

Cross-Sectional Analysis of Pyrroles in Psychiatric Disorders: Association With Nutritional and Immunological Markers

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Abstract *Background: Psychiatrists started using urine pyrroles (hydroxyhemopyrrolin-2-one, HPL) to diagnose psychiatric disorders many years ago. The biological origins of HPL are not known, nor are the causes of elevated urinary pyrrole excretion well understood.*

Methods: In the present study we analyzed the level of pyrroles in 148 patients with schizophrenia, 135 patients with bipolar disorder, 97 patients with depression, 119 patients with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and compared these data with the results of pyrrole tests for patients with non-psychiatric conditions and healthy volunteers.

Results: According to our data, urinary pyrrole concentrations tended to be high in patients with psychiatric disorders, but elevated level of pyrroles was not specific for only these patients. We found evidence of an allergy related component in the fact that elevated pyrrole levels were significantly more prevalent in subjects with elevated histamine values. A role of intestinal bacteria, or imbalances in intestinal bacterial metabolism, was also suggested based on the found relationship between elevated pyrrole levels and elevations in indicans and urobilinogens. In addition, our data demonstrated that subjects with severely elevated pyrrole levels were deficient in nutrients such as zinc, vitamin B₃, and vitamin C.

Conclusion: Thus, pyrrole excretion seems to be a component of illness in general and not strictly psychiatric disorders.

Background

Interest in pyrroles as markers of psychiatric disorders started Dr. Abram Hoffer's discovery that "Maue Factor", a pyrrole named for its lavender appearance in urine chromatograms stained with Ehrlich's reagent,¹ was prominent in urine samples from schizophrenics.^{2,3} After considerable efforts,⁴⁻¹⁰ Maue Factor was determined to be the hemopyrrole derivative hydroxyhemopyrrolin-2-one (HPL). Hoffer claimed that HPL tended to decrease when a patient recovered from illness, and increased when illness reappeared; moreover, treatments with vitamin B₆ and zinc were reported to

decrease HPL levels and were associated with patient recovery.¹¹ Some psychiatrists, particularly those with interests in orthomolecular medicine, have used HPL as a clinical tool for diagnosing and following the progression or remission of mental illness.¹¹⁻¹⁷ Data from these studies suggest that roughly one-third of schizophrenia patients tested had elevated pyrroles, but high urine HPL levels were not limited to schizophrenia, as a variety of conditions and stresses were associated with urine pyrrole excretion.

The biological origins of HPL are not known, nor are the causes of elevated urinary pyrrole excretion understood. Proposed

mechanisms for HPL formation and accumulation in the body include intake from dietary sources, heme breakdown, or altered heme biosynthesis, the latter perhaps occurring with the aid of gut flora.¹⁸ Irvine has proposed that HPL is a metabolite of heme synthesis intermediates porphobilinogen and prophyryns, as these are structurally very similar to HPL.⁹ Increases in pyrrole levels and excretion may occur as a result of stress-induced changes in intestinal permeability, which in turn leads to increased pyrrole absorption. To the extent that pyrrole excretion may be an indicator of heme breakdown due to emotional stress, oxidative stress, or nutrient deprivation, a study of the correlation between urinary pyrroles and nutrient levels should be of interest.

At the Riordan Clinic, urinary pyrrole measurements have been part of the protocol for diagnosing psychiatric disorders and other disorders for decades. Access to the clinic's database has enabled us to examine pyrrole levels in patients with a variety of disorders and to see how they correlate with the concentrations of other key nutrients or metabolites. The present manuscript describes our analysis and evaluation of these data, and provides some assessment of the potential value of monitoring pyrrole levels in patients with psychiatric disorders.

Methods

All laboratory tests were conducted by the Riordan Clinic Bio-Center Laboratory (Wichita, KS), a licensed and certified medical laboratory (<http://www.riordanclinic.org/laboratory/catalog.pdf>). Handling of laboratory data by our institute is done in full compliance with HIPAA regulations. Assay methods for the various vitamins, minerals, and lipids for which data are presented here were conducted by the Bio-Center Laboratory using standard methodologies. Urine HPL levels was quantified using a colorimetric assay, provided precautions are taken to keep it stable prior to and during the assay. Statistical analyses were carried out using the Excel spreadsheet program and graphs, with regression data fits where appropriate, were

constructed using the Kalaidagraph program (Synergy Software, Reading PA).

