Force-velocity and power characteristics of rat soleus muscle fibers after hindlimb suspension

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McDonald, K. S., C. A. Blaser, and R. H. Fitts. Force-velocity and power characteristics of rat soleus muscle fibers after hindlimb suspension. J. Appl. Physiol. 77(4): 1609–1616, 1994.—The effects of 1, 2, and 3 wk of hindlimb suspension (HS) on force-velocity and power characteristics of single rat soleus fibers were determined. After 1, 2, or 3 wk of HS, small fiber bundles were isolated, placed in skinning solution, and stored at −20°C until studied. Single fibers were isolated and placed between a motor arm and force transducer, functional properties were studied, and fiber protein content was subsequently analyzed by sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE). Additional fibers were isolated from soleus of control and after 1 and 3 wk of HS, and fiber type distribution and myosin light chain stoichiometry were determined from SDS-PAGE analysis. After 1 wk of HS, percent type I fibers declined from 82 to 74%, whereas hybrid fibers increased from 10 to 18%. Percent fast type II fibers increased from 8% in control to 26% by 3 wk of HS. Most fibers showed an increased unloaded maximal shortening velocity ($V_0$), but myosin heavy chain remained entirely slow type I. The mechanism for increased $V_0$ is unknown. There was a progressive decrease in fiber diameter (14, 30, and 38%) and peak force (38, 56, and 63%) after 1, 2, and 3 wk of HS, respectively. One week of HS resulted in a shift of the force-velocity curve, and between 2 and 3 wk of HS the curve shifted further such that $V_0$ was higher than control at all relative loads <45% peak isometric force. Peak absolute power output of soleus fibers progressively increased through 2 wk of HS but showed no further change at 3 wk. The results suggest that between 2 and 3 wk the HS-induced alterations in the force-velocity relationship act to maintain the power output of single soleus fibers despite a continued reduction in fiber force.

HS has also been found to alter the isometric and isotonic contractile properties of the intact soleus of the rat. Peak twitch and tetanic tensions, as well as twitch contraction and half-relaxation times, were reduced after HS (5, 9, 26). Furthermore, the maximal velocity of shortening, determined using both afterloaded ($V_{max}$) (5, 9) and unloaded ($V_0$) (5) contractions, was elevated after HS. These elevated speeds of shortening were associated with an increase in the relative amount of fast myosin isoforms (5, 9).

To assess the cellular basis of the functional changes induced by 0 G or HS, studies using single soleus fibers have been undertaken. HS caused a reduction in the size and peak tension-generating capacity of single fibers, which, in part, explained the drop in the peak tension of the intact soleus (9, 10, 24). Also, single-fiber $V_0$ (10, 17) and adenosine triphosphatase (ATPase) activities (17) were elevated after HS. Although the percentage of soleus fast fibers increased from 4% in control to 29% after 3 wk of HS, a population of fibers showed an increased $V_0$ and ATPase activity with no detectable fast myosin on sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE). Additionally, no increase in the percentage of hybrid fibers was observed (17). These findings suggest that the altered functional capacity of the intact muscle after HS or 0 G is, at least in part, explained by cellular changes in the individual skeletal muscle fibers.

In vivo muscles shorten against a load, and thus the important functional property to move a load over time is power output, which comprises both force and velocity. The effect of HS on the time course of change in power output of single soleus fibers has not been characterized. Consequently, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects of 1, 2, and 3 wk of HS on the force-velocity relationship and power characteristics of individual slow-twitch fibers from the soleus. A second objective was to reevaluate the effect of HS on the soleus fiber type distribution, with particular emphasis on the relationship between fiber $V_0$ and the myosin isozyme pattern.

