Vitamin D, carotid intima–media thickness and bone structure in patients with type 2 diabetes

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Abstract

Despite aggressive treatment of cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factors individuals with type 2 diabetes (T2D) still have increased risk of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality. The primary aim of this study was to examine the cross-sectional association between total (25-hydroxy vitamin D (25(OH)D)) and risk of CVD in patients with T2D. Secondary objective was to examine the association between 25(OH)D and bone health. A Danish cohort of patients with T2D participating in a randomised clinical trial were analysed. In total 415 patients (68% men, age 60±9 years (mean ± s.d.), duration of diabetes 12±6 years), including 294 patients (71%) treated with insulin. Carotid intima–media thickness (IMT) and arterial stiffness (carotid artery distensibility coefficient (DC) and Young’s elastic modulus (YEM)) were measured by ultrasound scan as indicators of CVD. Bone health was assessed by bone mineral density and trabecular bone score measured by dual energy X-ray absorptiometry. In this cohort, 214 patients (52%) were vitamin D deficient (25(OH)D <50 nmol/l). Carotid IMT was 0.793±0.137 mm, DC was 0.0030±0.001 mmHg, YEM was 2354±1038 mmHg and 13 (3%) of the patients were diagnosed with osteoporosis. A 25(OH)D level was not associated with carotid IMT or arterial stiffness (P>0.3) or bone health (P>0.6) after adjustment for CVD risk factors. In conclusion, 25(OH)D status was not associated with carotid IMT, arterial stiffness or bone health in this cohort of patients with T2D. To explore these associations and the association with other biomarkers further, multicentre studies with large numbers of patients are required.

Key Words

- carotid intima–media thickness
- 25-hydroxyvitamin D
- bone structure
- cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes

Endocrine Connections
(2015) 4, 128-135
Introduction

Despite aggressive treatment of cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk factors individuals with type 2 diabetes (T2D) still have an about twofold increased risk of cardiovascular morbidity and mortality compared to the general population (1, 2, 3).

Carotid intima–media thickness (IMT) measured by ultrasound has in several epidemiological studies been demonstrated to be associated with prevalent CVD and is considered an independent predictor of future CVD events like myocardial infarction (MI), stroke and death. Carotid IMT has therefore been suggested as a suitable surrogate marker for CVD in the general population (4, 5) and in patients with T2D (6). Carotid artery distensibility coefficient (DC) and Young’s elastic modulus (YEM) are markers of arterial stiffness and has been shown to correlate well with overall cardiovascular outcome (7, 8). DC represents a global stiffness measurement of the entire arterial wall based on a single measurement site, whereas YEM can detect more subtle changes in the relative proportions of the layering of the arterial wall (9, 10).

A number of studies indicate a high prevalence of vitamin D deficiency in the general population and diabetic cohorts (11, 12). Several epidemiological studies have reported an association between vitamin D deficiency and risk of CVD including hypertension, hyperlipidemia, carotid IMT, arterial stiffness, MI and obesity (13, 14, 15). Few studies have examined the association between vitamin D status and risk of CVD in patients with T2D (16, 17), and one study has reported an association between low 25-hydroxy vitamin D (25(OH)D) and increased carotid IMT in patients with T2D (18). In contrast, sufficient levels of vitamin D has been linked to improved endothelial function, inhibition of foam cell formation and suppression of macrophage cholesterol uptake in patients with T2D (19, 20).

Vitamin D’s effect on bone health (fractures and bone mineral density (BMD)) is well established in the general population (21), while data from epidemiological studies in persons with diabetes – being less conclusive – suggest that vitamin D deficiency predisposes to β cell dysfunction, insulin resistance and T2D (11). Patients with T2D have increased risk of hip (22, 23), spine and extremity fractures (24) despite normal or increased BMD (25).

We hypothesize, that low 25(OH)D is associated with risk of CVD and reduced bone health.

This cross-sectional study aims to investigate the complex relationship between 25(OH)D, risk of CVD (measured as carotid IMT, carotid artery DC and YEM) and bone health (measured as BMD and trabecular bone score (TBS)) in a Danish cohort of patients with T2D participating in a randomised clinical trial (The Copenhagen Insulin and Metformin Therapy (CIMT) trial) (26).