Inclusionary criteria used were patients with a diagnosis of psychiatric disorder who came for treatment at the Riordan Clinic and had evaluations that included nutritional and pyrrole tests. No other demographic data except age and sex were recorded for this study.

The diagnosis of psychiatric disorder was made by medical doctors using Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV criteria based on direct observations plus reports from parents and other care takers.

Results

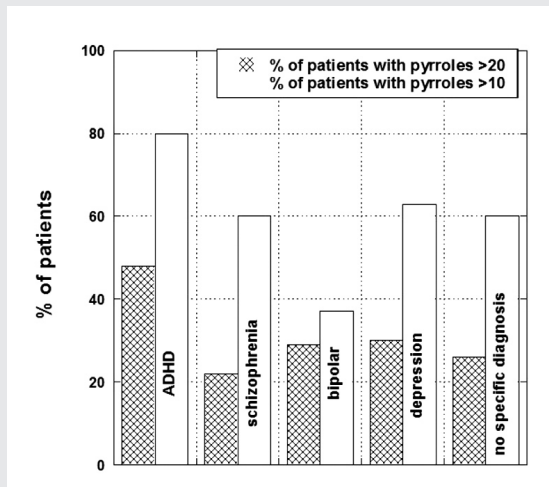
We analyzed urine pyrrole data in 119 patients with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 148 patients with schizophrenia, 135 patients with bipolar disorder and 97 patients with depression. We initially examined amino acids, key precursors for neurotransmitters. We also investigated other parameters consider relevant to psychiatric disorders, such as toxic metals, essential minerals, and fatty acids. Tests for psychiatric disorder groupings show elevated average values of hair aluminum, lead (in patients with schizophrenia), iron (total and hair), arachidonic acid to EPA ratio, omega 3 to omega 6 fatty acid ratios, and urine pyrroles. Deficiencies were found in the levels of essential metals magnesium, zinc and copper (serum). Some deficiencies and the metabolic imbalances in fatty acid, amino acid, mineral, and pyrrole levels in ADHD patients were analyzed previously.¹⁹

The percentage of patients with increased levels of pyrroles in comparison with patients without specific diagnosis (134 subjects) is shown in **Figure 1** (p.3).

According to these data the percentage of patients with the levels of pyrroles higher than 20 ug/dL was 48% for ADHD patients, 22% for patients with schizophrenia, 30% for patients with bipolar and depression and 26% for patients without specific diagnosis.

Pyrrole distributions in subjects with illnesses were analyzed by illness category, along with the distribution that would be

Figure 1. Frequency of the increased levels of pyrroles measured in patients with psychiatric diseases and subjects without specific diagnosis.



expected if all subjects were in the normal range. There was skew in the data indicating subjects with elevated pyrrole levels in groups of patients with psychiatric disorders. It is particularly acute in ADHD patients, of whom 48% had levels above the normal range. The median of pyrrole values outside the normal range were 47 ng/dL for patients with schizophrenia, 43 ng/dL for patients with bipolar disorder, 39 ng/dL for patients with depression and 44 ng/dL for patients with ADHD.

The proportion of subjects with pyrroles outside the normal range was similar to those seen in patients with other illnesses (26% of all subjects analyzed had pyrrole levels above 20 ug/dL), suggesting that pyrrole levels indicate illness in general and not necessarily psychiatric disorder.

To see if pyrrole levels were related to allergic reactions, we compared pyrrole levels with histamine and immunoglobulin levels. For histamine, data are shown in **Figure 2** (p.4).

There was a statistically significant correlation ($p < 0.001$) between histamine levels and pyrrole levels, and the vast majority of patients with elevated pyrrole levels showed elevated histamine levels also. For instance, for subjects with histamine levels below 53

ng/dL (the upper limit of normal range in our clinical laboratory), only 16% of subjects had elevated (> 20 ug/dL) pyrrole levels, with only 2% having pyrrole values above 40 ug/dL and 2% having values above 80 ug/dL. In contrast, 26% of subjects with elevated histamine levels had elevated pyrrole levels, with 9% showing values above 40 ug/dL and 4% showing values above 80 ug/dL. All subjects with pyrrole levels above 100 ug/dL had elevated histamine levels. Similar trends were observed with the immunoglobulins IgM. Relation between IgM and pyrroles is shown in **Figure 3** (p.4).

