


Prediagnostic Blood Metal Levels and the Risk of Parkinson's Disease: A Large European Prospective Cohort

Yujia Zhao, MSc,¹  Anushree Ray, MSc,^{1,2} Karin Broberg, PhD,³ Maria Kippler, PhD,³ Christina M. Lill, MD, MSc,^{4,5} Paolo Vineis, PhD,⁶ Verena A. Katzke, PhD,⁷ Miguel Rodriguez-Barranco, PhD,^{8,9,10} María-Dolores Chirlaque, MD, MHSc, PhD,^{10,11} Marcela Guevara, MD, PhD,^{10,12,13} Jesús-Humberto Gómez, MD,^{10,11} Johnni Hansen, PhD,¹⁴ Salvatore Panico, MD,¹⁵ Lefkos T. Middleton, MD, FRCP,⁵ Giovanna Masala, MD,¹⁶ Valeria Pala, ScD,¹⁷ Ana Vinagre-Aragon, MD,^{18,19} Maurizio Zibetti, MD, PhD,²⁰ Roel Vermeulen, PhD,^{1,21} and Susan Peters, PhD^{1*} 

¹Institute for Risk Assessment Sciences, Utrecht University, Utrecht, the Netherlands ²Institute for Stroke and Dementia Research, Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, Munich, Germany ³Institute of Environmental Medicine, Karolinska Institute, Stockholm, Sweden ⁴Institute of Epidemiology and Social Medicine, University of Münster, Münster, Germany ⁵Ageing Epidemiology Research Unit, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom ⁶MRC Centre for Environment and Health, School of Public Health, Imperial College London, London, United Kingdom ⁷Division of Cancer Epidemiology, German Cancer Research Center, Heidelberg, Germany ⁸Escuela Andaluza de Salud Pública, Granada, Spain ⁹Instituto de Investigación Biosanitaria ibs.GRANADA, Granada, Spain ¹⁰Centro de Investigación Biomédica en Red de Epidemiología y Salud Pública, Madrid, Spain ¹¹Department of Epidemiology, Regional Health

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*Correspondence to: Dr. Susan Peters, Institute for Risk Assessment Sciences, Utrecht University, Nieuw Gildestein, Room 3.59, Yalelaan 2, 3584 CM Utrecht, the Netherlands; E-mail: s.peters@uu.nl

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Council, IMIB-Arrixaca, Murcia University, Murcia, Spain ¹²Instituto de Salud Pública y Laboral de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain ¹³Navarra Institute for Health Research, Pamplona, Spain ¹⁴Danish Cancer Institute, Danish Cancer Society, Copenhagen, Denmark ¹⁵School of Medicine, Federico II University, Naples, Italy ¹⁶Institute for Cancer Research, Prevention and Clinical Network, Florence, Italy ¹⁷Epidemiology and Prevention Unit, Fondazione IRCCS Istituto Nazionale dei Tumori di Milano, Milan, Italy ¹⁸Movement Disorders Unit, Department of Neurology, University Hospital Donostia, San Sebastián, Spain ¹⁹Neurodegenerative Diseases Area, BioDonostia Health Research Institute, San Sebastián, Spain ²⁰Department of Neuroscience "Rita Levi Montalcini", University of Turin, Turin, Italy ²¹Julius Center for Health Sciences and Primary Care, University Medical Centre Utrecht, Utrecht, the Netherlands

ABSTRACT: Background: Metals have been postulated as environmental concerns in the etiology of Parkinson's disease (PD), but metal levels are typically measured after diagnosis, which might be subject to reverse causality.

Objective: The aim of this study was to investigate the association between prediagnostic blood metal levels and PD risk.

Methods: A case-control study was nested in a prospective European cohort, using erythrocyte samples collected before PD diagnosis.

Results: Most assessed metals were not associated with PD risk. Cadmium has a suggestive negative association with PD (odds ratio [95% confidence interval] for the highest quartile, 0.70 [0.42–1.17]), which diminished among never smokers. Among current smokers only, lead was associated with decreased PD risk (0.06 [0.01–0.35]), whereas arsenic showed associations toward an increased PD risk (1.85 [0.45–7.93]).