Materials and methods

The CIMT trial is an investigator-initiated, multicentre, randomised controlled study with a 2×3 factorial design. The trial was initiated in May 2008 and completed in December 2012 at eight hospitals in the Region of Copenhagen, Denmark, in accordance with ICH–GCP regulations and the Helsinki Declaration (trial registration ClinicalTrials.gov number NCT00657943) and approved by the Ethical Committee. Patients were recruited from diabetes clinics and signed informed consent if they met the following inclusion criteria: age > 30 years, BMI between 25 and 40 kg/m², estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) > 60 ml/min (calculated using the Modification of Diet in Renal Disease (MDRD) equation), HbA1c > 7.5% (58 mmol/mol) and treated with oral hypoglycaemic agents and/or insulin. Exclusion criteria were recent history of CVD, cancer, renal failure, liver disease or other chronic diseases as assessed by the investigator (26). CVD was defined as a previous history of MI, stroke, coronary or vascular surgery. Of the 464 patients screened for participation in the CIMT trial, 27 patients were not meeting the inclusion criteria, 11 patients declined to participate and 11 patients were not included due to other reasons. Thus, a total of 415 Danish patients with T2D were included and randomised, by central concealed randomization stratified for age (above 65 years), previous insulin treatment and treatment centre.

The results presented were obtained at the baseline investigation of the trial. Baseline measurements included clinical examinations, fasting blood and urine samples, carotid ultrasound scan and dual energy X-ray absorptiometry (DXA) scans. Serum total 25(OH)D (25-hydroxy vitamin D3 plus 25-hydroxy vitamin D2) was measured with an electro-chemiluminescence immunoassay (ECLIJA) competitive assay using the Cobas e411, Roche equipment based on a one-step sandwich assay. This method was used as routine analyses in our hospital. All samples were measured in one batch using identical batch numbers. The coefficients of variation (CV) for 25(OH)D was 6.4%. Analytical sensitivity was of 10.0 nmol/l. According to the Institute of Medicine vitamin D deficiency is defined as a 25(OH)D < 50 nmol/l, where treatment is recommended (27).
Carotid IMT and arterial stiffness markers, DC and YEM, were measured by ultrasound scans of the carotid arteries and performed by the same two lab technicians. The CV as measured by the S.D. of the log-transformed values was 10\% between sonographers and between days (28). After 10 min of rest in the supine position the scanning was performed using a GE Healthcare (Waukesha, WI, USA) logic 9 with a nine linear (8 MHz) or a 12 linear (12 MHz) probe, initially, a rough cross-sectional scanning was made to localize possible plaques or stenosis. Peripheral blood pressure was measured with a validated oscillometric device measuring on the brachial artery on the dominant arm after 10 min of rest and immediately after ultrasound examination. We did not have the possibility to measure the central blood pressure in this study. Thereafter, a longitudinal scanning was made of the common carotid artery with storage of a dynamic sequence of 4–6 s for the measurement of carotid IMT. For the border detection and calculations, we used specialized software (vascular tools 5, Medical Imaging Applications, Coralville, IA, USA). The region of interest was defined as a segment of the far wall in common carotid artery devoid of focal plaques and spanning 5–10 mm with a centre 10 mm proximal to the bulb. The mean carotid IMT was calculated as the average of the mean IMT of the left and right common carotid artery. Relative compliance (carotid artery DC (mmHg)) of the common carotid artery was automatically calculated as a measure of the change in vessel volume from systole to diastole calculated from the equation: (radius in systole\(^2\)− radius in diastole\(^2\))/(radius in diastole\(^2\)× pulse pressure) where high/increased values are beneficial for the hemodynamic system. YEM (mmHg) reflects the intima–media layers tendency to be deformed elastically where low/reduced values are beneficial for the hemodynamic system.

Lumbar spine of L1–L4, total femur and femoral neck BMD was measured by DXA using a Hologic Discovery A, series 82800-A (Hologic, Bedford, MA, USA) and Software 12.6.2. T-scores referring to the Hologic database young normal mean BMD were calculated for each anatomical site. Osteopenia was defined as T-score below −1 but above −2.5, and osteoporosis was defined as any T-score \(\leq -2.5\) (29). Lumbar spine TBS was derived for each spine DXA examination via TBS Software (TBS iNsight Software, version 1.8; Med-Imaps, Pessac, France) installed on the Hologic machine. TBS was calculated as the mean value of the individual measurements for vertebrae L1–L4, based on gray-level analysis of DXA images. TBS calculation is performed over the same region of interest as the BMD measurement. Any fractured and/or arthritis vertebrae were excluded from computation.