MUSCLE ATROPHY and the loss of functional capacity are serious problems associated with spaceflight (27). During Skylab flights, astronauts experienced a 12% decrease in leg volume and a 20% decrease in muscle strength (3). The exact causes of the reduced muscle work capacity are unknown but could involve processes affecting the extent and frequency of motor unit activation, neuromuscular synaptic transmission, the coupling of muscle excitation and contraction, and the number and cycling rate of the force-generating cross bridges.

One animal model that has been developed to study the morphological and physiological changes in unloaded muscles is hindlimb suspension (HS). In the rat, HS has been found to elicit changes in muscle size, biochemistry, and function similar to those associated with zero gravity (0 G) (8–10, 12, 17, 23, 26). Both HS and 0 G induce the greatest changes in the slow antigravity muscles such as the soleus. For example, the relative atrophy observed with both HS and 0 G was soleus > gastrocnemius = plantaris > extensor digitorum longus (12, 23).

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tained in separate rooms, both of which were maintained at 23°C with a 12:12-h light-dark cycle.

**Muscle and single-fiber preparation.** After 1, 2, or 3 wk of HS or cage control, the rats were weighed and anesthetized with pentobarbital sodium (50 mg/kg body wt ip). The soleus muscle was isolated, weighed, and divided into bundles of ~50-100 fibers. The bundles were tied to glass capillary tubes and stored at -20°C in a skinning solution containing (in mM) 125 K-proionate, 2 ethylene glycol-bis(β-aminoethyl)ether-N,N,N',N'-tetracetic acid (EGTA), 4 ATP, 1 MgCl₂, and 20 imidazole, as well as 0.5% (vol/vol) glycerol for up to 4 wk (10). On the day of an experiment, a bundle was transferred to a dissection chamber that contained relaxing solution composed of (in mM) 20 imidazole (pH 7.0), 7 EGTA, 5.4 MgCl₂, 10 caffeine, 4.7 ATP, 0.016 CaCl₂, and 14.5 creatine phosphate, as well as sufficient KCl to adjust ionic strength to 180 mM. A single fiber was carefully isolated from the bundle, and a segment (~2 mm) of the fiber was transferred to an experimental chamber containing relaxing solution. The fiber was mounted between a force transducer (model 400, Cambridge Technology, Cambridge, MA; sensitivity 2 mV/mg) and an isotonic DC torque motor (model 300H, Cambridge Technology), as described previously in detail (20). Fiber segments were exposed for 1 min to relaxing solution containing 0.5% Brij-58 (polyoxyethylene 20 cetyl ether; Sigma Chemical). This treatment disrupted sarcoplasmic reticulum membranes and improved the resolution of sarcomeres. The segment length was adjusted to a sarcomere spacing of 2.6 μm, and a Polaroid photograph was taken while the fiber was briefly suspended in air. From the photograph, the fiber diameter was measured at three equal-distant locations along the fiber and the average fiber diameter was determined. Fiber cross-sectional area was calculated by assuming a circular cross section.

**Determination of peak force and tension.** The outputs of the force and position transducers were amplified and sent to a Commodore 64 microcomputer via a universal input-output board (Microworld Computers, Lakewood, CO). Force in relaxing solution was monitored, and the fiber was activated by transfer into activating solution containing (in mM) 20 imidazole (pH 7.0), 7 EGTA, 5.4 MgCl₂, 10 caffeine, 4.7 ATP, 107.8 KCl, 14.5 creatine phosphate, and 7.0 CaCl₂. The pCa of the relaxing solution was determined by Metzger et al. (18). The sarcomere spacing during peak activation was 2.5 μm. Peak force (in N) was determined in each fiber by computer analysis. Several different length steps were used for each fiber, and the slack distance was plotted as a function of the duration of unloaded shortening. The time course of change in soleus fiber diameter and peak force and tension is presented in Table 1. Diameters and peak force of the slow type I fibers progressively declined with increasing duration of HS. Peak tension...
TABLE 1. Diameter, peak force, and peak tension of slow type I fibers from soleus of control and HS animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fiber Diameter, 10^-6 m</th>
<th>Peak Force, 10^-6 N</th>
<th>Peak Tension, kN/m^2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n=20</td>
<td>66±2</td>
<td>36.8±1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 wk of HS n=19</td>
<td>57±1*</td>
<td>22.8±1.3*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 wk of HS n=25</td>
<td>46±2**</td>
<td>16.1±1.0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 wk of HS n=15</td>
<td>41±2**</td>
<td>13.5±1.1**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are means ± SE; n, no. of fibers. HS, hindlimb suspension. * Significantly different from control, P < 0.05; † significantly different from 1 wk of HS, P < 0.05; ‡ significantly different from 2 wk of HS, P < 0.05.

