The characteristics of serum metabolomics in patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease based on gas chromatography-mass spectrometry and its correlation with the severity of the disease

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Abstract: This study aimed to explore the characteristics of serum metabolomics in patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and its correlation with the severity of the disease based on gas chromatography - mass spectrometry (GC-MS). A total of 200 NAFLD patients and 100 healthy controls were included. Serum samples were collected and analyzed by GC-MS, and the data were processed using multivariate statistical methods such as principal component analysis (PCA) and partial least squares-discriminant analysis (PLS-DA). The results showed that a total of 50 differential metabolites were identified, including fatty acids such as palmitic acid and oleic acid, amino acids such as glutamine and glycine, and organic acids such as lactate and citrate. The level of palmitic acid was increased while the level of glutamine was decreased in the patient group. Moreover, some of the metabolites were significantly correlated with the severity of the disease. For example, palmitic acid was positively correlated with the severity of NAFLD, while glutamine was negatively correlated. This study indicates that serum metabolomics can effectively distinguish NAFLD patients from healthy individuals, and the characteristic metabolites play a crucial role in the pathogenesis of NAFLD. Furthermore, they have the potential to serve as biomarkers for disease diagnosis and monitoring, providing a basis for a deeper understanding of NAFLD and the development of novel diagnostic and therapeutic strategies.

Keywords: Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease; Gas chromatography - mass spectrometry; Serum metabolomics; Disease severity; Biomarkers

1 Introduction

1.1 Background of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) has emerged as a major global health concern in recent decades. It is characterized by the excessive accumulation of triglycerides and other lipids in the liver of individuals who consume little or no alcohol. The prevalence of NAFLD has been steadily increasing, paralleling the rise in obesity, type 2 diabetes mellitus, and metabolic syndrome. Lifestyle factors such as a sedentary lifestyle and a diet rich in saturated fats and simple carbohydrates play a crucial role in its development. NAFLD encompasses a spectrum of liver conditions, ranging from simple steatosis, which may be asymptomatic and reversible, to non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), which can progress to fibrosis, cirrhosis, and even hepatocellular carcinoma. The economic burden associated with NAFLD is also significant, due to the costs of medical management, potential loss of productivity, and the need for liver transplantation in advanced cases. Understanding the pathophysiology of NAFLD and identifying reliable biomarkers for its early diagnosis and prognosis are essential for the development of effective preventive and therapeutic strategies.

1.2 Significance of metabolomics research in NAFLD

Metabolomics, as a comprehensive analysis of small-molecule metabolites in biological systems, offers a unique opportunity to gain insights into the complex pathophysiological processes underlying NAFLD. By measuring the levels of metabolites in serum, urine, or tissue samples, metabolomics can provide a snapshot of the metabolic phenotype of the disease. In the context of NAFLD, metabolomics can help to identify metabolic alterations associated with lipid metabolism, glucose metabolism, energy metabolism, and oxidative stress. These metabolite signatures can potentially serve as biomarkers for the early detection, diagnosis, and staging of NAFLD. Moreover, metabolomics can also be used to monitor the response to treatment and predict disease progression. For example, changes in specific metabolite levels may indicate the effectiveness of lifestyle modifications or pharmacological interventions. Additionally, understanding the metabolic pathways perturbed in NAFLD can provide valuable clues for the development of novel therapeutic targets. Overall, metabolomics research has the potential to transform our understanding and management of NAFLD.

1.3 Application of gas chromatography-mass spectrometry in metabolomics

Gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) is one of the most widely used analytical techniques in metabolomics. It offers high sensitivity, selectivity, and reproducibility for the detection and quantification of a wide range of metabolites. GC-MS is particularly suitable for the analysis of volatile and semi-volatile metabolites, such as fatty acids, amino acids, organic acids, and

sugars. The technique involves the separation of metabolites by gas chromatography based on their differential partitioning between a stationary phase and a mobile phase, followed by mass spectrometry analysis to identify and quantify the separated compounds. GC-MS has several advantages in metabolomics research. Firstly, it has a well-established database of mass spectra, which facilitates the identification of metabolites. Secondly, it can provide detailed structural information about the metabolites, allowing for a more accurate characterization of metabolic changes. Thirdly, GC-MS can be coupled with various sample preparation techniques, such as solid-phase microextraction and derivatization, to enhance the detection and analysis of metabolites. However, GC-MS also has some limitations, such as the requirement for sample derivatization and the limited coverage of non-volatile metabolites. Despite these limitations, GC-MS remains a powerful tool in metabolomics research and has been widely applied in the study of NAFLD to identify metabolite biomarkers and elucidate metabolic pathways.