Conclusions: We observe no strong evidence to support a role of metals in the development of PD. In particular, smoking may confound the association with tobacco-derived metals. © 2023 The Authors. *Movement Disorders* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of International Parkinson and Movement Disorder Society.

Key Words: Parkinson's disease; metals; prospective exposure assessment; cohort study

Introduction

Parkinson's disease (PD) is the second most common neurodegenerative disease. Around 90% of PD cases are related to a variety of lifestyle and environmental factors.¹ Metals have been implicated in the pathogenesis of PD for many years.² For the general population,

metal exposures usually result from contaminated food or drinking water, cigarette smoking, air pollution, dental amalgam fillings, medication, and dietary supplements.³

We recently evaluated the epidemiological evidence of associations between metal exposure and PD risk in a systematic review.² We did not observe consistent associations with PD risk for most metals in meta-analyses. Notably, the research quality was greatly limited because of retrospective exposure assessment. Metal levels in human biofluids were mostly measured after disease diagnosis, and results were therefore possibly affected by reverse causality because patients with PD tend to change smoking and diet habits when experiencing clinical manifestations.⁴

To elucidate whether metal exposures represent genuine risk factors for PD, we assessed the association between PD risk and metal levels in blood samples collected several years before PD diagnosis, in a case-control study nested in the EPIC4PD cohort, a large prospective European study.⁵ Meanwhile, possible confounding of smoking was also explored for the effect of metals on PD, because smoking was reported to be inversely associated with PD risk,⁶ and cigarette smoke contains various metal species.⁷

Subjects and Methods

Study Population

The EPIC4PD study is based on 220,494 subjects from the general population residing in seven countries, within the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition (EPIC) study.^{5,8} Within EPIC4PD, 734 incident PD cases who received a diagnosis after the date of recruitment were identified through medical record linkage and neurologist validation.⁵ Here, we conducted a nested case-control study within the EPIC4PD cohort, including 362 incident PD cases for whom a baseline erythrocyte sample was available in the EPIC biobank. The reliability of the diagnoses was categorized into “definite,” “very likely,” “probable,” and “possible” (Supporting Information Data S1).⁵ One control subject per case matched by age at recruitment, sex, and study center was selected using incidence density sampling.

Measurement of Metal Levels

Metal concentrations in erythrocytes were measured by inductively coupled plasma mass spectrometry. Eleven elements were assessed: arsenic, cadmium, calcium, copper, iron, lead, magnesium, manganese, mercury, selenium, and zinc. Details were described in Supporting Information Data S2.

Statistical Analysis

Metal concentrations were compared among subjects with different smoking status. Correlations between metal levels and smoking intensity, represented by the reported number of cigarettes smoked per day at baseline when blood was collected, were tested by Spearman’s correlation (correlation coefficient, ρ).

Conditional logistic regression for the matched case-control sets was applied to estimate the odds ratio (OR) and 95% confidence interval (CI) of PD incidence associated with quartile categories of metal levels (based on the distribution among controls, denoted as Q1–Q4). Considering the recognized inverse association between smoking and the risk of PD,⁶ smoking status at recruitment (never, former or current smoker, and unknown) was deemed as a potential confounder in the conditional analyses. Other possible confounding factors, including alcohol consumption, coffee drinking, seafood and vegetable intake, education, body mass index, and physical activity, did not modify the risk estimated (all $P > 0.1$) and were not included in the models.

We performed stratified analyses by sex and smoking status (current, non-current, and never smokers) to test possible different effects. Two sensitivity analyses were conducted to test the robustness of our findings: (1) limiting analyses to PD cases diagnosed after 8 years (median) since recruitment (timing for blood collection) to reduce possible reverse causality, and (2) limiting analyses to PD cases with definite and very likely diagnoses. All analyses were carried out in R 4.1.3.⁹

Results

For PD cases, the median period between recruitment and PD diagnosis was 7.8 years (Table S1). At baseline, 13% of the cases were smokers, compared with 16% among controls ($P = 0.69$). Cadmium levels in current smokers were about 2.5 times higher than in never smokers (Table S3), and lead in current smokers was around 1.4 times higher compared with never smokers. Furthermore, cadmium and lead levels were both positively correlated with the number of daily smoked cigarettes ($\rho = 0.50$ and 0.26 , respectively).