Information on physical activity was obtained by questionnaires.

Results

Data were tested for normal distribution by QQ-plots and histograms. Baseline characteristics were compared using Student’s t-test for continuous variables and \(\chi^2\)-test for categorical variables. Correlation analyses (Pearson/Spearman’s \(r\)) and multivariate linear regression analyses were performed in addition. The selection of covariates was based on two approaches. Relevant variables including age, sex, BMI, HbA1c, smoking, eGFR, systolic blood pressure and alendronate treatment, were significantly correlated to the dependent variables and selected. In addition, covariates reported in the literature were included (see ‘Results’ section). Data are presented as median (range) for 25(OH)D and mean (±S.D.) or n (%) as appropriate and divided according to deficient and sufficient status of serum 25(OH)D. A two-sided \(P\) value \(<0.05\) was considered statistical significant. The statistical software SPSS (version 19, IBM, Chicago, IL, USA) was used.

Baseline characteristics are shown in Table 1. In this population, carotid IMT was 0.793 ± 0.137 mm, 43% of the patients had osteopenia and 3\% had osteoporosis.

Vitamin D (25(OH)D)

The median concentration of 25(OH)D was 48 (7–176) nmol/l in the total group of patients with T2D (\(n=415\)) and 214 (52\%) of the patients were 25(OH)D deficient (<50 nmol/l). No significant differences were found in 25(OH)D levels according to season (\(P=0.15\), data not shown) or physical activity (\(P=0.149\), data not shown).

