Obesity — On or Off?

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Obesity imposes major health risks on the individual patient, and its prevalence is rapidly increasing. The heterogeneous and complex causes of this disorder, including interactions between genetic predisposition and environmental factors (almost all of which are unknown), are challenging to treat and to prevent.

A recent study by Dalgaard and colleagues forces us to rethink aspects of the heritable component of obesity. Dalgaard et al. characterized mice carrying a mutation in the gene encoding tripartite motif–containing 28 (Trim28). Trim28 is a zinc-finger transcription factor that enhances transcriptional repression — in other words, a mutation in one copy of Trim28 causes an unexpected heritable bimodal (on–off) obesity distribution that seems to depend on certain environmental factors to “flip the switch.” The average weight gain (approximately 7 g) in the obese (“on”) mouse with the Trim28 mutation was largely due to an increased mass of adipose tissue distributed uniformly across all adipose depots and a very slight increase in length (1 to 2%), whereas the weight in the “off” phenotype did not differ from that in wild-type animals. The approximate doubling of the adipose-tissue mass in the “on” phenotype was accompanied by a doubling in the number of adipocytes in the tissue.

However, the mechanism for the accumulation of adipose tissue in the obese Trim28 mice was difficult to understand. The characterization of energy homeostasis was puzzling because of the observed behavioral effects (anxiety, stress sensitivity, and nightly hypoactivity), which implicate the central nervous system in driving the “on” form of obesity in these animals. Their primary metabolic profiles and secondary metabolic complications were not substantially different from those of their nonobese Trim28 littermates.

To find the causal mechanisms of obesity in the Trim28 mice, the investigators compared differences in gene-expression profiles of the epididymal adipose tissue in the obese mice and those in the lean mice with such differences in wild-type mice that were fed a high-fat diet and those that were fed regular chow. They observed a low correlation between the differences in these two data sets, which suggests that the obesity caused by overeating in the wild-type mice and obesity caused by a deficiency in Trim28 have biologically different mechanisms. Because the Trim28 mutation was previously shown to have a silencing effect, the authors chose to focus on genes that were down-regulated in adipose tissue in Trim28 mice but that showed an opposite transcriptional pattern (i.e., one that was unaltered or up-regulated) in wild-type obese mice that were fed a high-fat diet. The investigators identified a set of nine imprinted genes and an imprinted gene network (which they called IGN1) that showed substantial differences in expression between these groups of mice, genes that were down-regulated in obese Trim28 mice. Some of these genes have been implicated in body size and weight control. However, the authors could find no differences in DNA methylation of these genes among the different groups of mice.

To test whether down-regulation of the IGN1 gene cluster could cause the bimodal (on–off) obesity distribution, the investigators knocked out some of the genes in the IGN1 cluster (Nnat and Peg3) reproduced the “on” Trim28 phenotype (Fig. 1). Mice that were deficient in either gene have a more pronounced phenotype than the Trim28 haploinsufficient mice. Thus, with strong circumstantial evidence for an epigenetic regulation of the on–off heritable pattern, the investigators con-
cluded that dysregulation of imprinted genes caused the Trim28-dependent bimodal obesity. Further work will be needed to identify the precise epigenetic mechanism by which the expression of these genes is down-regulated.

Are these findings relevant to obesity in humans? The bimodal obesity phenotype was obvious in the inbred Trim28 mice, and the authors obtained suggestive data that polyphenism is also manifested in human populations. They observed that TRIM28 expression levels in human adipose tissue sorts samples into one of two subsets. Persons with low levels of TRIM28 expression have IGN1 dysregulation and are more likely to be obese than are persons with high levels of TRIM28 expression, a finding that is in line with the observations in mice. In addition, they report that the distributions of body-mass index within a homogeneous pediatric cohort (4000 children of European ancestry) as well as within a heterogeneous cohort (persons of black American, Mexican-American, and Han Chinese ancestries) fit two distinct gaussian distributions rather than a single gaussian distribution. However, we note that there could be other explanations (e.g., skewed social and environmental stratification) for a bimodal distribution. The regulation of TRIM28 expression in humans remains unknown.

Does the study by Dalgaard and colleagues point to a new approach to the treatment of obesity? Although 40 to 70% of the variability in obesity among individuals is commonly attributed to genetic factors, less than 20% of the
variability is explained by known common genetic variants. The authors propose the existence of a mechanism that links the environment to gene expression (e.g., of \textit{TRIM28}) and thereby modulates the prevalence of obesity in the population. The authors speculate that environmental cues, such as ambient temperature, could be a modulator of the on–off obesity phenotype. Genetic contribution to polyphenism per se would be difficult to detect with the use of existing analysis strategies. Although genomewide association studies have yielded obesity-related loci, the study design assumes that the phenotype under scrutiny is normally distributed. The authors propose that mechanisms that cause a bimodal nonmendelian distribution of obesity exist in humans and that there may be signals of these mechanisms in current data sets.

Much research is needed before any conclusions on whether polyphenism contributes to the human obesity epidemic can be made. If it can be shown that environmental regulators cause obesity as a polyphenism, then modifying these environmental triggers would be an obvious opportunity to manipulate obesity.

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