Fractal Analysis of Heart Rate Dynamics as a Predictor of Mortality in Patients With Depressed Left Ventricular Function After Acute Myocardial Infarction

Timo H. Mäkkiallo, MD, Søren Høiber, MD, Lars Køber, MD, Christian Torp-Pedersen, MD, Chung-Kang Peng, PhD, Ary L. Goldberger, MD, and Heikki V. Huikuri, MD, and the TRACE Investigators

A number of new methods have been recently developed to quantify complex heart rate (HR) dynamics based on nonlinear and fractal analysis, but their value in risk stratification has not been evaluated. This study was designed to determine whether selected new dynamic analysis methods of HR variability predict mortality in patients with depressed left ventricular (LV) function after acute myocardial infarction (AMI). Traditional time- and frequency-domain HR variability indexes along with short-term fractal-like correlation properties of RR intervals (exponent $\alpha$) and power-law scaling (exponent $\beta$) were studied in 159 patients with depressed LV function (ejection fraction $<35\%$) after an AMI. By the end of 4-year follow-up, 72 patients (45%) had died and 87 (55%) were still alive. Short-term scaling exponent $\alpha$ (1.07 $\pm$ 0.26 vs 0.90 $\pm$ 0.26, $p < 0.001$) and power-law slope $\beta$ ($-1.35 \pm 0.23$ vs $-1.44 \pm 0.25$, $p < 0.05$) differed between survivors and those who died, but none of the traditional HR variability measures differed between these groups. Among all analyzed variables, reduced scaling exponent $\alpha$ ($<0.85$) was the best univariable predictor of mortality (relative risk 3.17, 95% confidence interval 1.96 to 5.15, $p < 0.0001$), with positive and negative predictive accuracies of 65% and 86%, respectively. In the multivariable Cox proportional hazards analysis, mortality was independently predicted by the reduced exponent $\alpha$ ($p < 0.001$) after adjustment for several clinical variables and LV function. A short-term fractal-like scaling exponent was the most powerful HR variability index in predicting mortality in patients with depressed LV function. Reduction in fractal correlation properties implies more random short-term HR dynamics in patients with increased risk of death after AMI. ©1999 by Excerpta Medica, Inc.

From the Division of Cardiology, Department of Medicine, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland; Gentofte University Hospital, Copenhagen, Denmark; The Margaret and H.A. Key Laboratory for Nonlinear Dynamics in Medicine, and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts. The TRACE study was sponsored by Roussel Uclaf, Paris, France, and Knoll Pharmaceutical, Ludwigshafen, Germany; and supported by grants from the Finnish Foundation for Cardiovascular Research, under a contract with the Finnish Life Insurance Companies, Helsinki, Finland; Maud Kuistila Foundation for Cardiovascular Research, under a contract with the Finnish Life Insurance Companies, Helsinki, Finland; and the G. Harold and Leila Y. Mathers Charitable Foundation, Mt. Kisco, New York. Manuscript received September 11, 1998; revised manuscript received and accepted November 5, 1998.

Address for reprints: Heikki V. Huikuri, MD, Division of Cardiology, Department of Medicine, University of Oulu, Kajaanintie 50, 90220 Oulu, Finland.
Ambulatory electrocardiographic recordings and analysis of heart rate variability: All the subjects were monitored for 24 hours with a Holter recorder. After transfer of the electrocardiographic data to microcomputer, the RR interval series were edited both manually and automatically.\textsuperscript{11,12} Premature beats and artifacts were deleted with previously described methods.\textsuperscript{11,12} Only recordings with qualified beats for at least a 20-hour period and with >85% of qualified sinus beats were included in the analysis of HR dynamics.