Analyses in patients with and without vitamin D deficiency

The vitamin D deficient patients were younger, had shorter duration of T2D, higher BMI, higher HbA1c, higher eGFR, lower systolic blood pressure and lower carotid IMT compared to the patients with sufficient levels of 25(OH)D in unadjusted analyses (see Table 1). Dividing data according to 25(OH)D ≤37 nmol/l (as suggested in (18)) did not reveal any association in the overall results (data not shown).
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Lumbar spine BMD (g/cm²) 1.067
and eGFR, the association was no longer significant
smoking, systolic blood pressure, total cholesterol, HbA1c
25(OH)D was positively associated with carotid IMT
Vitamin D (25(OH)D) and CVD risk
Table 1 Baseline characteristicsa.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>All (n=415)</th>
<th>25-hydroxy vitamin D (&lt; 50 nmol/l) (n=214)</th>
<th>25-hydroxy vitamin D (≥ 50 nmol/l) (n=201)</th>
<th>P value*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex (female), n (%)</td>
<td>132 (32)</td>
<td>60 (28)</td>
<td>72 (36)</td>
<td>0.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>60 ± 9</td>
<td>58 ± 9</td>
<td>62 ± 8</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulin treatment, n (%)</td>
<td>294 (71)</td>
<td>238 (76)</td>
<td>56 (64)</td>
<td>0.135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T2D duration (years)</td>
<td>12 ± 6</td>
<td>12 ± 6</td>
<td>13 ± 7</td>
<td>0.029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI (kg/m²)</td>
<td>32.2 ± 4.2</td>
<td>32.7 ± 4.2</td>
<td>31.5 ± 4.1</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HbA1c (%)/(mmol/mol)</td>
<td>8.6 ± 1.1/70 ± 12</td>
<td>8.7 ± 1.1/72 ± 12</td>
<td>8.3 ± 1.1/68 ± 10</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eGFR (ml/min)</td>
<td>128 ± 44</td>
<td>135 ± 48</td>
<td>142 ± 16</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systolic blood pressure (mmHg)</td>
<td>139 ± 15</td>
<td>137 ± 15</td>
<td>82 ± 9</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diastolic blood pressure (mmHg)</td>
<td>82 ± 9</td>
<td>83 ± 9</td>
<td>82 ± 9</td>
<td>0.232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statin treatment, n (%)</td>
<td>375 (90)</td>
<td>193 (90)</td>
<td>182 (91)</td>
<td>0.901</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cholesterol (mmol/l)</td>
<td>4.2 ± 0.9</td>
<td>4.2 ± 1.0</td>
<td>4.1 ± 0.9</td>
<td>0.697</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current smokers, n (%)</td>
<td>63 (15)</td>
<td>37 (17)</td>
<td>26 (13)</td>
<td>0.195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin D 25(OH)D (nmol/l)</td>
<td>48 (7–176)</td>
<td>31 (7–49)</td>
<td>68 (50–176)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitamin D supplement, n (%)</td>
<td>76 (18)</td>
<td>26 (12)</td>
<td>50 (25)</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calcium supplement, n (%)</td>
<td>55 (13)</td>
<td>15 (7)</td>
<td>40 (20)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alendronate treatment, n (%)</td>
<td>8 (2)</td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
<td>4 (2)</td>
<td>0.929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carotid IMT (mm)</td>
<td>0.793 ± 0.137</td>
<td>0.771 ± 0.133</td>
<td>0.815 ± 0.129</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DC (mmHg)</td>
<td>0.0030 ± 0.0001</td>
<td>0.0026 ± 0.001</td>
<td>0.0025 ± 0.001</td>
<td>0.236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YEM (mmHg)</td>
<td>2354 ± 1037</td>
<td>2318 ± 1057</td>
<td>2392 ± 1016</td>
<td>0.488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous CVD, n (%)</td>
<td>80 (19)</td>
<td>65 (20)</td>
<td>15 (17)</td>
<td>0.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normal bone status, n (%)</td>
<td>218 (53)</td>
<td>111 (52)</td>
<td>107 (53)</td>
<td>0.964</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteopenia, n (%)</td>
<td>177 (43)</td>
<td>92 (46)</td>
<td>85 (42)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoporosis, n (%)</td>
<td>13 (3)</td>
<td>7 (3)</td>
<td>6 (3)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total femur T-score</td>
<td>0.12 ± 1.045</td>
<td>0.19 ± 1.074</td>
<td>0.05 ± 1.071</td>
<td>0.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total femur BMD (g/cm²)</td>
<td>0.999 ± 0.210</td>
<td>0.100 ± 0.202</td>
<td>0.993 ± 0.219</td>
<td>0.611</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femoral neck T-score</td>
<td>−0.59 ± 1.0</td>
<td>−0.58 ± 0.951</td>
<td>−0.60 ± 1.051</td>
<td>0.885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femoral neck BMD (g/cm²)</td>
<td>0.811 ± 0.175</td>
<td>0.811 ± 0.165</td>
<td>0.811 ± 0.186</td>
<td>0.986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumbar spine T-score</td>
<td>0.09 ± 1.542</td>
<td>0.08 ± 1.502</td>
<td>0.10 ± 1.589</td>
<td>0.852</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lumbar spine BMD (g/cm²)</td>
<td>1.067 ± 0.227</td>
<td>1.074 ± 0.198</td>
<td>1.058 ± 0.254</td>
<td>0.475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TBS (unit less)</td>
<td>1.145 ± 0.162</td>
<td>1.134 ± 0.167</td>
<td>1.157 ± 0.156</td>
<td>0.154</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Carotid IMT, carotid intima–media thickness; DC, distensibility coefficient; YEM, Young’s elastic modulus; CVD, cardiovascular disease; BMD, bone mineral density; TBS, trabecular bone score; eGFR, estimated glomerular filtration rate.

A total of 76 (18%) patients received vitamin D supplement and had significantly higher 25(OH)D (62 (12–176) nmol/l) compared to the patients not receiving vitamin D supplement (45 (7–161) nmol/l) (P<0.001). Patients receiving vitamin D supplement were older, had lower HbA1c, and higher cholesterol levels. A higher proportion of women received supplements (data not shown).

Vitamin D (25(OH)D) and CVD risk
25(OH)D was positively associated with carotid IMT (P=0.002), however after adjustment for sex, age, BMI, smoking, systolic blood pressure, total cholesterol, HbA1c and eGFR, the association was no longer significant (P=0.36) (see Table 2). Dividing the patients according to vitamin D supplement did not reveal any association between 25(OH)D and carotid IMT (data not shown). Age and systolic blood pressure were significantly associated to carotid IMT, DC and YEM both in all patients and after exclusion of patients on vitamin D supplement in the multivariate regression analyses (P<0.001, data not shown). 25(OH)D was negatively associated with DC (P=0.05), but no significant association was found in the adjusted analyses (P=0.61) (see Table 2). No association was found between 25(OH)D and YEM (see Table 2).

