Feasibility and Reproducibility of Measurement of Skeletal Muscle Blood Flow, Oxygen Extraction and VO2 with Dynamic Exercise Using MRI

Kory W. Mathewson1, Mark Haykowsky2, and Richard B. Thompson1

1Biomedical Engineering, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, 2Faculty of Rehabilitation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Purpose: We propose a new imaging approach which interleaves complex-difference (CD)1 and susceptometry2 MRI pulse sequences for real-time imaging of skeletal muscle blood flow (SMBF) and venous oxygen saturation (SvO2), respectively, for the calculation of skeletal muscle oxygen consumption (VO2). The goal of this study was to determine the reproducibility of this approach during sub-maximal knee extensor (KE) exercise. There is currently no non-invasive method for measuring skeletal muscle VO2 and its determinants during dynamic exercise, which is necessary to expose mechanisms of dysfunction along the oxygen cascade in health and disease.

Methods: 9 healthy young (mean 31±6 yrs.) male subjects performed two 2-minute, 5-Watt, knee-extension exercise bouts, separated by a 10 minute recovery period, on an MRI-compatible KE ergometer that isolates the quadriceps muscle, within the bore of a 1.5T MRI scanner (Sonata, Siemens Healthcare, Erlangen, Germany). Measurements of femoral vein SMBF, using CD-MRI, and SvO2, using susceptometry MRI, were made at rest and continuously immediately (<1 second delay) post-exercise. CD-MRI is a subtractive flow imaging method, using flow encoding gradient pairs similar to phase contrast MRI, designed to remove static tissue signal and yield a projection whose intensity is proportion to flow.1 Susceptometry estimates SvO2 based on the deoxyhemoglobin-induced magnetic field shift within a cylindrical vessel, relative to surrounding reference tissue.2 Our custom pulse sequence interleaves CD flow and susceptometry acquisitions by including through-plane flow encoding gradients in a multi-echo gradient echo sequence (for quantification of magnetic field shift), with in-flow saturation of arterial blood signal. Typical acquisition parameters: 5mm slice thickness, 2mm in-plane resolution, TR/TE1/TE2 = 30ms/5ms/10ms, flip angle = 25°, FOV: 384x160mm, Venc = 170cm/s, temporal resolution = 60ms (CD flow) and 2.4s (susceptometry). VO2 was calculated, using Fick’s principle, as the product of SMBF and the arteriovenous oxygen difference (AVO2diff) calculated from arterial oxygen saturation (pulse oximetry), susceptometry measured SvO2 and the oxygen carrying capacity of hemoglobin, and an assumed hemoglobin level and hematocrit (Hgb = 146 g/L, Hct = 0.43).2 Mass of the quadriceps muscle was measured from volumetric anatomical images (assumed density = 1.06 g/mL) to index VO2 to exercising KE muscle mass. Test-retest reliability was measured by correlation, coefficient of variation (CV), and interclass correlation (ICC) of peak post-exercise SMBF, SvO2 and VO2, between the two trials.

Results: Fig. 1 shows a magnitude image of the femoral vein from a susceptometry acquisition, showing the saturated arteries (1A, B), a CD-MRI velocity projection image, with arterial signal saturated (1C), and the corresponding oxygen saturation map acquired immediately post-exercise (1D). Our interleaved CD/susceptometry protocol measured peak SMBF, SvO2 and VO2 in close agreement between the two trials (SMBF: 0.9±0.1 vs. 1.0±0.2 L/min/kg; SvO2: 43.2±13.5 vs. 40.9±13.1 %; VO2: 95.7±18.0 vs. 108.9±17.3 mL/min/kg). The CV for SMBF, SvO2 and VO2 was 7.6%, 15.6% and 12.3% respectively, the Pearson correlation was 0.828, 0.878, and 0.881 respectively and the ICC was 0.678, 0.878, and 0.800 respectively. Fig. 2 shows the group average normalized SMBF, SvO2 and VO2 time course data (test-retest). Mean quadriceps muscle mass was 2.43±0.31 kg.

Discussion: Simultaneous femoral vein blood flow, oxygen saturation and skeletal muscle VO2 measurements are feasible and reproducible immediately post-exercise (thus capturing peak exercise values). Peak values and time course data during recovery are in general agreement with previous reported values from invasive hemodynamic KE studies.3 Simultaneous measurement of SMBF and SvO2 enables the independent consideration of these physiologic factors as mechanisms of impaired VO2 in subjects with reduced exercise capacity. When combined with cardiac and vascular studies, these methods can investigate the relative importance of the mechanisms that contribute to reduced exercise capacity in common conditions including those at risk for or with heart failure.