Our analyses did not demonstrate obvious associations between assessed metals and the risk of PD (Table 1). Cadmium was indicated to be associated with a decreased risk of PD (ORs [95% CIs]: Q2, 0.59 [0.38–0.90]; Q3, 0.75 [0.48–1.15]; Q4, 0.70 [0.42–1.17]). However, the effects attenuated toward null when limited to never smokers (Fig. 1). Zinc showed a borderline positive association in the third quartile (1.54 [0.98–2.45]; $P = 0.064$), which became most pronounced among never smokers (1.81 [1.00–3.33]) (Fig. 1) and females (2.32 [1.16–4.63]) (Fig. S4).

TABLE 1 The association between prediagnostic blood metal concentrations and the risk of Parkinson's disease

Exposure category	PD cases, n	Control subjects, n	OR (95% CI) ^a	Smoking adjusted OR (95% CI) ^b
Arsenic				
Quartile 1	94	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	97	90	1.02 (0.66–1.57)	1.02 (0.66–1.58)
Quartile 3	76	90	0.78 (0.48–1.27)	0.78 (0.48–1.26)
Quartile 4	95	91	0.97 (0.61–1.56)	0.96 (0.60–1.55)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.46	0.47
Cadmium				
Quartile 1	118	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	71	90	0.59 (0.39–0.91)	0.59 (0.38–0.90)
Quartile 3	90	90	0.75 (0.49–1.15)	0.75 (0.48–1.15)
Quartile 4	83	91	0.68 (0.44–1.04)	0.70 (0.42–1.17)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.09	0.13
Calcium				
Quartile 1	80	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	82	90	1.14 (0.70–1.87)	1.14 (0.70–1.88)
Quartile 3	114	90	1.62 (0.98–2.68)	1.60 (0.97–2.66)
Quartile 4	86	91	1.20 (0.63–2.29)	1.16 (0.61–2.23)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.32	0.37
Copper				
Quartile 1	94	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	77	90	0.85 (0.55–1.31)	0.85 (0.55–1.31)
Quartile 3	90	90	1.01 (0.62–1.64)	1.01 (0.62–1.65)
Quartile 4	101	91	1.20 (0.70–2.08)	1.20 (0.69–2.08)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.84	0.83
Iron				
Quartile 1	97	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	82	90	0.84 (0.54–1.32)	0.84 (0.54–1.32)
Quartile 3	100	90	1.02 (0.62–1.68)	1.00 (0.60–1.65)
Quartile 4	83	91	0.82 (0.48–1.41)	0.82 (0.48–1.42)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.64	0.62
Lead				
Quartile 1	101	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	92	90	0.90 (0.60–1.36)	0.93 (0.61–1.41)
Quartile 3	91	90	0.85 (0.56–1.31)	0.87 (0.56–1.34)
Quartile 4	78	91	0.65 (0.38–1.11)	0.68 (0.39–1.16)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.09	0.12
Magnesium				
Quartile 1	88	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	92	90	1.06 (0.69–1.65)	1.05 (0.68–1.63)

(Continues)

TABLE 1 Continued

Exposure category	PD cases, n	Control subjects, n	OR (95% CI) ^a	Smoking adjusted OR (95% CI) ^b
Quartile 3	85	90	0.99 (0.63–1.57)	0.99 (0.62–1.56)
Quartile 4	97	91	1.12 (0.71–1.77)	1.12 (0.71–1.77)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.99	0.99
Manganese				
Quartile 1	97	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	99	90	1.02 (0.68–1.53)	1.01 (0.67–1.53)
Quartile 3	79	90	0.80 (0.52–1.24)	0.80 (0.51–1.25)
Quartile 4	87	91	0.87 (0.55–1.37)	0.86 (0.55–1.36)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.60	0.57
Mercury				
Quartile 1	95	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	82	90	0.87 (0.56–1.34)	0.88 (0.57–1.35)
Quartile 3	89	90	0.96 (0.60–1.54)	0.96 (0.60–1.54)
Quartile 4	96	91	1.10 (0.61–1.97)	1.11 (0.61–2.00)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.95	0.98
Selenium				
Quartile 1	90	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	103	90	1.14 (0.76–1.71)	1.12 (0.75–1.68)
Quartile 3	61	90	0.70 (0.45–1.09)	0.68 (0.43–1.07)
Quartile 4	108	91	1.28 (0.79–2.05)	1.25 (0.77–2.01)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.94	0.88
Zinc				
Quartile 1	72	91	1.00 [Ref]	1.00 [Ref]
Quartile 2	98	90	1.43 (0.92–2.21)	1.41 (0.91–2.18)
Quartile 3	103	90	1.53 (0.97–2.42)	1.54 (0.98–2.45)
Quartile 4	89	91	1.35 (0.80–2.27)	1.35 (0.80–2.28)
<i>P</i> for trend, linear			0.51	0.54