Vitamin D (25(OH)D) and bone health
25(OH)D was not associated with total femur T-score, femoral neck T-score or lumbar spine T-score (see Table 2). Vitamin D status and TBS were positively associated (P=0.02). After adjustment for sex, age, BMI, smoking, calcium supplement, alendronate treatment and eGFR...
The strengths of the current study are the size of the study cohort and the applied measurements. The study cohort consisted of a well-defined group of patients with T2D. All patients had their primary outcome measure-
manting sample size and reducing bias. The current study is a prospective cohort study with repeated 
 measurements and a long follow-up period, which increases the reliability of the results.

Discussion

This study investigates the complex association between vitamin D status and carotid IMT in patients with T2D. The association was only found in patients with the combination of T2D and vitamin D deficiency (serum 25(OH)D ≤ 37 nmol/l). This suggests that vitamin D deficiency is an important risk factor for increased IMT in patients with T2D. However, further studies are needed to confirm these results and to investigate the potential mechanisms underlying this association.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of vitamin D deficiency in patients with T2D and suggests that vitamin D supplementation may be beneficial in reducing arterial stiffness in these patients. Further research is needed to investigate the clinical implications of these findings and to explore strategies for improving vitamin D status in this population.
standardized manner in a single center to minimize variation. Since known CVD risk markers can only partly explain the increased risk of CVD in patients with T2D, assessing CVD risk markers by ultrasound scan is relevant although the method is currently only used for research purposes. Studies with longitudinal data of carotid IMT scans and clinical CVD outcomes in diabetic populations are needed. DXA scans are validated and considered the standard method to assess bone health, although BMD-derived measures from DXA scans may not always detect a potential increased fracture risk (36). For analyses of patients with T2D, this discrepancy seems to be more pronounced as these patients tend to have a different bone structure than the general population (33). In an attempt to improve data strength TBS analyses were included. However, although patients TBS levels was slightly degraded (according to manufacturer) no association was found to levels of 25(OH)D.

One limitation is that assessing vitamin D status can be associated with measurement uncertainty. The ECLIA applied in this study was re-standardised before the analyses. One study concluded that status of vitamin D measured by the ECLIA disagreed considerably with other assays, and that the assay generally overestimates the vitamin D concentration (37) implying that the prevalence of vitamin D deficiency is underestimated. Another study compared the ECLIA with RIA and showed acceptable limits of agreement (38).

Another limitation is that the current study did not include measurements of biomarkers like adipokines or inflammatory cytokines which might be involved. Further and larger studies are required to address the impact of biomarkers on the association between atherosclerosis and CVD risk.

Notably, studies including people with T2D will always have several confounders, because of distinct heterogeneity among participants in relation to age, BMI, physical activity, duration and severity of diabetes including prevalence of late complications. Furthermore, the CVD risk factors are very aggressively treated in patients with T2D.

After adjustment for relevant covariates, 25(OH)D was not associated with carotid IMT, arterial stiffness, or bone health in this cross-sectional study of patients with T2D.

Declaration of interest
LLC, TA, AV, OP, TB, BC, SL, TJ and LT hold shares in Novo Nordisk A/S; LLC, TA, AV, TB, BGR, SL and LT report former employment by Novo Nordisk; BC is employed at Steno Diabetes Center, which is a diabetes hospital and academic institution owned by Novo Nordisk; SL holds shares in dynamically traded investment funds, which may own stocks from pharmaceutical companies; SL is an employee of Boehringer Ingelheim GmbH & Co. KG, Ingelheim, Germany; SL’s contribution was his own and does not necessarily reflect the official position of Boehringer Ingelheim; AV has received fees from Novo Nordisk; TB is employed by Novo Nordisk A/S; BT is a member of an advisory board for Eli Lilly; OS has received fees from AstraZeneca, Sanofi, MSD, Boehringer-Ingelheim, Eli Lilly and Novo Nordisk; CH has received fees from Bristol-Myers Squibb, Sanofi and Novo Nordisk; LB has received fees from and attended advisory for Novo Nordisk A/S; SM has served as a consultant or adviser to Novartis Pharma, Novo Nordisk, Merck Sharp & Dome, Sanofi-Aventis, AstraZeneca, Johnson & Johnson, Rosche, Mankind, Astra-Zeneca, Boehringer-Ingelheim, Zeeland, Eli Lilly, Intarcia Therapeutics and Bristol-Meyer Squibb; SM has received fees for speaking from Novo Nordisk, Merck, Sharp & Dome, Astra-Zeneca, Johnson and Johnson, Rosche, Shering-Plouq, Sanofi-Aventis, Novartis Pharma, Eli Lilly, Bristol-Meyer Squibb and Boehringer Ingelheim. SM has received 2 research grants from Novo Nordisk. PE is a board member at Eli Lilly, MSD and Agen; PE is part of the speakers bureau with Amgen and Eli Lilly. KW, BH, JW, CG, NW, MR, HV, ED, HP, TK, SS and EM have no conflicts of interests to declare.