decreased significantly after 1 wk of HS but returned to the control level by 2 wk of HS.

The velocity and power of control and HS single soleus fibers are summarized in Table 2. The mean slow fiber \( V_o \) determined by the slack test was significantly elevated after 1 and 2 wk of HS and increased further at 3 wk of HS such that at this time point \( V_o \) was significantly higher than all other time points. The increased \( V_o \) occurred without the appearance of either the fast MHC or MLC. This can be clearly seen in Fig. 2 where the MHC (A) and MLC (B) profiles of soleus fibers from control (lanes 4–12) and after 2 wk of HS (lanes 13–17) are shown. For example, the fiber in lane 14 contained only slow myosin, yet its \( V_o \) was 2.14 fl/s. This velocity was higher than any of the control fibers shown, including the fast type IIa fiber in lane 10 (1.97 fl/s) and the hybrid fiber in lane 6 (1.54 fl/s). In this population of fibers, there was no correlation between the light chain (LC) LC2a/(LC2α + LC2e) ratio and \( V_o \). After 2 and 3 wk of HS, a few fast fibers were observed (10% at 2 wk and 25% at 3 wk). This population of fibers had an average diameter, peak force, tension, and \( V_o \) of 40 ± 3 μm, 9.4 ± 1.5 × 10^{-5} N, 73 ± 6 kN/m^2, and 4.27 ± 0.36 fl/s, respectively.

The force-velocity curves of the fibers from each group are shown in Fig. 3. After 1 and 2 wk of HS the curves were shifted significantly upward compared with the
FIG. 2. Sodium dodecyl sulfate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) of single rat soleus fibers. Lanes 1–3 are myosin standards prepared from soleus, red, and white regions of gastrocnemius, respectively. Lanes 4–17 represent individual fibers, extracts of which were divided equally and assayed on 5\% gel separating myosin heavy chain (MHC) isoforms (IIa, IIx, IIb, and I) (A) and 12\% gel showing slow (LC_{1s} and LC_{2s}) and fast (LC_{1f}, LC_{2f}, LC_{3f}) myosin light chains (LC; B). Lanes 4–12 and 13–17 are fibers from control and after 2 wk of HS, respectively. Fiber type and its maximal unloaded velocity of shortening [V_{max} in fiber lengths (fL)/s] in each lane are as follows: lane 4, slow type I, 1.08; lane 5, slow type I, 1.27; lane 6, hybrid, 1.54; lane 7, slow type I, 1.91; lane 8, fast type I, 1.31; lane 9, slow type I, 1.74; lane 10, fast type IIa, 1.95; lane 11, slow type I, 1.45; lane 12, slow type I, 1.31; lane 13, slow type I, 1.49; lane 14, slow type I, 2.14; lane 15, slow type I, 1.84; lane 16, slow type I, 1.58; lane 17, slow type I, 1.83.

control values such that elevated velocities were observed at a given load. After 3 wk of HS, the force-velocity curve showed an additional upward shift toward the relationship observed for the fast type IIa fibers. The curve at 3 wk of HS was significantly different from those of the control and after 1 and 2 wk of HS.