Abbreviations: PD, Parkinson’s disease; OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval; Ref, reference.

^aConditional logistic regression for the matched case-control sets.

^bConditional logistic regression for the matched case-control sets, adjusted by smoking status.

No effects were observed for the remaining metals: calcium, copper, iron, magnesium, manganese, mercury, and selenium.

Exposure-response trends were not observed from linear (Table 1) or spline regression for any of the assessed metals (Fig. S2). Effect estimates from sensitivity analyses limiting to late-diagnosed cases and definite and very likely cases were similar to those of the main analyses, despite the widening of CIs due to the smaller sample size (Fig. S5).

A few metals showed associations only among current smokers (Fig. 1). Increased lead levels were found to be associated with a decreased risk of PD among

current smokers (OR for highest quartile, 0.06; 95% CI: 0.01–0.35), also showing a clear linear trend (*P* = 0.007). The inverse associations persisted after further controlling for the number of cigarettes (data not shown). In contrast, a positive association was suggested between arsenic and PD risk when limited to current smokers (ORs [95% CIs]: Q2, 3.29 [0.97–12.3]; Q3, 1.81 [0.43–7.95]; Q4, 1.85 [0.45–7.93]).

Discussion

Our study is the first prospective study to investigate the role of metal levels in PD risk by assessing blood

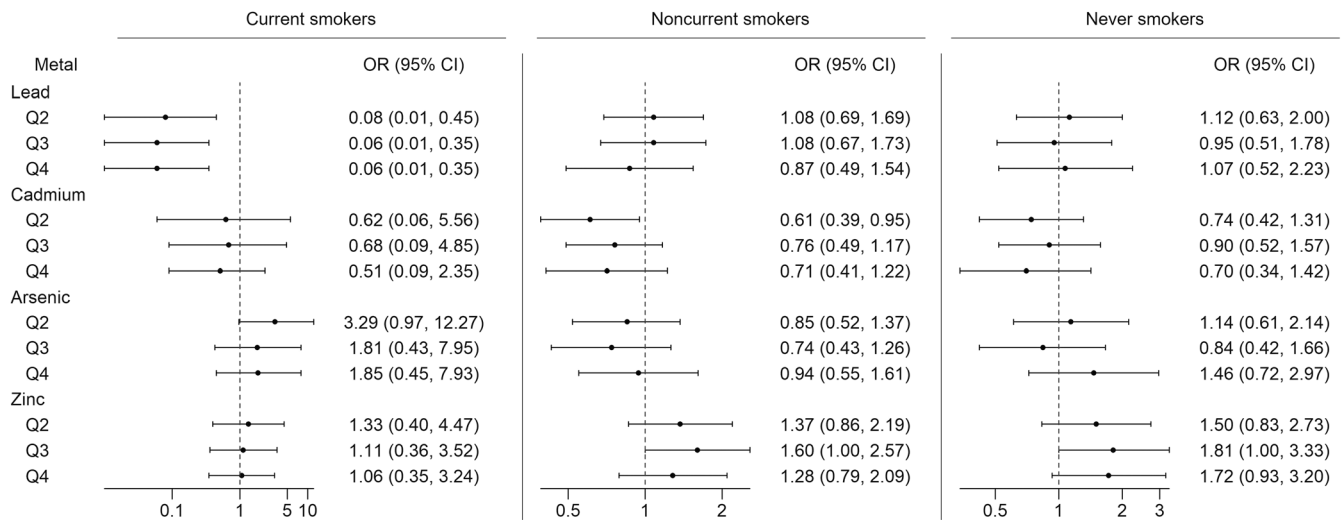


FIG. 1. The association between metal concentrations and the risk of Parkinson's disease by smoking status.

samples collected years before the clinical diagnosis. Our study did not provide robust evidence to verify the action of metals in the pathogenesis of PD.

