Recent Advances in Mitochondrial Research

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Mitochondria are fundamental regulators of life and death. Not surprisingly, their role in the cardiovascular system is an intense area of research, with many important advances in the field published recently. Such articles have continued to enhance our appreciation of the importance of mitochondria in cardiovascular health and have further contributed to the idea that mitochondrial dysfunction is a sine qua non of cardiovascular disease (CVD).

An old question addressed anew relates to mitochondrial form. How do the shapes of mitochondria regulate their function? Do conditions associated with CVD alter mitochondrial dynamics? And does mitochondrial structure impact CVD? If so, how? For the past 2 years, there has been remarkable progress addressing these questions. Essential regulators of mitochondrial fission and fusion such as mitofusins 1 and 2 (Mfn 1/2), dynamin-related protein 1, and optic atrophy 1 are proving essential for postnatal metabolic remodeling in the heart.8 and cardiomyocyte differentiation.9 Other regulators of mitochondrial fusion such as optic atrophy 1 have also been found to be critical for maintenance of cardiac function.10 From a therapeutic angle, inhibition of mitochondrial fission has the potential to become a viable option to prevent cardiac dysfunction following myocardial infarction.11

Mitochondrial dynamics is a central regulator of vascular health as well. In smooth muscle, mitochondrial fission (via dynamin-related protein 1) was shown to be obligatory in the closure of the ductus arteriosus,12 which is required for the transition from the fetal to the neonatal pattern of circulation. Hence, the physiological changes in circulation occurring on first breath hinge on the structure of mitochondria! Mitochondrial fission, however, may be a double-edged sword in smooth muscle. It promotes a hyperproliferative phenotype that could be deleterious in the context of diseases such as pulmonary artery hypertension.13,14 Furthermore, diabetes mellitus and hyperglycemia elevate the expression of fission-1 protein and dynamin-related protein 1, resulting in mitochondrial fragmentation.15 Similar to smooth muscle cells, mitochondrial fragmentation in endothelial cells is associated with a hyperproliferative phenotype, which generates higher levels of reactive oxygen species and is prone to senescence. Silencing of profission proteins restores mitochondrial networks and diminishes reactive oxygen species production while increasing the activation state of NO synthase,15 the latter of which could have a direct role in adaptive mitochondrial dynamics.16

In healthy endothelium, regulatory proteins such as uncoupling protein 2 seem to be integrated with profission responses to protect endothelial cells from the damaging reactive oxygen species and p53 activation associated with the fragmented mitochondrial phenotype.17,18 Such changes in mitochondrial structure are known to be intricately linked with their removal via mitophagy,19 which seems to be essential for eliminating damaged mitochondria and preserving bioenergetic function.20 Should damaged mitochondria fail to be removed, then cell death via necrosis or...
Recent studies have shed further light into how the mitochondria regulate cell death and which specific pathways are activated by mitochondrial signaling. For example, loss of myeloid cell leukemia-1, an antiapoptotic B-cell lymphoma-2 protein, was found in 2 independent studies to impair mitochondrial respiration and lead to heart failure. Results from the past 2 years have also imparted novel insights into the roles of Ca²⁺/calmodulin-dependent protein kinase II, G protein–coupled receptor kinase 2, and mitochondrial signal transducer and activator of transcription 3 in myocardial cell death and mitochondrial stress in the heart. New advances were also made with respect to the well-studied protein targets, p53 and cyclophilin D: p53 was shown to bind to cyclophilin D, resulting in mitochondrial permeability transition pore–dependent necrosis. Although cyclophilin D is best known as a regulator of the mitochondrial permeability transition pore, studies also suggest that it modulates branched chain amino acid, pyruvate, and fatty acid metabolism, which was could be related to its putative role in regulating the mitochondrial acetylation. Interestingly, mitochondrial protein acetylation has also been suggested to play an important role in initiating mitophagy. Although there is still much to learn about cell death and the role of post-translational modifications such as protein acetylation, it is becoming increasingly clear that both cell death pathways and protein acetylation are regulated by pyridine nucleotides. Nicotine adenine dinucleotides (NAD⁺/NADH) and their phosphorylated forms (NADP⁺/NADPH) are known to play central roles in energy production, ion channel regulation, and antioxidant defense in cardiovascular tissues. Recent studies have revealed that they regulate the Na⁺/Ca²⁺ exchanger to modulate Ca²⁺ homeostasis in cardiac myocytes, and a cytosolic form of the NAD⁺-utilizing enzyme aldehyde dehydrogenase 2 (initially thought to be localized only in mitochondria) was shown to be important in the bioactivation of nitroglycerin. The NAD⁺/NADH ratio also impacts the activity of the sirtuin family of protein deacetylases, and this ratio is regulated by circadian rhythms. Interestingly, circadian control of NAD⁺-dependent sirtuin 3 was shown to generate cadence in the acetylation of oxidative enzymes in mitochondria, linking respiratory activity with daily cycles of fasting and feeding. Moreover, diminishing complex I–supported mitochondrial respiration in the heart results in heightened NADH levels, elevated levels of protein acetylation, sensitization of mitochondria to permeability transition pore opening, and accelerated heart failure. A deeper understanding of how pyridine nucleotides regulate energy metabolism could aid in the development of novel therapies for CVD.