Funding
The trial received an unrestricted grant from Novo Nordisk A/S for the submitted work.

Acknowledgements
The staff at the Clinical Research Unit at Steno Diabetes Center are thanked for their technical assistance. The CIMT trial group: Søren S Lund, Physician, Steno Diabetes Center, Denmark; Hans Perrild, Associate professor, Department of Endocrinology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Denmark; Thure Krakup, Chief Physician, Department of Endocrinology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Bispebjerg, Denmark; Ole Snorgaard, Chief Physician, Department of Endocrinology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Hvidovre, Denmark; Birthe Gade-Rasmussen, Chief Physician, Department of Endocrinology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Hvidovre, Denmark; Birger Thorsteinsson, Professor, Department of Cardiology, Nephrology and Endocrinology, Nordsjaellands Hospital, Denmark and Department of Medicine, Copenhagen University, Hellerup, Gentofte, Denmark; Michael Røder, Chief Physician, Department of Cardiology, Nephrology and Endocrinology, Nordsjaellands Hospital, Denmark and Department of Medicine, Copenhagen University, Hellerup, Gentofte, Denmark; Elisabeth R Mathiesen, Professor, Department of Endocrinology, Rigshospitalet, University of Copenhagen, Denmark; Tonny Jensen, Chief Physician, Department of Endocrinology, Rigshospitalet, University of Copenhagen, Denmark; Henrik Vestergaard, Chief Physician, Department of Endocrinology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Herlev, Denmark; Section of Metabolic Genetics, The Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research, and University of Copenhagen, Denmark; Christoffer Hedetoft, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, University Hospital Køge, Denmark; Leif Breum, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, University Hospital Køge, Denmark; Elsebeth Duun, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, Copenhagen University Hospital, Gentofte, Denmark; Simone B Sneppen, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, Copenhagen University Hospital, Gentofte, Denmark; Oluf Pedersen, Professor, Steno Diabetes Center, Denmark; Section of Metabolic Genetics, The Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research, and University of Copenhagen, Denmark; Henrik Vestergaard, Chief Physician, Department of Endocrinology, Rigshospitalet, University of Copenhagen, Herlev, Denmark; Section of Metabolic Genetics, The Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research, and University of Copenhagen, Denmark; Christoffer Hedetoft, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, University Hospital Køge, Denmark; Leif Breum, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, University Hospital Køge, Denmark; Elsebeth Duun, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, Copenhagen University Hospital, Gentofte, Denmark; Simon B Sneppen, Chief Physician, Department of Medicine, Copenhagen University Hospital, Gentofte, Denmark; Oluf Pedersen, Professor, Steno Diabetes Center, Denmark; Section of Metabolic Genetics, The Novo Nordisk Foundation Center for Basic Metabolic Research, and University of Copenhagen, Denmark; Bianca Hemmingsen, Physician, Copenhagen Trial Unit, Centre for Clinical Intervention Research, Rigshospitalet, Copenhagen University Hospital, Denmark and Department of Cardiology, Nephrology and Endocrinology, Nordsjaellands Hospital, Denmark; Sten Madsbad, Professor, Department of Endocrinology, Copenhagen University Hospital, Hvidovre, Denmark, and University of Copenhagen, Hvidovre, Department of Medicine.
Copenhagen, Denmark; Christian Gluud, Head of Department, Copenhagen University Hospital, Denmark; Lars Madsen, Professor, Steno Diabetes Center, Denmark and Department of Endocrinology, Rigshospitalet, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, and University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

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