

# Adenosine-induced ST segment depression with normal perfusion

Fadi G. Hage, Jaekyeong Heo, Ami E. Iskandrian

Division of Cardiovascular Disease, Department of Medicine,  
University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama, USA

## Abstract

**Background:** *Intravenous adenosine in conjunction with myocardial perfusion imaging is commonly used for the detection of coronary artery disease and risk assessment. We have previously shown that patients with ischemic changes on the 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG) in response to adenosine but with normal perfusion pattern have a benign outcome on short-intermediate follow-up. The long-term outcome of these patients is unknown.*

**Methods:** *Patients with ischemic ECG response ( $\geq 1$  mm ST depression) to adenosine infusion but with normal perfusion on single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) imaging in the absence of a history of myocardial infarction or coronary revascularization were followed up for mortality, myocardial infarctions, and coronary revascularization.*

**Results:** *The cohort consisted of 73 patients (81% women) who were followed up for mortality for a mean of  $61 \pm 15$  months. There were 10 deaths, and the cause of death was determined to be non-cardiac in half of those. Follow-up for the other endpoints was complete for  $21 \pm 10$  months during which no patient had myocardial infarction and seven underwent coronary revascularization.*

**Conclusions:** *Patients with ischemic ECG response to intravenous adenosine administration and normal perfusion on SPECT are at low risk of cardiovascular events. The ST segment response to adenosine in this setting is likely related to non-ischemic mechanisms. (Cardiol J 2009; 16, 2: 121–126)*

**Key words:** adenosine, stress test, ST depression, electrocardiogram, perfusion, imaging

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## Editorial p. 101

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### Introduction

Myocardial perfusion imaging using single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT) is widely used both for the detection of coronary artery disease and for risk assessment [1]. In the United States, more than one third of all SPECT

imaging is done using coronary vasodilators, most commonly with intravenous adenosine [2]. The risk of death or myocardial infarction in patients with normal images after adenosine has been shown to be around 1% per year [3–5], slightly higher than the risk in patients with normal exercise perfusion images [6–8], which is probably related to the higher cardiovascular risk profile of this patient population. Most patients with ST segment depression noted on the electrocardiogram (ECG) after adenosine

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**Address for correspondence:** Fadi G. Hage, MD, Zeigler Research Bldg 1024, 1530 3<sup>RD</sup> AVE S, Birmingham, AL 35294-0007, USA, tel: 205 934 2580, fax: 205 934 0424, e-mail: fadihage@uab.edu

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infusion have reversible perfusion defects [9]. Although it has been suggested that patients with ischemic ECG changes during adenosine infusion but with normal perfusion on SPECT images are at increased risk [10, 11], we have previously demonstrated that this population has a benign outcome on short to intermediate follow-up [12]. We report here on the largest cohort in the literature of such patients, and show that on long-term follow-up these patients continue to be at low risk.

## Methods

We studied patients with ischemic ST segment response to adenosine but with normal perfusion on SPECT imaging (Fig. 1). We previously reported the short-term outcome in a subset of these patients [12]. Patients were included if they underwent adenosine SPECT at the University of Alabama at Birmingham Nuclear Cardiology Laboratory between May 2001 and July 2003. Exclusion criteria included prior myocardial infarction, prior coronary revascularization, or the presence of left bundle branch block, non-sinus rhythm, or paced rhythm in resting ECG. Patients who were taking digitalis or had ST/T wave abnormalities that preclude the interpretation of the stress ECG response were also excluded.

Adenosine was administered intravenously at a standard infusion rate of 140  $\mu\text{g}/\text{kg}/\text{min}$  for five minutes. No exercise was done during the infusion. Technetium-99m sestamibi or tetrofosmin was injected at 3 min into the adenosine infusion. The SPECT gated images were acquired with an elliptical 180° acquisition using a dual head detector (45° RAO to 45° LAO) and 8 frames per R-R cycle as previously described [12]. The perfusion images were interpreted visually without attenuation correction, and quantitative analysis (polar images) was used to supplement the visual analysis. The left ventricular ejection fraction was measured by the method of Germano et al. [13].

A standard 12-lead ECG was performed on the same day and prior to the adenosine infusion. ECG was monitored continuously during infusion and a 12-lead ECG was printed every minute. An ischemic response was defined as 1 mm or greater flat or down-sloping ST segment depression, or a 1.5 mm or greater up-sloping ST segment depression in two or more contiguous leads at 80 ms from the J point using the TP segment as the isoelectric reference in accordance with accepted guidelines [14]. The changes had to normalize after the termination of the infusion. The physician reading the ECGs was blinded to the perfusion on SPECT imaging.