For abnormal levels of pyrroles (>20 ug/dL), 75% of the data showed IgM values higher than 100 mg/dL. The average level of pyrroles was 30 ng/dl \pm 8ng/dl for IgM<100 mg/dl, and 46 ng/dl \pm 40 ng/dl for IgM>100 mg/dL.

Elevated pyrroles are also thought to be related to intestinal issues. The urine indican test is considered an indicator of intestinal toxemia and overgrowth of anaerobic bacteria (indican is a product of bacterial tryptophan digestion), while urobilinogens are products of intestinal bacteria that can build up if the liver is overburdened. **Figure 4**, (p.5) shows how these parameters vary depending on urinary pyrrole levels. In both

Figure 2. Correlation between urine pyrrole levels and histamine in subjects with mental illnesses. A dot plot showing pyrrole distributions for normal versus elevated (> 53 ng/dL) histamine levels.

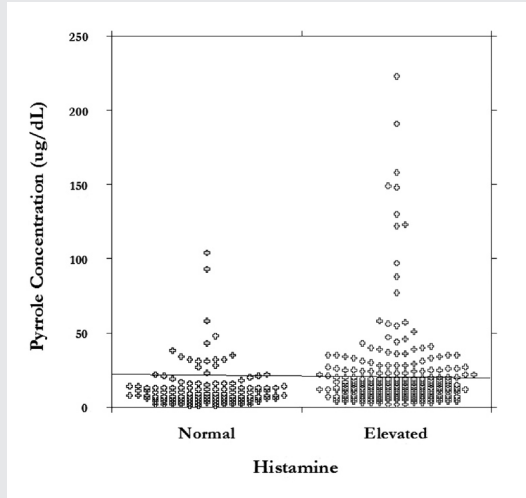
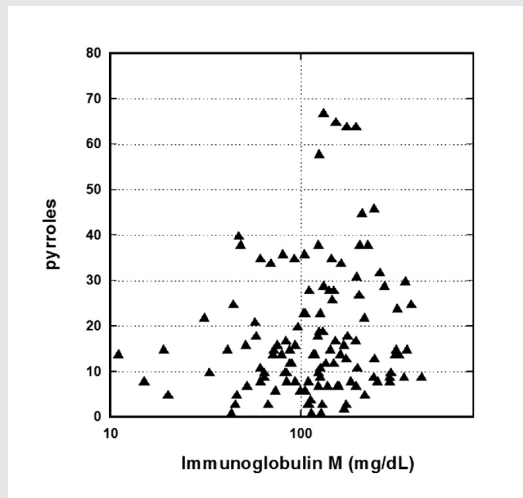


Figure 3. The relation between urinary pyrrole concentrations and Immunoglobulin M levels.



cases, elevated pyrroles were associated with elevated levels, supporting the hypothesis that intestinal bacteria overgrowth may be associated with excessive pyrrole excretion.

To determine if increased pyrroles secretion is accompanied by nutritional deficiencies, we compared urinary pyrrole con-

centrations with vitamins and minerals in blood for cases where both were measured on the same visit. Vitamins are natural barriers against infection and allergic reactions, as well as chemical balance of essential minerals. Examples of a relationship between urinary pyrroles and vitamin C or zinc are

Figure 4. The correlation between urinary pyrrole and urine indican concentrations. Graphs show mean indican levels for normal and various elevated pyrrole ranges.