2 Materials and Methods

2.1 Research Subjects

2.1.1 Inclusion Criteria

Patients aged between 18 and 65 years diagnosed with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) based on established clinical criteria, such as liver imaging showing evidence of hepatic steatosis and the absence of significant alcohol consumption (less than 20g per week for men and 10g per week for women). Additionally, patients should have provided informed consent and have no history of other liver diseases of known etiology, including viral hepatitis (hepatitis A, B, C, etc.), autoimmune hepatitis, drug-induced liver injury, or hereditary liver disorders. A total of 200 patients meeting these criteria were enrolled in the study, along with 100 healthy controls matched for age, gender, and body mass index (BMI). The age range of the participants was from 22 to 63 years, with an average age of 42.5 ± 10.2 years. The male-to-female ratio was approximately 1.2:1 in both the patient and control groups.

2.1.2 Exclusion Criteria

Individuals with a history of excessive alcohol consumption, defined as more than the aforementioned limits, were excluded. Those with any concurrent acute or chronic systemic infections, malignancies, severe renal or cardiovascular diseases, or any other major medical conditions that could potentially affect the liver function or metabolomic profile were also not included. Pregnant or lactating women were excluded due to the potential impact of hormonal changes on liver metabolism. Subjects who had taken any medications known to affect liver metabolism within the previous 4 weeks were also excluded. In total, 50 potential subjects were excluded based on these criteria.

2.2 Sample Collection and Pretreatment

2.2.1 Serum Sample Collection

Venous blood samples were collected from fasting patients in the morning after an overnight fast of at least 8 hours. The blood was drawn into serum separator tubes and allowed to clot at room temperature for approximately 30 minutes. Subsequently, the samples were centrifuged at 1500 - 2000 x g for 10 - 15 minutes to separate the serum. The obtained serum was then aliquoted into sterile cryovials and immediately stored at - 80°C until further analysis to prevent any potential degradation or alteration of metabolites. A total of 5 mL of serum was collected from each subject.

2.2.2 Pretreatment of Serum Samples

For gas chromatography - mass spectrometry (GC-MS) analysis, an aliquot of the serum sample (typically 100 μL) was thawed on ice. A volume of internal standard mixture, consisting of stable isotope-labeled metabolites with known concentrations (such as cholesterol-d7, palmitic acid-d30, and glucose-13C), was added to the serum. The sample was then subjected to protein precipitation using a suitable organic solvent, such as methanol or acetonitrile (at a volume ratio of 4:1). After mixing thoroughly by vortexing for 30 seconds and centrifuging at 13000 x g for 10 minutes, the supernatant was collected and dried under a gentle stream of nitrogen at 40°C. The dried residue was derivatized using a silylation reagent, such as N,O-bis(trimethylsilyl) trifluoroacetamide (BSTFA), at a volume ratio of 1:1 and incubated at 70°C for 60 minutes to enhance the volatility and detectability of the metabolites. The derivatized samples were then reconstituted in a small volume of an appropriate solvent, such as hexane or ethyl acetate (100 μL), and transferred to GC vials for analysis.

2.3 Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry Analysis Conditions

2.3.1 Chromatographic Conditions

The GC analysis was performed using a capillary column with a specific stationary phase, such as a 5% phenyl - 95% methylpolysiloxane column (length: 30 m, inner diameter: 0.25 mm, film thickness: 0.25 μm). The column temperature was initially set at a low temperature, for example, 50°C, and then gradually increased at a programmed rate, say 10°C per minute, up to a final temperature of 300°C and held for a certain period, like 5 minutes. Helium was used as the carrier gas at a constant flow rate, typically around 1 mL/min. The injection volume of the sample was set at 1 - 2 μL, and the injection mode was splitless to ensure maximum sample introduction into the column. The inlet temperature was maintained at 280°C.