Follow-up was performed for all patients by a single physician. Outcomes of interest included cardiac death, non-fatal myocardial infarction, percutaneous coronary intervention, coronary artery bypass grafting, or death from any cause. The outcomes were determined by reviewing the medical records or by telephone interviews with the patients, or if the patient was deceased, with a first degree relative. Mortality was established by conducting a search of the US Social Security Death Master File for the entire cohort on 15 February 2008.

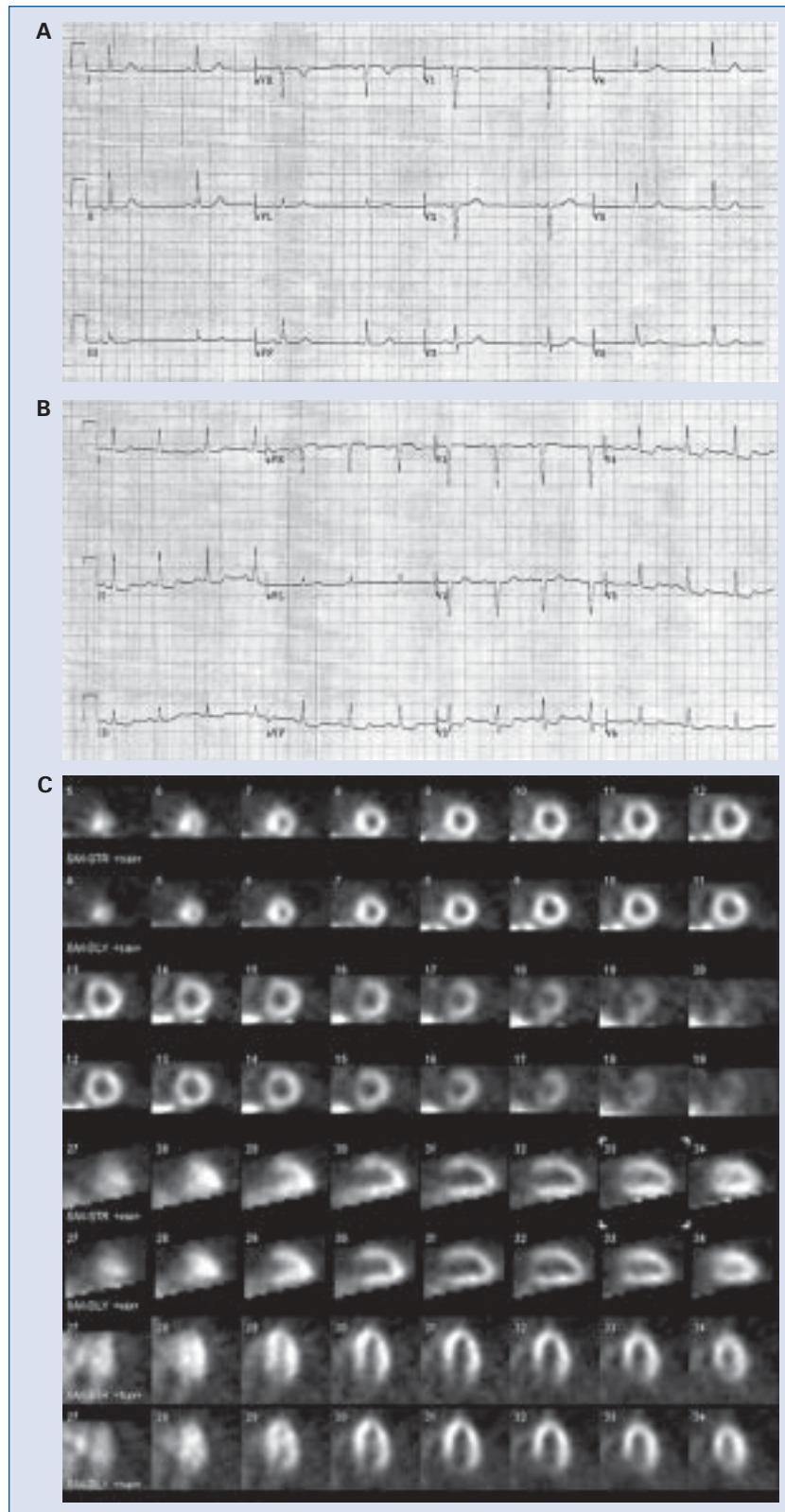
All statistical analyses were performed using the SPSS® version 11.5 for Windows® (SPSS® Inc., Chicago, IL). Categorical data were presented as frequencies and continuous variables were presented as means  $\pm$  standard deviations. The survival curve was constructed using the product-limit method (Kaplan-Meier).