Consistent with the reports of others (15, 21), V_{max} calculated using the straight line form of the Hill equation was less than V_{max} determined by the slack test (Table 2). V_{max} values at 1, 2, and 3 wk of HS were significantly higher than control values but not significantly different from each other.

The power curves of the slow fibers from each group are shown in Fig. 4. The absolute power output of a fiber was calculated by multiplying the fiber's absolute force times the velocity of shortening attained at that given force. The power output curve of a fiber was generated by making this calculation for each point of a fiber's force-velocity curve. The absolute power generated by control fibers was significantly greater than that generated by the HS fibers at all loads. The power output of the slow fibers at 1 wk of HS was significantly greater than that of the slow fibers at 2 and 3 wk of HS, but for loads >30\% it was similar to the average values for the fast fibers at 2 and 3 wk of HS. The absolute power output was similar among the slow fibers at 2 and 3 wk of HS.

The mean peak fiber power outputs for the slow type I fibers are presented in Table 2. The peak fiber power output was significantly reduced after 1 wk of HS and continued to fall significantly through 2 wk of HS. However, by 3 wk of HS, peak power output had reached a plateau.

Representative SDS-PAGE gels of individual soleus fibers from control and after 1 and 3 wk of HS are shown in Fig. 5, and the fiber type distribution is summarized in Table 3. The number of slow fibers showed a progressive decrease with HS. In contrast, the percent fast fibers showed no change at 1 wk but was increased at 3 wk, and the hybrid population showed a transient increase at 1 wk of HS. The MLC stoichiometry was not significantly altered by HS. The LC_{1s}/(LC_{1f} + LC_{2s}) ratio was 0.512 ± 0.007 and 0.514 ± 0.014 in slow soleus fibers from control and after 3 wk of HS, respectively.

DISCUSSION

Both space travel and land models of weightlessness result in changes that are muscle specific. There is prefer-
ential atrophy in muscles composed mainly of slow-twitch fibers relative to fast-twitch muscles (5, 9, 10, 12). Accordingly, functional changes induced by HS are most prevalent in slow-twitch muscles. For example, after HS, peak force-generating capacity was more dramatically reduced in the slow-twitch soleus muscle than in the fast-twitch muscles [extensor digitorum longus and superficial vastus lateralis (9) and plantaris (5)]. In addition, $V_{\text{max}}$ of the soleus muscle was significantly increased after HS, whereas $V_{\text{max}}$ of fast-twitch muscles was unaffected by HS (5, 9). Recently, single-fiber studies have been conducted in an attempt to understand the cellular processes responsible for the functional changes of the atrophied soleus. The force-generating capacity of single soleus fibers was reduced and $V_c$ was elevated after HS (10, 17, 24). One objective of this study focused on the effects of varying duration of HS on the force-velocity relationship of single soleus muscle fibers and examined whether increased shortening speeds would offset decreases in fiber force to maintain fiber power output. The important findings were that 1) HS caused an alteration in the force-velocity relationship such that for a given relative fiber load the shortening velocity was increased; 2) the increase at 3 wk of HS was greater than at 1 and 2 wk of HS, which suggests that the HS-induced alteration in the force-velocity relationship had not reached a new steady state by 3 wk; 3) absolute power output of single soleus fibers decreased significantly after 1 wk of HS, continued to decline through 2 wk of HS, and reached an apparent steady state by 3 wk of HS; and 4) the percentage of fast fibers in the soleus increased to 26% by 3 wk of HS, yet the majority of the fibers showing an increased $V_c$ contained only the slow type I myosin isozyme. $V_{\text{max}}$ values calculated from the force-velocity data are in close agreement with others previously measured in rat skinned soleus fibers (1). These values were lower than $V_c$ values determined by the slack test method. This is consistent with the previous reports of Julian and Moss (15) and Moss (20). They suggest that compression at the fiber ends may cause slight distortions and decreased shortening velocity under load and that force-velocity determination of $V_{\text{max}}$ may miss the fast phase of shortening (15).