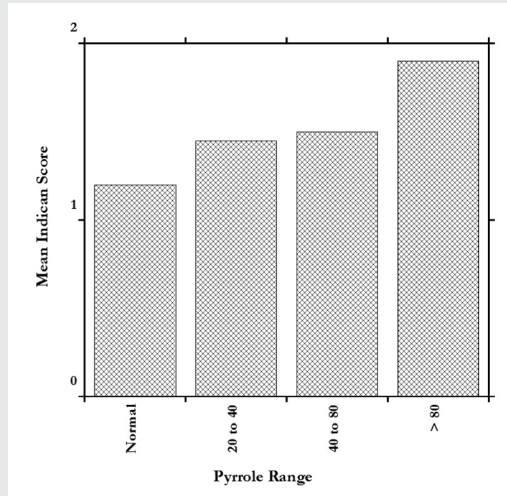
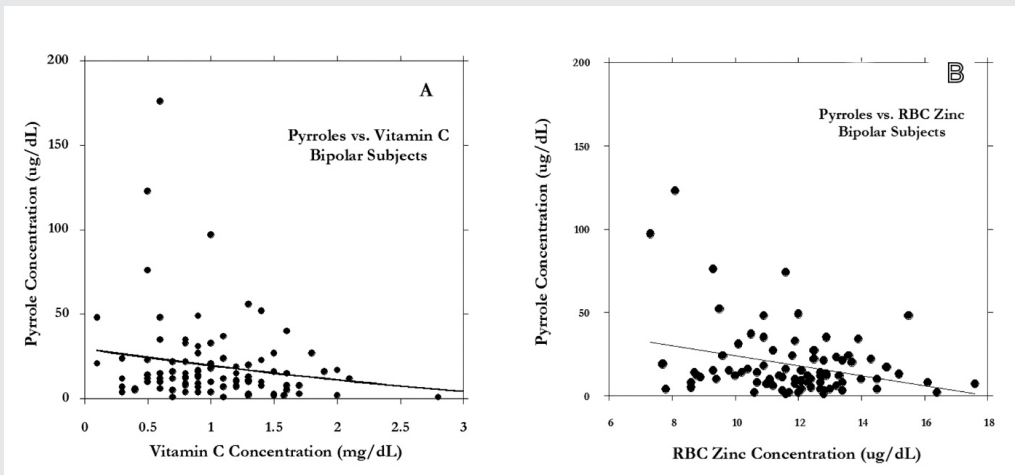


Figure 5. Effect of various nutrient levels on pyrrole excretion: (A) plasma vitamin C levels and (B) concentration of zinc in RBCs. The lines represent quadratic and linear data fits, and are for illustration purposes only.



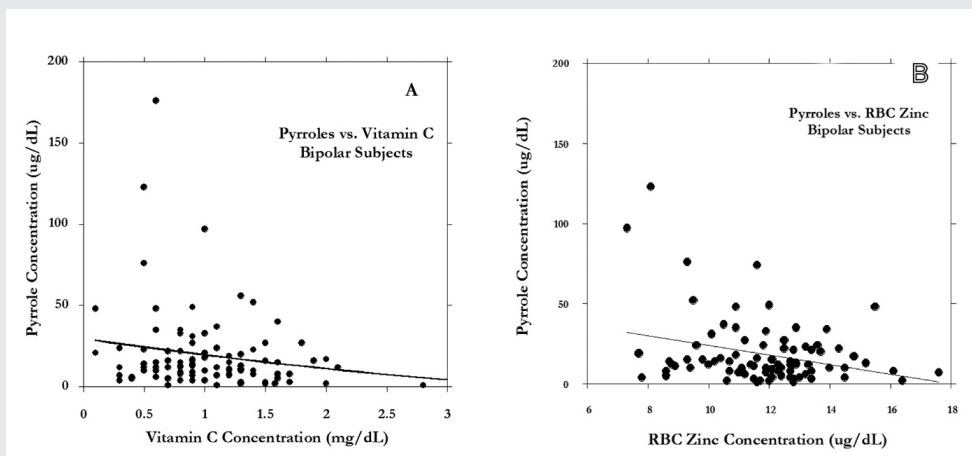
shown in Figure 5(a, b).

Vitamin C, vitamin B3, red blood cell zinc, and zinc to copper ratios were found in some psychiatric disorder groups to decrease with increasing pyrrole levels. Examining Figure 5, it appears that subjects with very high pyrrole levels (above 40 ug/dL) tended toward the left hand side of the horizontal

axis, suggesting that data points with very high pyrrole levels had low nutrient values. The potential link between nutrient levels and pyrrole levels deserves further systematic study.

