

Nitric oxide and its role in cardiovascular disease

Nitric oxide is a soluble gas continuously synthesized by the endothelium. This substance has a wide range of biological properties that maintain vascular homeostasis, including modulation of vascular dilator tone, regulation of local cell growth, and protection of the vessel from injurious consequences of platelets and cells circulating in blood. A growing list of conditions, including those commonly associated as risk factors for atherosclerosis such as hypertension and hypercholesterolemia, are associated with diminished release of nitric oxide into the arterial wall either because of impaired synthesis or excessive oxidative degradation. Diminished nitric oxide bioactivity may cause constriction of coronary arteries during exercise or during mental stress and contribute to provocation of myocardial ischemia in patients with coronary artery disease. Additionally, diminished nitric oxide bioactivity may facilitate vascular inflammation that could lead to oxidation of lipoproteins and foam cell formation, the precursor of the atherosclerotic plaque. Numerous therapies have been investigated to assess the possibility of reversing endothelial dysfunction by enhancing the release of nitric oxide from the endothelium, either through stimulation of nitric oxide synthesis or protection of nitric oxide from oxidative inactivation and conversion to toxic molecules such as peroxynitrite. Accordingly, causal relationships between improved endothelial function and reduction in myocardial ischemia and acute coronary events can now be investigated.