Locomotion involves dynamic contractions under varying degrees of load. The important functional property involved in the ability to move a load is power output. We constructed power curves of control and HS single soleus fibers from their respective force-velocity relationships. The fibers generated peak power at loads between 15 and 30% of $P_o$, which corresponds to ~15–35% of $V_{\text{max}}$. This is in agreement with previous animal and human studies of individual muscles where peak power was obtained at loads considerably below 50% of $P_o$ and velocities ~25% of $V_{\text{max}}$ (4, 25). HS did not affect the load and velocity at which the single fibers produce peak power. However, peak power and the power generated at all loads were dramatically reduced after 1 wk of HS and further declined by 2 wk of HS. By 3 wk of HS, soleus fibers exhibited power curves that were not different from fibers after 2 wk of HS. The power curves were similar even though absolute force continued to decline. The decreased force production of the fibers appeared to have been offset by an increased shortening velocity, such that power output between 2 and 3 wk of HS was maintained. These findings suggest that during muscle atrophy certain cellular changes occur that are functionally advantageous. In this case, the alteration of the force-velocity relationship resulted in the maintenance of power output.
FIG. 5. Representative 12% SDS-PAGE gels of single soleus fibers from control (A) and after 1 wk of HS (B) and 3 wk of HS (C). Lanes 1 and 2, slow and fast myosin standards, respectively. MHC-s, slow MHC; LC1-s/LC2-s and LC1-f/LC2-f, slow and fast myosin LCs 1 and 2, respectively. All fibers are slow except 5A (lane 3 (fast), lanes 5 and 9 (hybrid)), 5B (lanes 6 and 14 (fast), lanes 4 and 13 (hybrid)), and 5C (lane 8 (fast), lanes 4 and 11 (hybrid)).
was identified as type IIa or IIx (or combination of IIa HS to increase fast myosin in the soleus, and the protein pion et al. (2) and Diffee et al. (6). Both groups found the transient increase in hybrid fibers supports the hypothesis that the HS-induced increase in fast fibers re-

cessations at the single-fiber level.

A second objective of this study was to reevaluate the effect of HS on the soleus fiber type distribution and to assess the MLC stoichiometry. In a recent publication (17), we had observed HS to elicit a progressive increase in the number of fast fibers in the soleus from a control value of 4% to 7, 10, and 29% at 1, 2, and 3 wk of HS, respectively. As fibers transform from slow to fast, one would expect to observe at least a transient increase in the number of hybrid fibers (fibers containing both slow and fast myosin). However, <1% of the fibers showed a hybrid myosin profile (see Table 4 in Ref. 17). We hy-


to insufficient loading of the gel. In this study, we eval-


Parameters at 80°C for 1 wk or 2°C for 3 wk, and after I and 3 wk

| TABLE 3. Fiber type distribution in soleus of control and after 1 and 3 wk of HS |
|-----------------|----------|--------|-------|
|                 | n        | %Slow  | %Fast | %Hybrid |
| Control         | 195      | 82     | 8     | 10      |
| 1 wk of HS      | 271      | 74     | 8     | 18      |
| 3 wk of HS      | 246      | 69     | 26    | 5       |

n, No. of fibers assayed.

despite continued reductions in force. It is important to remember, however, that the power outputs of the fibers from animals after 2 and 3 wk of HS were markedly lower than control outputs.

The effect of 4 wk of HS on the absolute force-velocity relationship of the intact soleus was recently reported by Diffee et al. (5). Using their curve, we calculated peak soleus muscle power output to have declined ~50% after 4 wk of HS. The results from the present study indicate that single-fiber peak power output was reduced 49 and 45% after 2 and 3 wk of HS, respectively. Collectively, these findings suggest that the decrease in soleus muscle power output likely occurs within the first 2 wk of HS and that the decline can be primarily attributed to deficiencies at the single-fiber level.

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