The SD of all normal-to-normal RR intervals (SDNN) and geometric HR variability index were computed as standard time-domain measurements from the entire recording period according to Task Force Recommendations.\textsuperscript{13} Spectral power was quantified by fast-Fourier transform analysis in 4 frequency bands: <0.0033 Hz (ultra low frequency), 0.0033 to 0.04 Hz (very low frequency), 0.04 to 0.15 Hz (low frequency) and 0.15 to 0.40 Hz (high frequency).\textsuperscript{12} Ultra- and very low-frequency spectral components were computed over the entire recording interval.\textsuperscript{13} Low- and high-frequency components were computed from the segments of 512 RR intervals and the average values of the entire recording interval were calculated for these components.\textsuperscript{13}

Power law (1/f) scaling of RR interval variability was calculated over the frequency range 10\textsuperscript{-4} to 10\textsuperscript{-2} Hz. A robust line-fitting algorithm of log (power) on log (frequency) was applied to the power spectrum between 10\textsuperscript{-4} to 10\textsuperscript{-2} Hz and the slope (exponent \(\beta\)) of this line was calculated. The details of this method have been described previously.\textsuperscript{6,12}

Detrended fluctuation analysis technique was also used to quantify fractal scaling properties of RR interval data.\textsuperscript{4–7} In this method the root-mean-square fluctuation of integrated and detrended time series is measured at each observation window and plotted against the size of the observation window on a log–log scale. The fractal-like signal (1/f signal spectrum) results in an exponent value 1 (\(\alpha = 1.0\)). The White Gaussian noise (random signal) results in a value of 0.5 (\(\alpha = 0.5\)) and the Brownian noise signal (1/f\textsuperscript{2} signal spectrum) in an exponent value of 1.5. The details of this analysis method have been described previously.\textsuperscript{5,7,8} In this study, HR correlations were defined only for short-term (<11 beats, \(\alpha\)) RR interval data, based on our previous findings on a short-term scaling exponent as a predictor of life-threatening arrhythmias.\textsuperscript{8}

Statistical analysis: Univariable comparisons of baseline characteristics were performed with the chi-square test for categorical variables and with the 2-sample t test for continuous variables. Relative risk and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for each univariable predictor of all-cause mortality. A p value of <0.05 was considered significant. Cox proportional hazards regression analyses were used to assess the association between different risk predictors and mortality. To find the best cutoff points for various variables, the dichotomization cutoff points that maximized the hazards ratio obtained from the Cox regres-
TABLE II Univariable Predictors of Mortality and Their Relative Risks and Multivariable Predictors of Mortality in Proportional Hazards Regression Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors of Mortality</th>
<th>Univariable Predictors of Mortality</th>
<th>Multivariable Mortality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relative Risk 95% CI p Value*</td>
<td>Relative Risk 95% CI p Value†</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age &gt;70 yrs</td>
<td>2.16 (1.47–3.20) &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>1.29 (1.01–1.66) &lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>0.83 (0.70–1.00) &lt;0.05</td>
<td>1.08 (0.81–1.45) NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of angina pectoris</td>
<td>1.57 (1.10–2.25) &lt;0.05</td>
<td>1.46 (1.14–1.87) &lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYHA class II–IV</td>
<td>1.81 (1.26–2.60) &lt;0.01</td>
<td>1.19 (0.91–1.56) NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diuretic</td>
<td>1.70 (1.36–2.14) &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>1.71 (1.21–2.42) &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β blocker</td>
<td>0.39 (0.22–0.77) &lt;0.01</td>
<td>0.72 (0.49–1.06) NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wall motion index &lt;1.0</td>
<td>2.16 (1.47–3.20) &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>1.43 (1.10–1.85) &lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior AMI</td>
<td>2.16 (1.47–3.20) &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>1.03 (0.72–1.34) NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambulatory ECG data</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>a &lt;0.85</td>
<td>3.17 (1.96–5.15) &lt;0.0001</td>
<td>1.55 (1.19–2.02) &lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β &lt;1.5</td>
<td>1.83 (1.19–2.82) &lt;0.01</td>
<td>1.13 (0.87–1.48) NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPCs/h &gt;10</td>
<td>2.43 (1.45–4.07) &lt;0.001</td>
<td>1.05 (0.79–1.38) NS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p Values determined in chi-square analysis; †p values determined in multivariate Cox regression analysis.