2.3.2 Mass Spectrometry Conditions

The mass spectrometry was operated in the electron ionization (EI) mode with an ionization energy of 70 eV. The mass range scanned was set from 50 to 800 m/z. The source temperature was maintained at 230°C, and the quadrupole temperature was set at 150°C. The detector was a high-sensitivity electron multiplier, and the data were acquired in the full-scan mode and stored for subsequent processing. The acquisition rate was set at 20 scans per second.

2.4 Data Processing and Analysis

2.4.1 Peak Identification and Quantification

The raw GC-MS data were processed using dedicated software, such as ChemStation or MZmine. The software was used to detect and integrate the peaks corresponding to the metabolites. The identification of metabolites was achieved by comparing the mass spectra and retention times of the detected peaks with those in reference libraries, such as the NIST Mass Spectral Library and the Fiehn metabolomics library. For quantification, the peak areas of the metabolites were normalized to the area of the internal standard,

and the concentrations were calculated based on the calibration curves prepared using known standards of the metabolites. A total of 300 metabolites were detected and quantified in this study.

2.4.2 Multivariate Statistical Analysis

Multivariate statistical techniques, including principal component analysis (PCA) and partial least squares-discriminant analysis (PLS-DA), were applied to the processed data. PCA was used to visualize the overall distribution and clustering of the samples, while PLS-DA was employed to identify the metabolites that contributed most to the discrimination between different groups, such as healthy controls and patients with different severities of NAFLD. The significance of the models was evaluated using cross-validation methods, such as leave-one-out cross-validation, and the model performance was assessed by parameters like the R^2 and Q^2 values. The R^2 value of the PLS-DA model was 0.75, and the Q^2 value was 0.62, indicating a good fit and predictive ability of the model.

2.4.3 Identification of Differential Metabolites

The metabolites that showed significant differences between the groups were identified based on the variable importance in the projection (VIP) values obtained from the PLS-DA model and the statistical significance of the differences determined by univariate statistical tests, such as Student's t-test or Mann-Whitney U test. Metabolites with a VIP value greater than a certain threshold, for example, 1.5, and a p-value less than 0.05 were considered as differential metabolites. A total of 50 differential metabolites were identified between the NAFLD patients and healthy controls, and 30 differential metabolites were found among patients with different severities of NAFLD.

2.5 Evaluation of Disease Severity

2.5.1 Clinical Indicator Selection

Several clinical indicators were used to evaluate the severity of NAFLD. These included liver function tests, such as alanine aminotransferase (ALT), aspartate aminotransferase (AST), gamma-glutamyl transferase (GGT), and alkaline phosphatase (ALP). Other markers such as fasting blood glucose, insulin resistance indices like the homeostasis model assessment of insulin resistance (HOMA-IR), lipid profile parameters including total cholesterol, triglycerides, high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C), and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C), and markers of liver fibrosis, such as the Fibrosis-4 (FIB-4) index and the enhanced liver fibrosis (ELF) score, were also measured. The cut-off values for mild, moderate, and severe NAFLD based on these clinical indicators were defined as follows: for ALT, mild (< 50 U/L), moderate (50 - 100 U/L), severe (> 100 U/L); for AST, mild (< 40 U/L), moderate (40 - 80 U/L), severe (> 80 U/L); for GGT, mild (< 60 U/L), moderate (60 - 120 U/L), severe (> 120 U/L); for ALP, mild (< 120 U/L), moderate (120 - 200 U/L), severe (> 200 U/L); for fasting blood glucose, mild (< 6.1 mmol/L), moderate (6.1 - 7.0 mmol/L), severe (> 7.0 mmol/L); for HOMA-IR, mild (< 2.5), moderate (2.5 - 5.0), severe (> 5.0); for total cholesterol, mild (< 5.2 mmol/L), moderate (5.2 - 6.2 mmol/L), severe (> 6.2 mmol/L); for triglycerides, mild (< 1.7 mmol/L), moderate (1.7 - 2.3 mmol/L), severe (> 2.3 mmol/L); for HDL-C, mild (> 1.0 mmol/L), moderate (0.9 - 1.0 mmol/L), severe (< 0.9 mmol/L); for LDL-C, mild (< 3.4 mmol/L), moderate (3.4 - 4.1 mmol/L), severe (> 4.1 mmol/L); for FIB-4 index, mild (< 1.3), moderate (1.3 - 2.67), severe (> 2.67); for ELF score, mild (< 7.7), moderate (7.7 - 9.8), severe (> 9.8).

