

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Iran J Allergy Asthma Immunol

June 2007; 6(2): 49-57

# E-Selectin S128R Polymorphism Leads to Severe Asthma

Ebrahim Nadi<sup>1</sup>, Mehrdad Hajilooi<sup>2</sup>, Fatemeh Zeraati<sup>3</sup>, Mostafa Ansari<sup>1</sup>, Sasan Tavana<sup>1</sup>,  
Sayed Hamid Hashemi<sup>1</sup>, and Alireza Rafiei<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Division of Pulmonary Sciences and Critical Care Medicine, Hamadan Research Group of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, Ekbatan Hospital, School of Medicine, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Department of Immunology, Hamadan Research Group of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Department of Pharmacology, Hamadan Research Group of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease, Ekbatan Hospital, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences, Hamadan, Iran

<sup>4</sup> Department of Immunology and Microbiology, Sari Medical School, Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences, Sari, Iran

Received: 1 November 2006; Received in revised form: 9 January 2007; Accepted: 21 January 2007

## ABSTRACT

The E-selectin mediates the interaction of activated endothelial cells with leukocytes and plays a fundamental role in the pathogenesis of asthma. It has been suggested that an S/R (Serine128Arginine) polymorphism of E-selectin alters ligand binding function. Our purpose in this study was to determine whether this Serine128Arginine polymorphism influences the risk of asthma and also to analyze the possible correlation of disease severity in Iranian patients with polymorphism of E-selection.

We studied human E-selectin gene polymorphism in 172 asthmatic patients and 173 healthy volunteers by polymerase chain reaction-restriction fragment length polymorphism (PCR-RFLP). To determine the severity of the asthma's situation, a questionnaire was prepared requesting the following information: age, sex, clinical signs and symptoms and past medical history. After the participants filled in the questionnaire, all active or ex-smoker patients were excluded. A trained observer assessed airway reversibility, peak flowmetry and spirometry in asthmatic patients.

We found increased serum levels of soluble E-selectin (sE-selectin) in asthmatic patients compared with healthy subjects ( $P < 0.0001$ ). Frequencies of the SS, SR, and RR genotypes were found as 66.3%, 31.4%, and 2.3% in the patients and 91.9%, 8.1%, and 0.0% in control subjects, respectively. The 128Arg allele was more prevalent in patients than controls (OR 5.78; 95% CI, 3.07-10.86,  $P < 0.0001$ ). However, in this study the polymorphism was not associated with circulating sE-selectin levels. We found a direct correlation between the level of sE-selectin and the severity of asthma ( $P = 0.001$ ). On the other hand, there was a close relation between 128Arginine carriage and disease severity ( $P < 0.0001$ ).

These results suggest that the Ser128Arg polymorphism of the E-selectin gene is a genetic factor that may be associated with the severity of asthma.

**Keyword:** Asthma; E-selectin; Gene polymorphism

**Corresponding Author:** Ebrahim Nadi, MD;  
Division of Pulmonary Sciences and Critical Care Medicine,  
Hamadan Research Group of Tuberculosis and Lung Disease,

Ekbatan Hospital, Hamadan University of Medical Sciences,  
Hamadan, Iran. Tel: (+98 918) 1116 518, Fax: (+98 918) 8226 035,  
E-mail: Ebrahim\_nadi@yahoo.com

## INTRODUCTION

Adhesion molecules such as members of the selectin family facilitate the recruitment and migration of inflammatory cells from the blood to the airway walls and therefore play an important role in the pathogenesis of asthma. On one hand, early primate studies had shown that blockade of E-selectin reduced allergic pulmonary inflammation.<sup>1</sup> Thus, increased expression of the E-selectin was subsequently observed in asthmatic patients,<sup>2-4</sup> suggesting that these molecules were up-regulated in human disease and may contribute to the alteration of pathophysiology. However, the migration of leukocytes into an asthmatic lung is dependent upon multiple mechanisms that are initiated by the binding of leukocytes at the endothelial border to selectins. Blockade of the initial selectin-mediated adhesion event should inhibit subsequent migration into the lung during an allergen challenge.

