 3.44±1.52 microSiemens to 4.26±1.6 microSiemens in female during cold pressor test. Immersion of hand in ice-water stimulates nociceptors, which in turn may produce a reflex via the central nervous system.

Conclusions: Our GSR findings point towards autonomic adjustments suggesting more of sympathetic over activity during cold induced acute pain.

Key words: Cold pressor test, galvanic skin response, pain

Introduction

Cold pressor test typically involves immersion of a participant’s dominant hand in ice cold water for period of time. Immersion of limb in cold water has long been known to induce pain. [1] The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) defines pain as an “unpleasant sensory and emotional experience, associated with actual or potential tissue damage.” [2] Pain is known to influence the sympathetic nervous system that is monitored by measuring galvanic response of the skin. Galvanic skin response (GSR) is defined as the changes in the electrical properties of a person’s skin and can be used to measure emotional and sympathetic response by means of the activity of sweat glands. [3] When a painful stimulus (eg. Cold pressor test) is applied to an individual; pain elicits a sympathetic response by increasing sweat gland activity that increases skin conductance. Therefore, a transient increase in skin conductance is proportional to sweat secretion and these physiological changes can be measured as galvanic skin response (GSR). [4] Cold stimulation increases the skin conductance thus, it is a good indicator of acute pain. [4] The study conducted by Harrison [5] showed during the heel lance procedure, skin conductance activity significantly increased upon lance and
remained elevated following completion of the procedure. The skin conductance peak is specific to the stimulus that induces the response and is evident within one to two seconds after stimulation. [6] Ledowski et al [7] assessed postoperative pain by monitoring skin conductance and showed sympathetic activity measured as skin conductance per second is positively correlated with subjective pain intensity evaluated by numeric rating scale among postoperative patients in the recovery room.

As pain is always subjective, therefore difficult to measure but is an important aspect of clinical medical care. Several rating tools (e.g. the visual analog score) have therefore been developed in an attempt to quantify this experience. [8] When patients cannot verbally communicate the pain as in infant, small children, unconscious or delirious patients; a fast reacting, objective, sensitive, specific method to monitor pain is needed. [7] Thus the main objective of the present study is to quantify the changes in skin conductance during the pain induced by cold stimulation.

METHODS

This is an experimental study done in Department of Physiology of Kathmandu University School of Medical Sciences, Chaukot during the period of one year from October 2015 to September 2016. Forty healthy medical undergraduates including twenty males and twenty females, aged between 18-24 years, were selected by random sampling method. Subjects having symptom of pain and those taking analgesic were excluded from the study. The protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Committee of Kathmandu University School of Medical Sciences/Dhulikhel Hospital (IRC-KUSMS) at 20th March 2016. All participants provided a written informed consent before any study related procedure was performed.

Each subject was called individually to departmental research lab, asked to sit on the chair comfortably and relax for five minutes. Meantime electrodes of galvanoscope were wrapped around last two phalanges of index and middle finger of right hand and the baseline galvanic skin response (GSR) was recorded for one minute, called skin conductance level (SCL) by AD instrument. Acute pain was induced by cold pressor test (immersion of palm in cold water at 4°C) and the GSR was recorded till the pain was perceived, called skin conductance response. Immediately after removal of hand, GSR was recorded again for one minute.

The data of galvanic skin response thus obtained were exported to Microsoft Excel and then to Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for further analysis. Results were analyzed by paired t test. In all tests performed, p value <0.05 was considered to be significant.

RESULTS

Forty healthy subjects, twenty males and twenty females with a mean age of 21.4 years and 20 years, mean height 1.73 meter and 1.55 meter, mean weight 66.9 kg and 50.2 kg respectively were enrolled in the present study. The demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>p-value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age(yrs)</td>
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<td>21.4±1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>20±1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height(meter)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1.73±0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1.55±0.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weight(kg)</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>66.9±12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>50.2±5.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22.38±4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21.19±4.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Skin conductance: Before, during the cold stimulation, and after the cessation of cold stimulation in male subjects.

In male, the mean value of the skin conductance was 4.24±2.53 microSiemens before the cold stimulation, which increase
significantly during cold stimulation to 5.36±2.7 microSiemens (p<0.05). The skin conductance returned to a near baseline value of 3.99 microSiemens, till one minute after cessation of cold stimuli (figure 1).

In female, the mean value of the skin conductance was 3.44 ± 1.52 microSiemens before the cold stimulation, which increase significantly during cold stimulation to 4.26 ± 1.6 microSiemens (p<0.05). The skin conductance returned to a near baseline value of 3.82 microSiemens, at one minute after cessation of cold stimulation (figure 2).

**DISCUSSION**

In the present study we have recorded skin conductance during pain induced by cold stimulation in healthy subjects. As pain is always subjective, objective pain measuring tool is needed for special situation like those who can’t communicate verbally (infant and children), those who are in coma, delirium. Many studies \[7,9\] observed that there is a strong relationship between postoperative pain and the skin conductance.

In our study skin conductance response was significantly increased in both male and female during pain induced by cold pressor test. Similar result was obtained by many studies. \[4,10-14\] When we terminate the pain stimulus, the skin conductance levels come back close to baseline, which was in accordance with the study conducted by Strom \[6\] and Khambam. \[4\] Each time the skin nerves are activated, the palmar and plantar sweat glands fill. This leads to a diminished skin resistance and the skin conductance increases before the sweat is reabsorbed and skin conductance again decreases. \[13\]

Stress is a condition that puts mind in a state of fear or anxiety. Stress such as pain is known to influence skin conductance. \[15\] Galvanic skin response is a result of polysynaptic reflex arch activation. The efferent part of the reflex consists of myelinated sympathetic fibers that originates from interomediolateral horn of thoracolumbar (T1 – L2) segments of spinal cord and terminates on paravertebral ganglia. Post ganglionic fibers are non myelinated and innervates the eccrine sweat glands. The central part of the reflex arc is not fully understood yet. It is presumably polysynaptic with a connection to a structure of hypothalamus, ventrolateral part of the brainstem, medial and basal part of the frontal lobe and medial part of the temporal lobe. The afferent tract of the reflex arch depends on stimulus modality. \[16\]

Any kind of stress including pain is known to influence sweat production. \[10\] The sweat ducts behaves like a resistors, as they filled with sweat, their resistance lowers and conductance increases. The amplitude of the conductance depends on the amount of sweat delivered to the ducts and on the number of sweat glands which are activated. This activation is controlled by the brain via the sympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system. Human sweat glands receive signals primarily from sympathetic cholinergic fibers that use the neurotransmitter, acetylcholine. Thus the pain induced by cold pressor stimulates sympathetic nerves which increases sweat production that decreases the resistance and increases conductance before the sweat is reabsorbed. \[17\] Changes in skin conductance may therefore be a sensitive and specific tool for predicting pain intensity.

**CONCLUSION**

Our GSR findings pointed towards autonomic adjustments suggesting more of
sympathetic over activity during cold induced acute pain. Thus the evaluation of skin conductance during cold stimulation pain in healthy subjects can be used as a simple and sensitive method for detecting pain and nociceptive stimulation.

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REFERENCES