The institutional review board for human research at the University of Alabama at Birmingham approved the study. There were no complications from this study.

## Results

During the specified period, 73 patients satisfied the study protocol and therefore constituted the study cohort. Baseline characteristics of these patients are summarized in Table 1. The left ventricular ejection fraction by gated SPECT was  $70 \pm 11\%$  (range 47–94).

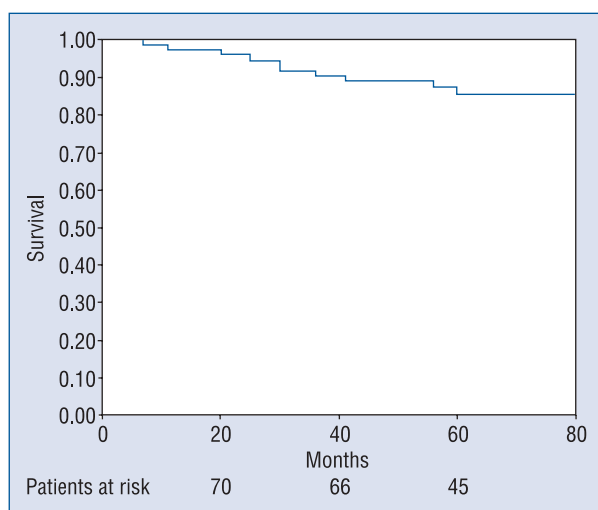
The patients were followed up for mortality for a mean of  $61 \pm 15$  (range 7–79) months. There were 10 deaths. The mean age of the patients at death was  $71 \pm 14$  years. These deaths occurred at a median of 30 (range 7–60) months from the adenosine SPECT studies. The cause of death was documented to be non-cardiac in 5 of these; 4 patients died with metastatic cancers and the 5<sup>th</sup> patient was 96 years old with end-stage dementia receiving end-of-life hospice care. The cause of death in the other 5 patients was not available to us. The Kaplan-Meier curve for survival of the cohort is shown in Figure 2. Follow-up for myocardial infarction and coronary revascularization was complete for  $21 \pm 10$  (range 1–38) months. During follow-up no patient had myocardial infarction. Seven patients underwent coronary revascularization; 4 had percutaneous coronary interventions (for single vessel coronary artery disease), and 3 had coronary artery bypass grafting. The coronary revascularizations were performed at a median of 2 (range 0–24) months after the adenosine SPECT. During a mean



**Figure 1.** A stress test performed on a 48-year-old woman with renal disease who underwent screening for coronary artery disease; **A.** A 12-lead electrocardiogram at rest shows sinus rhythm with no ST depression; **B.** During adenosine infusion her electrocardiogram demonstrates 1–2 mm down-sloping ST depression in V3–V5 as well as in leads II and aVF; **C.** The adenosine (panels 1, 3, 5 and 7) and rest (remaining panels) SPECT MIBI images demonstrated normal perfusion pattern; the left ventricular ejection fraction was normal (not shown). Over the next 3 years her renal function deteriorated and she is now listed for renal transplantation.

**Table 1.** Baseline characteristics.

Variable	(n = 73)
Age (years)	65 ± 12
Women	60 (81%)
Diabetes mellitus	20 (27%)
Hypertension	54 (74%)
Beta-blocker therapy	18 (25%)
Calcium channel blocker therapy	25 (34%)
Nitrate therapy	6 (8%)
Prior myocardial infarction	0
Prior coronary revascularization	0
Prior stress myocardial perfusion imaging	12 (16%)
Prior coronary angiography	1 (1%)



**Figure 2.** Kaplan-Meier curve showing the survival (from all-cause mortality) of patients with ST segment depression in response to adenosine but with normal perfusion.

follow-up of 5 years, the annual rate of all-cause mortality was 2.7% and cardiovascular mortality was 1.3% or less as the cause of death was unknown in half of the patients. On the other hand, during the mean follow-up of almost 2 years, the annual rates of myocardial infarction and coronary revascularization were 0% and 5.5%, respectively.

### Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the long-term prognosis of patients with ischemic ECG response to intravenous adenosine administration and normal perfusion on SPECT images. We report that in a cohort of 73 patients with these charac-

teristics, the annual cardiovascular mortality during a mean follow-up of 5 years was less than 1.3%. Similarly, the annual rates of myocardial infarctions and coronary revascularization during a shorter follow-up of almost 2 years were 0% and 5.5%, respectively. This study, therefore, re-enforces our previous conclusion that this population is at low risk [12].

Most patients with ST segment depression during adenosine infusion have reversible defects and only a minority demonstrate normal perfusion on imaging [15, 16]. The ST segment depression is thought to represent myocardial ischemia secondary to coronary steal. For this to occur in the setting of normal perfusion images after adenosine administration, a ‘perfectly balanced’ decrease in perfusion in the coronary artery tree due to a ‘perfectly balanced’ symmetric distribution of stenotic coronary artery lesions has to occur. This mechanism is hypothetical, but it is widely feared in the cardiovascular community and has been notoriously labelled as ‘balanced ischemia’. The high positive predictive value of ST response during adenosine infusion [9, 17–19] has raised the concern that balanced ischemia might be the reason behind the normal images, and that such patients should be considered at high-risk [10, 11]. It is well accepted now that ST segment depression during exercise stress testing does not add prognostic data to perfusion images [20]. In 2003 Abbott et al. [10] reported on 66 patients with ischemic ECG changes and normal perfusion after adenosine stress. During a follow-up period of 29 ± 12 months, 2 patients had cardiac death, 5 patients sustained non-fatal myocardial infarctions, and 9 patients underwent subsequent coronary revascularization. At the same time Klodas et al. [11] reported on 49 patients that they followed for 28 ± 20 months; in this population, the corresponding numbers are 2, 4, and 8 patients. When we examined a similar population of 65 patients from our institution with no prior myocardial infarction or coronary revascularization that we followed for 24 ± 8 months, we observed no cardiac death or myocardial infarction, while 6 patients underwent coronary revascularization [12]. Chow et al. [21] also reported on 72 patients with dipyridamole-induced ischemic ECG changes but normal perfusion using positron emission tomography. At a mean follow-up of 27 ± 13 months there were no cardiac deaths, 1 patient had non-fatal myocardial infarction, and 2 patients underwent coronary revascularization. Given that the conclusions from these studies were different, it is obvious that the rates of events do not match those seen in

patients with 3-vessel or left main coronary artery disease [22, 23] and therefore do not support the original hypothesis of balanced ischemia causing ECG changes, which was missed on perfusion imaging. This conclusion is supported by the benign outcome of these patients on long-term follow-up as shown here. Although false negative SPECT imaging with vasodilators does occur, and it should be suspected in the right clinical setting, the presence of ischemic ECG changes during stress testing does not seem to add to the prognostic power of this test. It should be noted that in the large study by Hachamovitch et al. [24], ischemic ECG changes in response to adenosine did not surface as a predictor of outcome in the overall risk prediction score after adjustments for other variables.

This ischemic ST response to adenosine, despite a normal perfusion pattern on imaging, occurs mostly in women (80–90%), as evidenced by our study and others [10–12, 21]. A similar higher preponderance of false positive ECG changes during exercise stress test in women [25, 26] suggests that there might be an intrinsic gender-related difference in the ST response to exercise as well as to vasodilation. This effect has been attributed to oestrogen [27–29]. To explore this, Henzlova et al. [30] examined the ECG response to exercise in a cohort of women with normal perfusion on SPECT imaging and found that exogenous oestrogen therapy increased the ST segment response to exercise. Several investigators have similarly suggested that oestrogen might have a digoxin-like effect on the ST segment [31–33]. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the ST segment response to adenosine that is encountered in the setting of normal perfusion on SPECT imaging occurs probably through a non-ischemic mechanism and is more prevalent in women. The benign long-term outcome of our population lends further support to this hypothesis.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, patients with ischemic ECG response to intravenous adenosine administration and normal perfusion on SPECT are at low risk of cardiovascular events, even after long-term follow-up. The ST segment response to adenosine, in this setting, is predominantly in females and is likely related to non-ischemic mechanisms.

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