E-selectin is exclusively expressed on endothelial cells (ECs), mainly after their activation.<sup>5</sup> It is expressed and proteolytically cleaved from the surface of ECs upon activation by different stimuli<sup>6,7</sup> including interleukin 1(IL-1), tumor necrosis factor (TNF). Such a shedding leads to an increase of plasma levels of soluble(s)E-selectin *in vivo*.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, sE-selectin levels correlate with its surface expression on ECs *in vitro*.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, sE-selectin serves as an excellent marker for endothelial activation in numerous cardiovascular and inflammatory diseases.<sup>10</sup>

The common Ser128Arg polymorphism has been reported to regulate plasma levels of sE-selectin.<sup>11,12</sup> This polymorphism is functional in that, it alters ligand affinity.<sup>13</sup> E-selectin has an aminoterminal C-type lectin domain that is amino terminal the carbohydrate-binding site which binds the sialylated Lewis-x antigen (sLex or CD15s) (Neu5Acalpha2-3Galbeta1-4 (Fucalalpha1-3) GlcNAc). Substitution of E-selectin endothelial growth factor (EGF) domain residue Ser128 with an arginine results in E-selectin proteins that have lost the requirement for alpha1-3-linked fucose and are thus able to bind to sialyllactosamine.<sup>13</sup> Probably as a consequence, this SNP enhances tethering of myeloid cells<sup>14</sup> and extends the range of lymphocytes recruited by E-selectin.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Ser128Arg transduced ECs support significantly more rolling and adhesion of neutrophils and mononuclear cells compared with ECs

transduced with wild-type E-selectin. These Ser128Arg transduced ECs also exhibit significantly greater levels of phosphorylation of extracellular signal-regulated kinase 1, 2 and p38 mitogen activated protein kinase. This suggests that an altered endothelial signaling pathway is associated with this polymorphism.<sup>16</sup> Clinically, the polymorphism has been associated with atherosclerosis,<sup>17</sup> myocardial infarction,<sup>16</sup> and restenosis after angioplasty,<sup>12</sup> but the underlying mechanism is unclear. Recent advances in the pathophysiological understanding have underpinned the frequent involvement of the protein family of selectins in the progression of serious illnesses, including cancer, cancer metastasis, and immunological diseases such as asthma, allergy and autoimmune reactions.<sup>18,19</sup> Our purpose in this study was to determine whether this Serine128Arginine polymorphism influences the risk of asthma and also to analyze the possible correlation of disease severity in Iranian patients with polymorphism of E-selectin.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

### Study Population

Our case-control study was carried out in pulmonology clinics of Ekbatan Hospital of Hamadan University of Medical Sciences from 2004 to 2005. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Hamden University of Medical Sciences.

One hundred seventy-two patients with asthma (Table 1), before treatment, were recruited from the out-patient clinics.

**Table 1. Patients' characteristics.**

Characteristic	Asthmatic patients (n=172)
Age (year)	56. 56±12. 69
Gender (F/M)- %	57. 6/42. 4
FEV1 %	54. 3±22. 4
PEF %	49. 6±20. 75
PEF Variability %	26. 42±8. 1
Reversibility %	19±6. 24
Severity-n (%)	
Mild intermittent (Step1)	27 (15. 7%)
Mild persistent (Step2)	31 (18%)
Moderate persistent (Step3)	46 (26. 8)
Severe persistent (Step4)	68 (39. 5)

**Table 2. Stepwise asthma severity classification.**

Step	Symptoms		PEFR or FEV1 (PEFR Variability)
	Day	Night	
<b>Step1:</b> Mild intermittent	≤2days/week	≤2nights/months	≥80% (<20%)
<b>Step2:</b> Mild persistent	>2days/week but <1 per day	>2nights/month	≥80% (20-30%)
<b>Step3:</b> Moderate persistent	Daily	>1night/week	<60%-<80% (>30%)
<b>Step4:</b> Sever persistent	Continual	Frequent	≤60% (>30%)

According to National Asthma Education and Prevention program method (The NAEPP EXPERT PANEL. 2002; Kasper. DL. et al. 2005)