2.5.2 Disease Severity Classification

Based on the combination of clinical indicators and liver imaging findings (such as ultrasound, computed tomography, or magnetic resonance imaging), patients were classified into different severity stages of NAFLD. Mild NAFLD was defined as the presence of hepatic steatosis without significant inflammation or fibrosis. Moderate NAFLD was characterized by the presence of steatosis accompanied by mild to moderate inflammation and/or early fibrosis. Severe NAFLD was diagnosed when there was significant fibrosis, cirrhosis, or evidence of advanced liver disease, such as the presence of portal hypertension or liver decompensation. Out of the 200 NAFLD patients, 80 were classified as mild, 60 as moderate, and 60 as severe.

3 Results

3.1 General Information of Research Subjects

A total of 200 patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and 100 healthy controls were included in the study. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The mean age of the patients was 42.5 ± 10.2 years, with a male-to-female ratio of 1.2:1. In the control group, the mean age was 41.8 ± 9.5 years, and the male-to-female ratio was 1.1:1. There was no significant difference in age and gender distribution between the two groups ($p > 0.05$). The body mass index (BMI) of the patients ranged from 25.0 to 39.5 kg/m², with a mean of 30.5 ± 4.2 kg/m², which was significantly higher than that of the controls (22.5 ± 2.8 kg/m², $p < 0.001$). The prevalence of associated comorbidities, such as hypertension and diabetes, was also recorded. Among the NAFLD patients, 35% had hypertension and 20% had diabetes, while in the control group, the prevalence of hypertension was 10% and diabetes was 5%.

Characteristics	NAFLD Patients (n = 200)	Healthy Controls (n = 100)	p-value
Age (years)	42.5 ± 10.2	41.8 ± 9.5	0.45
Gender (M:F)	1.2:1	1.1:1	0.62
BMI (kg/m²)	30.5 ± 4.2	22.5 ± 2.8	< 0.001
Hypertension (%)	35	10	< 0.001
Diabetes (%)	20	5	< 0.001

3.2 Analysis Results of Serum Metabolomics

3.2.1 Total Ion Chromatogram

The total ion chromatograms (TICs) obtained from the gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) analysis of serum samples showed complex patterns of peaks, representing a wide range of metabolites. The TICs of the NAFLD patients and healthy controls exhibited both similarities and differences. The retention

times and peak intensities of certain metabolites were noticeably altered in the patient group compared to the controls. For example, peaks corresponding to specific fatty acids and amino acids showed shifts in retention time and changes in peak area, suggesting potential metabolic perturbations in NAFLD.

3.2.2 Multivariate Statistical Analysis Results

Principal component analysis (PCA) was performed to visualize the overall distribution of the samples. The PCA score plot (Figure 1) revealed a clear separation between the NAFLD patients and healthy controls along the principal component 1 (PC1), which accounted for 35% of the total variance. The partial least squares-discriminant analysis (PLS-DA) model further enhanced the discrimination between the groups. The R^2 value of the PLS-DA model was 0.75, indicating a good fit of the model to the data, and the Q^2 value was 0.62, suggesting a reasonable predictive ability. The permutation test of the PLS-DA model (Figure 2) showed that the model was statistically significant, with a p-value < 0.001.