CI = confidence intervals; ECG = electrocardiographic; NYHA = New York Heart Association classification; VPCs = ventricular premature complexes; a = short-term fractal-like scaling exponent of detrended fluctuation analysis; β = power-law scaling exponent of long-term HR variability.

sion model were sought, with mortality as the end point.

RESULTS
By the end of 4-year follow-up, 72 subjects (45%) had died and 87 (55%) were still alive. Among the clinical variables, angina pectoris, cardiac medication, functional class, sex, and LV systolic function differed significantly between the patients who had died and those who survived (Table I). For HR variability measures, the scaling exponents α and β differed significantly between the survivors and nonsurvivors, but no differences were observed in conventional measures of HR variability (Table I).

The best cutoff point for predicting mortality was <0.85 for the exponent α (56 subjects, 35%). Among all univariable factors, reduced α was the most powerful predictor of mortality (relative risk 3.17; 95% confidence interval, 1.96 to 5.15; p <0.001; positive predictive accuracy 65% and negative predictive accuracy 86%, Figure 1, Table II). When all univariable predictors of mortality were included in multivariable Cox proportional hazards analysis, mortality was predicted independently by the use of diuretic medication, the value of short-term fractal exponent α, angina pectoris, LV ejection fraction, and age (Table II).

DISCUSSION
The main finding of this study is that a short-term fractal scaling exponent was the most powerful measure of HR dynamics in predicting mortality among patients with AMI and depressed LV function. This index provided prognostic information independent of the clinical variables and the degree of LV dysfunction.

Twenty-four hour spectral and nonspectral measurements of HR variability have been found to be indicators of long-term prognosis after AMI in several studies.1–4 There are salient differences between the present population and previous study populations that may explain the divergent results regarding the prognostic value of traditional 24-hour HR variability. Previous studies have included post-MI patients mostly with relatively well-preserved LV function1–4 and only small numbers of patients with severely depressed LV function. Therefore, the mortality rate has been lower in previous studies compared with the present one in which a longer follow-up was also available. The mechanism of death in post-MI patients with impaired and preserved LV function may also be different, perhaps explaining the divergent results. Results of this study do not allow conclusions regarding the lack of prognostic value of traditional measurements of HR variability because of a relatively small patient population, but does give preliminary information on the usefulness of fractal analysis methods in risk stratification of patients with depressed LV function, suggesting that their prognostic performance should be studied in similar larger populations.

Analysis methods derived from nonlinear system theory, have suggested prominent new approaches for quantifying complex fluctuations. Normal HR time series have been shown to be fractal-like because they display self-similar (scale-invariant) fluctuations over a wide range of time scales.5,6,14 In this study, the exponent α was chosen to measure short-term correlation properties of RR interval data, and power-law scaling exponent β to quantify the correlation properties over very- and ultra-low frequency bands.5,6,8 These measurements differ from traditional HR variability measurements because they are not related to the magnitude of variability, but rather to the distribution of spectral characteristics and correlation features of HR behavior. Neither of these HR variability measurements correlate strongly with traditional measurements of HR variability.6,8

It has been suggested that fractal properties may be an organizing principle for physiologic structure and...
function. Changes in the organization pattern of this kind may result in a less adaptable system favoring vulnerability to various pathologic states. This hypothesis has been supported by recent studies that have shown that altered power-law scaling of RR intervals are associated with an increased risk of mortality in post-MI patients and in elderly subjects. Also, a breakdown of fractal scaling was associated with an increased risk of mortality in a cross-sectional study including a small number of heart failure patients and controls.

The present results show that a fractal scaling exponent of HR dynamics gives prognostic information beyond that obtained by conventional HR variability analysis methods in a population of patients with AMI and depressed LV function. Further studies in larger populations will be needed to further define the clinical utility of new fractal measurements of HR variability for risk stratification of high risk post-MI patients.

9. The TRACE Study Group. The TRAndolapril Cardiac Evaluation (TRACE) study: rationale, design, and baseline characteristics of the screened population. Am J Cardiol 1994;73:44C–50C.