The inclusion criterion for all cases was bronchial asthma, where the diagnosis was established through demonstrating reversible airway obstruction. The participants were requested to fill in a questionnaire for identifying their demographic characteristics such as age, sex, asthma history, past medical history and details related to current asthma exacerbation, nocturnal and diurnal clinical signs and symptoms. In order to identify the severity of asthma, a trained observer assessed air-way reversibility, peak flowmetry and spirometry in the asthmatic patients. At least three acceptable maneuvers meeting American College of Chest Physicians standards were required, with at least two reproducible forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV<sub>1</sub>) and forced vital capacity (FVC) maneuvers within 5% of best required for each test.<sup>20</sup> The airway responsiveness was performed in a standardized fashion<sup>21</sup> and the airway reversibility was evaluated by spirometry before and 15 minutes after inhalation of two puffs of a beta-adrenergic agonist (albuterol) as metered dose inhaler and equal or more than 15% increase in FEV<sub>1</sub> was meant diagnostic for asthma.<sup>21</sup> Peak expiratory flow (PEF) was also used to assess

acute asthma severity and was expressed as percentage of the value based on age, sex, race and height. Changes in PEF are expressed as the relative change in percentage of predicted value. According to National Asthma Education and Prevention program method, asthmatic patients were categorized in 4 steps.<sup>22, 23</sup> The exclusion criteria were the presence of any inflammatory diseases and past history of recurrent infections, viral hepatitis, known collagen vascular diseases, autoimmune diseases, chronic obstructive lung disease (other than bronchial asthma), myocardial infarction/unstable angina and having undergone any surgical procedures during the previous month, as well as positive drug history for lipid lowering agents (Table 2). Patients who previously used inhaled steroid or systemic steroid within the past four weeks and who were active and ex-smokers were excluded from the study. One hundred seventy-three healthy, non asthmatic adults unrelated control subjects with no personal or family history of asthma were recruited from the same geographical area through blood donor clinics.

**Table 3. Ser128Arg allele and genotype frequencies in asthmatic patients and healthy controls.**

E-selectin polymorphism	Asthmatics (n= 172)	Controls (n=173)	P-value
<i>Allele -n/total (%)</i>			
128 Ser (S)	282 (82%)	332 (96%)	NS
128 Arg (R)	62 (18%)	14 (4%)	<0. 0001
<i>Genotype-n/total (%)</i>			
Ser/Ser	114 (66. 3%)	159 (91. 9%)	NS
Ser/Arg	54 (31. 4%)	14 (8. 1%)	0. 000
Arg/Arg	4 (2. 3%)	0	NS

NS=Not significant

### E-selectin Genotype

Venous blood from each subject was collected in tubes containing 50 mmol of EDTA per liter. The genomic DNA was isolated from anti-coagulated peripheral blood buffy coat using Miller's salting out method.<sup>24</sup> A polymerase chain reaction-restriction fragment length polymorphism (PCR-RFLP) was used to detect the substitution responsible for E-selectin polymorphism.

Amplification was carried out using a PCR Technie Flexigene apparatus (Roche, Germany) in a total volume of 50 µl containing 0.2 ng of genomic DNA. The primers were used and their specificities are shown (Table 3).

The internal control primers were used in all reactions to amplify a 927 bases segment of human growth hormone gene to check for successful PCR amplification. Each pair of primer consisted of 10 pmol of each allele-specific primer, 200 mol/l each dNTP; 10 mol/l Tris-HCl (PH 8.3); 50 nmol/l KCl, 1.5 mol/l MgCl<sub>2</sub> and 0.5 IU Taq DNA polymerase. PCR performed without DNA template represented the negative controls.

The reaction was carried out under following conditions: initial denaturation was at 94 °C for 2 min, followed by 30 cycles of amplification at 94 °C for 15 sec and annealing at 60 °C for 45 sec, with final extension for 2 min at 72 °C. The PCR product of 186 bp was then digested by the restriction enzyme *Pst I* (10-µl PCR product and 5 U of *Pst I* were digested for 3 h at 37 °C), and separated in 3% agarose gel electrophoresis and visualized by ultra-violet tran illumination. Genotype SS yielded two fragments of 123 and 63 bp; genotype RR yielded one fragment of 186 bp, SR yielded three digestion fragments of 186, 123, and 63 bp.<sup>25</sup> To prevent observer's bias, the investigator was unaware of sample origin and a different individual crosschecked all gels.

