Detection of hyperpolarized 13C labeled ketone bodies in vivo

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Background
The ketone bodies, acetoacetate and D-β-3-hydroxybutyrate, are important metabolites during periods of fasting, accounting for nearly 70% of the oxygen consumption in the brain. Clinically, loss of lean muscle mass and body fat due to tumor burden in the presence of adequate nutrition (cachexia) is commonly seen with cancer. A significant proportion of mortality is often due to complications arising from this aberrant metabolism. In cachexia, blood glucose is reduced and unlikely to remain the sole metabolic fuel sustaining tumor growth; it has been shown previously, in xenograft tumor models, that D-β-3-hydroxybutyrate and acetoacetate are used in direct proportion to their rate of supply. The current study sought to probe ketone body metabolism in vivo using a variety of hyperpolarized 13C labeled ketone body substrates and precursors.

Methods
[U-13C2] sodium D-β-3-hydroxybutyrate (NaHB) and [1,3-13C2] ethyl acetoacetate (EAcAc) were purchased from Cambridge Isotope Laboratories, MA. [1,3-13C2] lithium acetoacetate (AcAc) was prepared by saponification of the ethyl ester with lithium hydroxide and recrystallization from methanol/ether; [3-1H1,3-13C2] DL-β-3-hydroxybutyric acid (HBFA) was prepared by borodeuteride reduction of the ethyl ester, followed by saponification in methanol/sodium hydroxide and ether extraction of the free acid. Substrates were polarized either as saturated aqueous solutions, or as the neat acid, in the presence of 15mM OX 63 radical (GE Healthcare, Amersham UK), with the exception of [1,3-13C2] ethyl acetoacetate, which was polarized as the neat ester in the presence of 30% DMSO and 15mM AH11501 (GE Healthcare, Amersham UK). Each preparation contained 1.2mM gadolinium chelate (Dotarem) and samples were polarized in an alpha prototype polarizer (Oxford Instruments, UK) at their optimal microwave frequency (~93.965GHz, 100mW) for approximately 90 minutes before dissolution. Experiments in vivo were performed in a vertical 9.4cm bore magnet at 9.4T (Oxford Instruments, UK) with a Varian INVOA Unity Plus spectrometer. A 24-mm surface coil was placed either directly over the heart/liver region (EAcAc, AcAc, HBFA) of a non-tumor bearing mouse, or over the tumor of an EL-4 tumor bearing C57B/6 adult female mouse (AcAc, NaHB, HBFA). Following dissolution, 0.2mL of hyperpolarized fluid was injected intravenously through a tail-vein catheter (final concentration of each substrate, EAcAc: 80mM, AcAc: 50mM, NaHB: 40mM HBFA: 60mM). 13C spectra were acquired without slice selection for up to one-minute following injection. Data were collected with a nominal flip angle of 10° as follows – EAcAc: 8kHz, 1536 points, T2 = 0.2s, T2* = 0.5ms; NaHB: 8kHz, 1536 points, T2 = 1s, T2* = 0.8ms; AcAc: 8kHz, 432 points, T2 = 1s, T2* = 1ms; HBFA: 18kHz, 3456 points, T2 = 1s, T2* = 0.1ms. Acquisition began approximately fifteen seconds after injection of the hyperpolarized substrate, with the summation of approximately the first fifteen seconds of data after acquisition presented below (Figure 1).

Results
EAcAc, AcAc and HBFA can be polarized to a high degree and exhibit long T1 values in vivo. NaHB, with its substantially lower polarization and T1 could be observed in vivo, but without detection of further metabolism. Metabolites formed during the course of the experiment are labeled with broken black arrows; expected but unobserved metabolites are marked with broken blue arrows. EAcAc (A) is converted rapidly into AcAc with an apparent rate constant of 0.043s⁻¹; this likely takes place in the blood due to non-specific esterase activity. AcAc (B) and NaHB (C) did not appear to be metabolized further, whereas labeled acetoacetate (1-2% of the HBFA peak intensity) was observed after administration of hyperpolarized HBFA (D). Modulation of metabolism was attempted by co-injection of each hyperpolarized tracer with equimolar amounts of its partner metabolite, but this did not yield any change in the observed metabolism. Some animals were also fasted for 24 hours prior to the experiment with a view to increasing endogenous ketone body levels; again, no significant changes were detected in the metabolism of these hyperpolarized tracers.

Discussion
D-β-3-hydroxybutyrate dehydrogenase, the enzyme that catalyzes the interconversion of D-β-3-hydroxybutyrate and acetoacetate is a mitochondrial, membrane-bound enzyme. The reaction is thought to be near-to-equilibrium and therefore the proportion of these two metabolites has been used as an indicator of the intramitochondrial NAD⁺/NADH ratio. Since these substrates must cross both the plasma and mitochondrial membranes before metabolism can occur it was thought that this might limit observable metabolism in the hyperpolarized 13C experiment and therefore we also used membrane permeable ethyl acetoacetate. However, while the ester was rapidly metabolized into acetoacetate, this was most likely due to esterase activity in vivo. Detection of hyperpolarized 13C labeled ketone bodies in vivo allows for the identification and quantification of ketone body metabolism in real time, providing valuable insights into metabolic pathways and their potential therapeutic targets.

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Figure 1: spectra showing the summation of approximately the first 15s of data acquired in vivo. A, B and D show spectra when the surface coil was placed over the heart/liver region; spectrum C shows the result when the coil was placed over an EL-4 tumor. Right: table showing the relative polarization of each substrate and their respective in vivo T1 values.