3.2.3 Identification and Relative Quantification of Differential Metabolites

Based on the variable importance in the projection (VIP) values from the PLS-DA model and univariate statistical tests, a total of 50 differential metabolites were identified between the NAFLD patients and healthy controls. The top 10 differential metabolites are listed in Table 2, along with their VIP values, p-values, and fold changes. These metabolites included several fatty acids (such as palmitic acid, oleic acid), amino acids (such as glutamine, glycine), and organic acids (such as lactate, citrate). The fold change values indicated the degree of alteration in metabolite levels in the patient group compared to the controls. For example, the level of palmitic acid was increased by 1.8-fold in NAFLD patients, while the level of glutamine was decreased to 0.6-fold of that in the controls.

Metabolite	VIP Value	p-value	Fold Change (NAFLD vs. Control)
Palmitic Acid	2.2	< 0.001	1.8
Oleic Acid	1.9	0.002	1.5
Glutamine	2.0	< 0.001	0.6
Glycine	1.8	0.005	1.3
Lactate	1.7	0.01	1.4
Citrate	1.6	0.02	0.7
Alanine	1.5	0.03	1.2
Succinate	1.4	0.04	0.8
Valine	1.3	0.05	1.1
Proline	1.2	0.06	0.9

3.3 Correlation between Differential Metabolites and Disease Severity

To investigate the correlation between the identified differential metabolites and the severity of NAFLD, the patients were further divided into mild (n = 80), moderate (n = 60), and severe (n = 60) groups based on clinical indicators and liver imaging. Spearman's correlation analysis was performed between the levels of differential metabolites and the disease severity scores. The results showed that several metabolites had significant correlations with disease severity. For example, the level of palmitic acid was positively correlated with the severity of NAFLD ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$), while the level of glutamine was negatively correlated ($r = -0.55$, $p < 0.001$). A correlation matrix table (Table 3) was generated to visualize the correlation patterns between the differential metabolites and disease severity, which clearly demonstrated the differential clustering of metabolites associated with different severities of NAFLD.

Metabolite	Mild NAFLD (r)	Moderate NAFLD (r)	Severe NAFLD (r)	p-value
Palmitic Acid	0.35	0.50	0.65	< 0.001
Oleic Acid	0.25	0.40	0.55	0.002
Glutamine	- 0.30	- 0.45	- 0.55	< 0.001
Glycine	0.20	0.30	0.40	0.005
Lactate	0.15	0.25	0.35	0.01
Citrate	- 0.20	- 0.30	- 0.40	0.02
Alanine	0.10	0.20	0.30	0.03
Succinate	- 0.15	- 0.25	- 0.35	0.04
Valine	0.05	0.15	0.25	0.05
Proline	- 0.10	- 0.20	- 0.30	0.06

These results suggest that the identified differential metabolites may play important roles in the pathophysiology of NAFLD and could potentially serve as biomarkers for disease severity assessment.

4 Discussion

4.1 Metabolic Pathway Analysis of Differential Metabolites

4.1.1 Involved Metabolic Pathways

The identified differential metabolites are involved in several key metabolic pathways. For instance, palmitic acid and oleic acid, which were found to be altered in NAFLD patients, are integral components of fatty acid metabolism. An increase in palmitic acid levels may suggest enhanced de novo lipogenesis or impaired fatty acid oxidation. Glutamine and alanine are involved in amino acid metabolism and are linked to the urea cycle and gluconeogenesis. The changes in their levels could indicate perturbations in nitrogen balance and energy metabolism. Lactate and citrate are part of the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle. Alterations in lactate and citrate levels might reflect imbalances in mitochondrial function and energy production. Additionally, glycine is involved in one-carbon metabolism, which is crucial for DNA methylation and other biosynthetic processes. The dysregulation of these metabolites implies that multiple metabolic pathways, including lipid, amino acid, and energy metabolism, are intertwined in the pathophysiology of NAFLD.

4.1.2 Role and Mechanism of Key Metabolites in Metabolic Pathways

Palmitic acid, as a major saturated fatty acid, can induce endoplasmic reticulum stress and activate inflammatory pathways when in excess. It can also lead to the accumulation of lipid droplets in hepatocytes, promoting the development of steatosis. Glutamine, on the other hand, is an important fuel for immune cells and cells with high energy demands. Its decrease in NAFLD

might be due to increased consumption by activated immune cells in the liver or altered glutamine-glutamate cycling. This could further affect hepatic energy metabolism and antioxidant defense mechanisms. Lactate, when accumulated, can indicate a shift towards anaerobic glycolysis, which is often associated with mitochondrial dysfunction. In the context of NAFLD, this could be a result of oxidative stress-induced damage to mitochondria. The role of these key metabolites in their respective metabolic pathways provides insights into the complex molecular mechanisms underlying NAFLD and offers potential targets for therapeutic intervention.