### Soulbe E-selectin Measurement

Whole blood was drawn in tubes and allowed to coagulate at room temperature for 1h. The serum was then separated by centrifugation and stored at -80 °C before being analyzed. Serum levels of sE-selectin were measured by commercially available ELISA kits (sE-Selectin; Bender Med Systems, BMS 205, Vienna, Austria) following manufacturers instructions. The lower limit of detection sensitivity was 1.6ng/mL for sE-selectin.

### Statistical Analysis

The consistency of genotype frequencies were checked with Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium. Results of the gene polymorphism studies were analyzed by the comparison of allele frequencies (ratio of test allele to total alleles). Frequencies of allele and genotype distribution were analyzed using Fisher's exact test or  $\chi^2$  test as appropriate. Multiple linear regression analysis was applied to assess the association between E-selectin genotype (independent variable) and plasma levels (dependent variable).

E-selectin plasma levels were log-transformed before being entered into the model. Because of skewed data, E-selectin plasma was log-transformed and differences between groups were confirmed by Mann-Whitney U Test. Odds ratios (OR) were calculated for disease susceptibility or severity in carriers of specific alleles. The 95% confidence intervals (CI) for the OR were also calculated. P-values of less than 0.05 (two-tailed) were considered significant.

## RESULTS

### Patients Data

The characteristics of the population are presented in Table1. Patients and control subjects were in the age range of 43.87 to 69.25 (mean age: 56.56±12.69) years and 44.32 to 64.54 (mean age: 54.43±10.11) years respectively, and 99 (57.6%) patients and 114 (65.9%) of control subjects were male. There were no age and sex significant differences between the patients and control subjects (P=0.08 and P=0.12, respectively).

### E-selectin Genotypes and Plasma Levels

DNA samples from 172 subjects with asthma and 173 healthy individuals were analyzed for Ser128Arg polymorphism of E-selectin gene. The frequencies of E-selectin genotypes in the patients and control individuals were found in accordance with those expected by the Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium (P=0.41 and P=0.57, respectively). Homozygous Arg128Arg genotype was found in 4 (2.3%) patients, heterozygous Ser128Arg genotype was found in 54 (31.4%) patients, and 114 (66.3%) asthmatic patients were wild type (Ser128Ser) (Table 3). The allele and genotype frequencies of the polymorphism were significantly differed between patients and controls.

**Table 4. Comparison of demographic data and lung function of asthmatic patients and controls according to E-selectin Ser128Arg genotype.**

Variables	Asthmatic (n=172)			Healthy controls (n=173)		
	Arg/Arg+Ser/Arg (n=58)	Ser/Ser (n=114)	P-value	Arg/Arg+Ser/Arg (n=159)	Ser/Ser (n=14)	P value
Age (year)	55.6±9.76	57.05±13.95	0.48	46.07±3.56	55.16±10.16	0.001
Sex (M/F) (%)	28.3/41.1	71.7/58.9	0.103	0/23.7	71.7/28.3	0.0001
deselecting	110.84±71.36	101.6±47.84	0.31	30.0	49.06±17.98	0.0001
FEV1	48.88±21.22	57.05±22.95	0.02			ND
PEF	45.53±20.91	51.74±20.44	0.06			ND
PEF variability	27.67±7.93	25.76±8.12	0.156			ND
Reversibility	19.12±7.55	18.95±5.49	0.86			ND

ND: Not done

The Arg allele was more prevalent in patients than controls (OR 5.78; 95% CI, 3.07-10.86,  $P < 0.0001$ ). No homozygous mutant (Ser128Ser) genotype was found in the control subjects. Since the mutant Arg128Arg homozygous genotype was too low in the patients for assessing any statistical analysis, further analysis proved dominance for the Arginine allele, i.e. Arg/Arg + Ser/Arg vs. Ser/Ser. (Table 4)

The levels of sE-selectin was significantly higher in asthmatic patients than controls ( $P < 0.0001$ ). The geometric mean of sE-selectin was  $104.71 \pm 56.83$  for

the patients with asthma and  $47.51 \pm 18.01$  for the control subjects (Table 5).