Recent work has also provided fresh insights into mechanisms underlying the salubrious effects of practical therapies such as caloric restriction and exercise. Caloric restriction is well known to diminish symptoms of cardiovascular aging and increase longevity, in part attributable to its ability to regulate not only sirtuin deacetylase activity, but mitophagy and peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma, coactivator 1 alpha-mediated processes as well. During caloric restriction, deacetylation of specific subunits of the electron transport chain was shown to be protective against ischemic stress. Exercise functions as a calorie restriction mimetic of sorts and is one of the most robust activators of PGC1. Consistent with the idea that stimulation of PGC1 activity could prevent cardiovascular decline because of stress or aging, PGC1β was demonstrated to maintain mitochondrial function following pressure overload and to prevent oxidative stress. Mitochondrial oxidative stress, in particular, could oxidize mitochondrial DNA, which is important in the fibrotic response that occurs after aortic constriction. Exercise may be important in preventing such mitochondrial changes: it was shown to prevent mitochondrial DNA depletion and mutations, increase oxidative capacity, and promote healthy aging as well as attenuate doxorubicin-mediated cardiac injury. A plausible idea concerning aging is that mitochondrial function and antioxidant capacity become mismatched over time, resulting in mitochondrial-mediated oxidative stress, bioenergetic dysfunction, and cell death. This is supported by the fact that deletion of the regulator of mitochondrial biogenetic programming PGC1α can increase mitochondrial reactive oxygen species production leading to vascular dysfunction and inflammation and that aerobic stiffening and cardiac deterioration occur in mice expressing lower levels of the mitochondrial form of superoxide dismutase (superoxide dismutase 2). How exercise may balance mitochondrial activity levels with antioxidant capacity and delineating approaches to increase exercise capacity in obese and older individuals are areas of inquiry that, once addressed, could diminish the burden of disease associated with aging. With regards to exercise, it seems that we may be forced to abandon our 1980s approaches because deficiency in creatine—long regarded by the exercising community to have remarkable health and performance benefits—was shown in rodents to neither affect exercise capacity nor change responses to chronic myocardial stress.

In summary, recent studies have addressed not only important, long-standing problems in mitochondrial research, but they have also led to unprecedented discoveries and novel insights into how mitochondria impact our cardiovascular health. Building on these discoveries, our search to identify the composition of mitochondria and the mitochondrial permeability transition pore, to understand how metabolic enzymes regulate cardiovascular remodeling and function, and to solidify the identity of the mitoKₐₐₜ channel are likely to be active and contentious areas of mitochondrial research. Such controversy is important and useful because it fosters thoughtful and thorough testing of mitochondrial therapies targeting critical determinants of cardiovascular cell function. We can rest assured that future findings regarding how mitochondria remodel, how microRNAs regulate mitochondria, and clarification of the actions and targets of oxidants will further deepen our appreciation of the versatility of the mitochondrion and its critical roles in regulating cardiovascular physiology and disease.

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