At the Riordan Clinic, patients with psychiatric disorders are treated by attempting to restore proper mineral balances and

Figure 5. Effect of various nutrient levels on pyrrole excretion: (A) plasma vitamin C levels and (B) concentration of zinc in RBCs. The lines represent quadratic and linear data fits, and are for illustration purposes only.



correct nutrient deficiencies. We examined the database for mental illness patients who underwent this type of therapy (though precise protocol details varied from subject to subject), compared “initial” to “final” pyrrole values, and found that pyrrole levels decreased during treatment. We have not yet conducted a controlled trial where a consistent treatment is used and patient mental illness (symptom severity) is also monitored over time.

Discussion

The Riordan Clinic has been measuring nutrients, minerals, toxins and urine pyrrole concentrations as a diagnostic tool for over forty years. In examining laboratory parameters that are thought to be important in maintaining proper neurological function, we found several potential trouble signs in patients with various types of psychiatric disorders. In particular, the tests demonstrated the elevated average values of aluminum, lead (in patients with schizophrenia), iron, arachidonic acid to EPA ratio, omega 3 to omega 6 fatty acid ratios, and urine pyrroles. Deficiencies were found in the levels of essential metals: magnesium RBCs, zinc RBCs and copper (serum). Urinary pyr-

role concentrations also tended to be high in these patients. We investigated these elevated pyrroles further, finding that nearly half of the patients diagnosed with ADHD had pyrrole concentrations above the normal limit (20 ug/dL) in urine. The proportion was roughly one-third in subject with depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia. Interestingly, the elevated level of pyrroles was not specific for patients exclusively with psychiatric disorders. When we analyzed patients without psychiatric disorders as a whole (i.e., with illnesses ranging from cancer to arthritis, fibromyalgia, and chronic fatigue, among others) and subjects without specific diagnosis, roughly a quarter of them had elevated urinary pyrrole levels. Thus, pyrrole excretion seems to be a component of illness in general and is not strictly associated with psychiatric disorders. We are struck, though, by how high urine pyrroles can be in mentally ill subjects, with roughly ten percent having values above 40 ug/dL and, in the case of schizophrenics and ADHD sufferers, nearly 5% of subjects having values above 80 ug/dL. We saw some patients with levels over 200 ug/dL.

Our examination of the Riordan Clinic database confirms some of the conventional

wisdom about pyrrole excretion. We find evidence of an allergy component in the fact that elevated pyrrole levels were significantly more prevalent in subjects with elevated histamine values. Immunoglobulins also appear to correlate with pyrroles (IgM versus pyrroles).

A role of intestinal bacteria, or imbalances in intestinal bacterial metabolism, is also suggested based on the relationship between elevated pyrrole levels and elevations in indicans and urobilinogens. Indicans can be an indicator of protein digestion efficiency.¹⁸ Patients with high urine indicans can be expected to have issues such as insufficient gastric hydrochloric acid, insufficient digestive enzymes, adverse food reactions, infection, or bacterial overgrowth. These problems are also consistent with elevated urobilinogens. Elevated urine pyrroles, as they correlate with the other stress factors, may simply be an indicator of metabolic stress in the body. It also appears to be a general rule that subjects with severely elevated pyrrole levels were deficient in nutrients such as nutrients zinc, vitamin B₃, vitamin C. The stress factors described above (infection, toxicity, etc.) may be factors in causing nutrient deficiency, or may be caused by nutrient deficiency. Vitamin C in particular is important for innate and cell mediated immunity, as it protects neutrophils from oxidative damage. The zinc to copper ratio is also an indicator of oxidative stress. This redox variable is commonly outside its normal range in mentally ill subjects, and appears to correlate in some cases with pyrrole excretion.

At the Riordan Clinic, mentally ill subjects are treated with supplements (including injections of B-vitamins, and intravenous infusions of vitamin C) to replenish depleted nutrient stores and support healthy (normal) immune function. We were interested to determine how these treatments affected pyrrole levels. While we have not conducted a rigorous clinical study in this regard, we were able to extract from the database a group of subjects who had similar treatments and for whom pyrrole analyses before and after extended treatment was available. The results seem to suggest that

pyrrole concentrations are reduced after prolonged supplementation therapy. This may be an interesting topic to explore with more rigorous controlled studies.

In summary, our analysis of the Riordan Clinic patient database suggests that pyroluria is relevant to a variety of stress and illness conditions. Abnormal pyrrole excretion appears to be an indicator of oxidative stress, infection, intoxication, or improper digestion.

Competing Interests

The author declares that she has no competing interests.

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