## DISCUSSION

In this case-control study of asthmatics of varying severity, on one hand we found that the levels of serum E-selectin were elevated in severity status of asthma. On the other hand, stepwise increases of sE-selectin levels were observed from intermittent to severe persistent asthma.

**Table 5. sE-selectin levels, genotypes and lung function activity according to severity of asthma.**

Variables	Mild intermittent (n=27)	Mild persistent (n=31)	Moderate persistent (n=46)	Severe persistent (n=68)	P-value
Ser128Arg polymorphism-n (%)					
Arg/Arg + Ser/Arg	5 (18.5)	3 (9.7)	16 (34.8)	34 (50)	0.000
Arg/Arg	22 (81.5)	28 (90.3)	30 (65.2)	34 (50)	
sE-selectin	72.46±32.79	93.78±44.58	107.87±54.07	125.1±65.8	0.001
Age(year)	47.58±12.97	47.84±13.54	60.80±9.73	61.69±9.81	0.001
Lung function					
FEV1	78.08±9.24	73.04±9.2	52.33±15.64	36.87±17.53	0.0001
PEF	76.17±5.34	62.76±7.91	47.52±13.14	35.42±19.78	0.0001
PEF variability	17.92±3.56	20.52±4.58	27.56±6.66	31.09±7.41	0.001
Reversibility	14.92±4.23	17.12±5.43	19.0±5.13	21.25±7.23	0.0001

In addition our results have shown that there is an association between clinical expression of asthma and E-selectin gene Ser 128 Arg polymorphism. 128 R was over-represented in asthmatic patients in comparison to controls.

Thus, 128R variant might confer susceptibility against the development of asthma. This finding is in agreement with a study which has shown that asthma is characterized by airway hyper-responsiveness and inflammation of the lungs, and is accompanied by the accumulation of lymphocytes and eosinophils.<sup>26</sup>

On the basis of the strong association of S128R with asthma, we were interested to determine whether a correlation existed between the concentration of sE-selectin in serum and Ser128Arg genotypes. We found that Arg allele accounted for 18% (Table 3) in the asthmatic group, which was significantly higher than in normal controls (4%,  $p < 0.05$ ). It indicates that Arg allele is associated with early onset asthma and may be a risk factor for asthma. The role of adhesion molecules in asthma is supported by several studies showing an increased expression of adhesion molecules in bronchial epithelial and endothelial cells from asthmatics.<sup>27,28</sup> The association of the E-selectin genotype and phenotype (sE-selectin levels), and analysis of the association with a clinical outcome is the novel aspect of this study.

Increased expression of soluble E-selectin is associated with a number of inflammatory conditions including atherosclerosis.<sup>29</sup> In addition, the increased expression was also observed in non-insulin-dependent diabetes.<sup>11</sup> Recent advances in our pathophysiological understanding have underpinned the frequent involvement of the protein family of selectins in the progression of serious illnesses, including cancer, cancer metastasis and immunological diseases such as asthma, allergy and autoimmune reactions.<sup>18</sup>

Changes in the concentration of soluble selectins in plasma usually reflect altered cell surface turnover and proteolytic cleavage, therefore these changes are often used as markers of a role for the selectins in asthma and allergy.<sup>30</sup> There are some reports that plasma levels of soluble E-selectin in homozygous Arg128Arg subjects and heterozygous Ser128Arg subjects were significantly higher than in wild-type Ser128Ser<sup>12</sup> and the Ser128Arg allele enhanced thrombin generation and fibrin formation significantly.<sup>16</sup>

In the study of asthmatics of varying severity, the levels of sE-selectin were related to clinical asthma severity. Thus, levels of serum E-selectin were elevated in severity status of asthma. This finding is in accordance with accumulation of inflammatory cells in the airways of asthmatics.<sup>31</sup>