Lead is a well-recognized toxicant primarily affecting the central nervous system.¹⁰ Two well-designed case-control studies found bone lead, which is a biomarker for cumulative lead exposure,¹¹ to be associated with increased risk of PD,^{12,13} indicating that long-term environmental lead exposure may be a risk factor for PD. In contrast, a strong inverse association between lead levels and PD risk was notable among current smokers in our study. A probable explanation is that lead is a surrogate measure or intermediate step of smoking in relation to PD, considering the positive correlation between lead levels and smoking intensity. This assumption is partly confirmed by our previous study on erythrocyte metal levels and the risk of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).¹⁴ In contrast with the observed decreased risk of PD, smoking is associated with an increased risk of ALS,¹⁵ and a positive association between blood lead and ALS was found in current smokers.

Cadmium was also possibly subject to the influence of smoking. In terms of OR magnitude, the negative associations between cadmium and PD were stronger among current smokers than never smokers. Because cadmium source attributes to cigarette smoking more than lead,¹⁶ it is more reasonable to speculate the participation of smoking in the relation of cadmium to PD. Future studies should aim to explore the modification effect of smoking in the relation between tobacco-derived metals and neurodegenerations and to help elucidate the etiology of the disease.

In this study, subjects with higher zinc levels showed an elevated risk of PD, especially among never smokers and females, but no clear dose-response trend was

observed. In our previous meta-analyses, zinc in the blood matrix was found to be lower in patients with PD compared with control subjects, with a pooled standardized mean difference of -0.53 (95% CI: -0.92 , -0.14) from 18 retrospective case-control studies.² The discrepancy with results in our study may be because of different biospecimens measured (blood matrix or erythrocytes) and possible reverse causality in previous studies. The precise nature and underlying mechanisms of the effect of zinc in the development of PD require further investigation.

We acknowledged some limitations in this study. First, metal levels in erythrocytes (with a life span of 120 days¹⁷) reflect recent exposures proximal to the time of blood sample collection. The biomonitoring at one time point could be inaccurate when metal exposures fluctuate over the lifetime. For example, unlike elevated levels in current smokers, cadmium concentrations in former smokers were similar as in never smokers (Table S3), suggesting one-time measurement cannot completely reflect past exposure. Second, blood samples were collected on average 8 years before PD diagnosis, but PD prodromal phase could occur as early as 20 years before the onset of motor symptoms.¹⁸ Therefore, we cannot fully exclude that metal alterations were secondary to diet and smoking habit change related to PD symptoms. However, similar results were obtained when limiting analyses to those who were diagnosed more than 8 years after recruitment, indicating residual reverse causality does not appear to be substantial. Third, although a positive association for arsenic was suggestive among current smokers, it makes less sense to postulate that smoking plays a role in the impact of arsenic on PD. The arsenic levels measured in our study mostly reflected organic species (arsenobetaine) from seafood. The mechanism

of arsenic in PD development warrants further exploration. Fourth, iron levels that we measured were a crude estimation of iron status in humans. Besides iron content in erythrocytes, iron status also relies on serum-based indicators, such as ferritin, transferrin saturation, and soluble transferrin receptor.¹⁹

In conclusion, our study did not find strong evidence to support the risk of PD altered by metal exposures. Smoking may confound the association with lead and cadmium. To date, this is the first study to evaluate prediagnostic metal levels in blood in the development of PD, minimizing reverse causation. Further investigations are needed to gain a better understanding of the relationship between smoking, metals, and PD. Furthermore, future studies of novel biomarkers of long-term metal exposure may provide more compelling evidence of the association between metals and PD. ■

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets used and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to privacy agreements.

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Supporting Data

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site.