BACKGROUND – VIIP Syndrome

Visual Impairment and Intracranial Pressure (VIIP) syndrome is a constellation of ophthalmic changes that occurs in astronauts following long-duration spaceflight. Understanding the mechanisms that lead to the ocular changes involved in VIIP is of critical importance for space medicine research.

Cephalad fluid shift hypothesis: In microgravity, the pressure gradient in the body is significantly reduced, resulting in higher pressures in the head, producing increased Intracranial Pressures (ICP).

Some astronauts present with optic nerve distension and/or a kink in the optic nerve after return to Earth, strongly suggesting that axial distension and tissue remodeling in response to ICP increases may be taking place.

The goal of this work is to characterize the mechanical properties of the optic nerve sheath to better understand its biomechanical response to increased ICP.

METHODS

1. Mechanical testing system allowed for unconfined lengthening, twisting, and circumferential distension
2. ICP was cycled between 0-60 mm Hg
3. Outer diameter and length of the ONS were recorded
4. Tests were performed under variable axial loads

RESULTS

Response of the ONS to Pressure

Representative pressure-diameter response of the ONS at different axial loads. Note that the curves cross over at ~11 mmHg (black circle), suggesting that at this pressure the diameter does not change despite variations in axial loading.

Representative change in length in response to pressure. The length of the ONS adjusts to maintain a constant diameter at ~11 mmHg.

Axial Alignment of Collagen Fibers During Loading

Second harmonic generation microscopy of collagen architecture in the porcine ONS under different loads. Axial stretch appears to affect collagen orientation and microarchitecture significantly more than ICP.

CONCLUSIONS

- The ONS is a mechanically complex structure
- Crossover point at 11 mmHg of the pressure-diameter curves
- Diameter remains constant at this pressure regardless of the axial load that is applied
- Corresponds to in vivo ICP levels for pigs (Kaiser et al., Laboratory animals, 2007)
- The observed helical and axial orientation of the collagen fibers may explain this behavior
- Such mechanical behavior would avoid compression of the optic nerve during change in gaze angle
- Despite large variations in strain, the stress remained nearly constant between samples
- Remodeling of the ONS may be targeted at maintaining this homeostatic stress target

Future studies will involve studying the effects of varying ICPs for extended periods of time on the mechanical properties of the ONS. In addition, we will include these observations into current computational models of the optic nerve to help improve their accuracy and enable prediction of possible risk factors of VIIP.

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