The S128R polymorphism lies in the EGF domain of E-selectin that is conserved among all selectins. Although the principal ligand contact points of the selectins lie within the lectin domain.<sup>32</sup> Domain swaps between E-selectin have suggested that the EGF-domain can modulate the binding properties of the lectin domain to surface-immobilized ligand without affecting the equilibrium binding properties toward soluble ligand.<sup>33</sup> The nucleotide substitution of E-selectin EGF domain has been shown to profoundly affect the ligand binding affinity. The polymorphism studied, is located within a gene, which is crucial for the recruitment of leukocyte into airway endothelium, thus an association of the Arg allele of Ser128Arg single nucleotide polymorphism with asthma could be reasonable.

The relationship between the E-selectin Ser128Arg polymorphism and asthma may reflect an amplified inflammatory response resulting from the action of altered selectin molecules containing the serine 128 arginine mutation. The substitution of arginine for serine has been shown to dramatically decrease binding specificity while increasing affinity for additional ligands, resulting in two to threefold increase in cellular adhesion. The E-selectin 128R allele may thus increase leukocyte adherence to activated airway endothelium thereby contributing to the progression of bronchial asthma. Up regulation of endothelial adhesion molecules facilitates the interaction with leukocytes and platelets.<sup>34</sup> E-selectin is of particular interest in this context, because it is expressed on activated endothelial cells and therefore can induce localized inflammation at the airway tract. When E-selectin is shed from the endothelial surface it can be detected as soluble sE-selectin in the plasma.<sup>35</sup> The level of sE-selectin increases in the severe asthmatic patients compared with mild/moderate asthmatic patients.<sup>36</sup>

It has been hypothesized that frequent genetic variants may contribute significantly to the genetic risk for common and complex phenotypes,<sup>37</sup> and therefore high prevalence of the Arg128Arg allele also provides

a strong biological rationale for the involvement of this polymorphism in the regulation of secretion of serum sE-selectin levels in asthmatics. A transition from 561A to 561C at the coding region of the E-selectin gene causes a conservative change of a serine with an arginine at codon 128 (Ser128Arg).<sup>25</sup> This mutation alters selectin binding specifically,<sup>38</sup> leading to a gain of function under flow conditions, possibly amplifying the number of leukocytes that roll and subsequently arrest on endothelium.<sup>39</sup>

This tethering mechanism could theoretically amplify the number of leukocytes interacting with mutated airway endothelial cells during bronchial asthma.

It is noteworthy that while the wild type E-selection recruits specifically activated Th-1 lymphocytes,<sup>40</sup> which produces proinflammatory cytokines and chemokines,<sup>41</sup> the presence of the 8128R polymorphism extends the range of lymphocytes recruited by E-selection, including Th2 and B lymphocytes.<sup>42, 43</sup> This subset of T cells produces interleukin 4 (IL-4), IL-5 and IL-13, leading to recruitment of eosinophils and enhancing production of immunoglobulin (particularly IgG, and IgE) from activated B cells, and increases recruitment of eosinophils and other leukocytes to inflamed airway endothelium. Furthermore, children were shown to have elevated serum levels of E-selectin during acute asthma exacerbation.<sup>44</sup> For the reason of the prevalence of severe persistent asthma in the subjects in this study, it seems that contrary to different studies conducted in other countries, most of the subjects because of not showing up in time for receiving the appropriate treatment and moreover experiencing recurrent episodes of asthmatic attacks, showed up with more severity of the disease at the hospital clinics, and so participated in our study. However this finding can be carried out simultaneously in different hospitals applying a different research design with appropriate samples.

Finally, in this study the polymorphism was not associated with high circulating sE-selectin levels, we found a direct correlation between the level of sE-selectin and severity of asthma ( $P=0.001$ ). Moreover, there is a close relation between 128Arginine carriage and disease severity ( $P<0.0001$ ). These results suggest that the Ser128Arg polymorphism of the E-selectin gene is a genetic factor that may be associated with the severity of asthma.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Miss. Marzieh Naderi Shahab for editing the manuscript.

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