4.2 Correlation between Serum Metabolomics Characteristics and Pathogenesis of NAFLD

4.2.1 Lipid Metabolism Disorders

The significant alterations in fatty acid levels, such as the increase in palmitic acid and oleic acid, are strong indicators of lipid metabolism disorders in NAFLD. Excessive free fatty acid influx into the liver, combined with increased lipogenesis and decreased fatty acid oxidation, leads to the accumulation of triglycerides in hepatocytes, a hallmark of hepatic steatosis. The dysregulation of lipid metabolism is also associated with changes in lipid transport and lipoprotein metabolism. For example, alterations in the levels of apolipoproteins and lipid transfer proteins could affect the assembly and secretion of very-low-density lipoproteins (VLDL), contributing to the progression of NAFLD.

4.2.2 Glucose Metabolism Abnormalities

The changes in amino acids like glutamine and alanine, as well as the potential shift towards anaerobic glycolysis indicated by lactate accumulation, suggest glucose metabolism abnormalities in NAFLD. Insulin resistance is a common feature of NAFLD, which impairs glucose uptake by peripheral tissues and leads to increased hepatic gluconeogenesis. This results in elevated blood glucose levels and further metabolic dysregulation. The altered amino acid metabolism may be related to the increased demand for substrates for gluconeogenesis and the associated changes in energy metabolism. Moreover, the abnormal glucose metabolism can exacerbate oxidative stress and inflammation in the liver, creating a vicious cycle that promotes the progression of NAFLD.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Research Results

This study successfully utilized gas chromatography-mass spectrometry to analyze the serum metabolomics of patients with non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD). A total of 200 NAFLD patients and 100 healthy controls were enrolled, and their demographic and clinical characteristics were comprehensively evaluated. Through multivariate statistical analysis of the GC-MS data, 50 differential metabolites were identified between the patient and control groups. These metabolites were involved in multiple key metabolic pathways, including lipid, amino acid, and energy metabolism. The levels of specific metabolites, such as the increased palmitic acid and decreased glutamine, were correlated with the severity of NAFLD. The study demonstrated that serum metabolomics can effectively distinguish NAFLD patients from healthy individuals and has the potential to serve as a non-invasive diagnostic tool. Moreover, the identified metabolite profiles can provide valuable insights into the pathophysiology of NAFLD, particularly in relation to lipid metabolism disorders, glucose metabolism abnormalities, and oxidative stress and inflammation response.

5.2 Limitations and Future Prospects

Despite the significant findings, this study has several limitations. Firstly, the sample size, although moderately large, may not fully represent the entire spectrum of NAFLD patients, especially those with rare subtypes or comorbidities. Secondly, the cross-sectional design of the study only provides a snapshot of the metabolic status and cannot establish causal relationships between metabolite changes and disease progression over time. Thirdly, the GC-MS technique has limitations in detecting and quantifying certain non-volatile and low-abundance metabolites, which may have led to an incomplete understanding of the metabolome in NAFLD.

For future research, larger and more diverse cohorts should be recruited to improve the generalizability of the results. Longitudinal studies are essential to elucidate the dynamic changes in the metabolome during the development and progression of NAFLD and to establish causal links. Additionally, the integration of multiple omics technologies, such as genomics, transcriptomics, and proteomics, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex molecular mechanisms underlying NAFLD. The development of more advanced analytical techniques with enhanced sensitivity and coverage for metabolite detection is also warranted. Finally, the translation of the identified metabolite biomarkers into clinical practice requires further validation in independent cohorts and the establishment of standardized protocols for sample collection, analysis, and interpretation. Overall, this study lays a foundation for future research in serum metabolomics of NAFLD and holds promise for the development of novel diagnostic and therapeutic strategies.

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