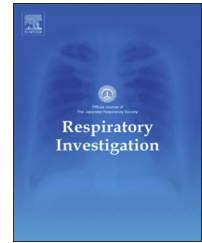




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Review

Role of lung volume and airway inflammation in obstructive sleep apnea

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ABSTRACT

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a prevalent disorder that affects not only the upper airways but also the intrathoracic airways. In this review, we summarize the results of studies on lung function and airway inflammation. We provide evidence that the alterations in intrathoracic airways observed in OSA are not purely consequences of mechanical trauma and oxidative stress during apneic events but have a causal role in the structural changes associated with OSA and increasing severity of this disorder.

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Abbreviations: AHI, apnea/hypopnea index; BALF, bronchoalveolar lavage fluid; BMI, body mass index; CIH, chronic intermittent hypoxia; COPD, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; CPAP, continuous positive airway pressure; EBC, exhaled breath condensate; FENO, fractional exhaled nitric oxide; FEV₁, forced expiratory volume in 1 second; FVC, forced vital capacity; ICAM, intercellular adhesion molecule; IL, interleukin; ILD, interstitial lung disease; iNOS, inducible nitric oxide synthase; MMP, matrix metalloproteinase; OSA, obstructive sleep apnoea; TNF, tumor necrosis factor; VEGF, vascular endothelial growth factor

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1. Introduction

Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) is a common disorder that is characterized by repetitive episodes of total or partial collapse of the upper airways during sleep. If OSA is accompanied by symptoms of excessive daytime sleepiness, tiredness, or fatigue, the term obstructive sleep apnea syndrome is used. According to the latest edition of International Classification of Sleep Disorders issued by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine in 2014 [1], OSA is defined as either the presence of daily symptoms/disturbed breathing during sleep/comorbidities together with more than 5 obstructive respiratory events or more than 15 obstructive respiratory events, irrespective of symptoms or comorbidities. Because of the diversity of the diagnostic methods and criteria, the exact prevalence of OSA is not known, but it ranges between 10% and 30% in the general adult population [2]. Obesity, male sex, age, and craniofacial anatomy are the major determinants of OSA susceptibility [2]. Therefore, sociodemographic variations may contribute to diverse epidemiological results as well.

Decreased pharyngeal diameters and an increased possibility of upper airway collapse are important but not the only components of the OSA pathophysiology. Local and central nervous control and systemic inflammation are also frequently recognized factors. However, there has been little attention on the role of intrathoracic airways even though the lungs are under massive oxidative burden caused by chronic intermittent hypoxia (CIH). It seems that the lower airways do not just passively participate in OSA but may contribute to the complex pathophysiology of the disease as well.

This article aims to summarize the current knowledge on the role of lung volume and airway inflammation in OSA.

2. Lung volumes

It has been recognized that reduced lung volumes are related to increased OSA severity, regardless of whether the patients have airway or parenchymal lung disease. This relationship has been confirmed both by body plethysmography [3–6] and spirometry [7,8]. In particular, negative relationships were reported between the severity of OSA, determined using the apnea/hypopnea index (AHI) or respiratory disturbance index, and expiratory reserve volume [3–6], functional residual capacity [4,5], forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV₁) [7,8], and forced vital capacity (FVC) [7]. In line with this, a significant association between lung function loss and all-cause mortality was reported in patients with OSA [9]. However, the contribution of lung volume loss to mortality was lower in patients with sleep disordered breathing than in control subjects (6% vs. 11%, for every 200 mL decrease in FEV₁) [10].

The relationship between reduced lung volume and OSA severity needs to be interpreted carefully because BMI is a

strong covariate for this association [7]. Obesity reduces the functional residual capacity, especially in the supine position [11], and is strongly associated with OSA severity [11]. However, there are arguments that the association between lung volume and OSA severity is independent of obesity. First, the lung volume was reduced when patients with OSA were compared with BMI-matched controls [6,8]; the AHI and expiratory reserve volume were found to be related after correction for body mass index (BMI) [4]. Second, OSA is highly prevalent in non-obese patients with restrictive lung disease [12]. Third, reduced lung volume leads to upper airway collapse not only in patients with OSA but also in patients with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) [13] and in healthy controls [14,15].

The association between lung volumes and upper airway collapsibility can be explained by mechanical [16] and chemical [17] factors [18]. A higher lung volume causes the mediastinal structures to be pulled caudally, leading to pharyngeal airway dilation [16]. Furthermore, increased lung volume is associated with the storage of more O₂ and CO₂, thus buffering blood gases from changes in ventilation [17]. Some patients with OSA are particularly prone to intermittent hypercapnic episodes, developing respiratory disturbances due to high loop gain [18].

Recently, we described an evening-to-morning increase in FEV₁ in OSA without any change in FVC. This very mild bronchodilation may be caused by sympathetic bursts during apneic periods [7], but the exact reason needs to be investigated in detail. Of note, this increase was observed only in obese patients with OSA; there were no changes in non-obese subjects with OSA or obese control volunteers [7]. Tidal volumes tend to decrease at sleep onset in non-OSA patients of normal weight [19], as well as in non-OSA obese patients [11] and patients with OSA [20].

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) treatment increases the vital capacity and functional residual capacity in non-OSA patients [21]. In addition, increases in lung volume are associated with lower pressures, required to maintain upper airway patency [14]. Thus, it seems that CPAP treatment prevents apneic episodes not only at the level of the upper airways but also by influencing the lower airway volumes. Of note, one study reported that long-term CPAP treatment is associated with worsening lung function, especially in terms of markers of small-airway obstruction [22].

Only one randomized controlled trial investigated if increasing the airway caliber with salmeterol has any effect on AHI in OSA; however, the effect of salmeterol compared to that of the placebo was insignificant [23].

3. Airway inflammation

Both chronic intermittent hypoxia and vibration trauma during snoring may induce inflammatory changes in the upper airways [24]. These include neutrophilia in the nasal

lavage fluid [25,26] and lymphocytosis in the pharyngeal lavage fluid [27,28]. In addition, OSA is characterized by an increase in the nasal levels of bradykinin and vasoactive intestinal peptide [25]. The resulting influx of inflammatory cells and the cytokine release may aggravate vasodilation, squamous cell hyperplasia, and hypertrophy of mucous glands. In addition, upper airway inflammation may lead to local anesthesia, which can blunt the physiological dilator reflex. Systemic inflammation augmented by obesity in OSA may cause pharyngeal myopathy and influence central neuronal control of the upper airway muscles [24]. Thus, upper airway inflammation seems to be both a cause and consequence of OSA (Fig. 1).

Vibration trauma is less likely to contribute to lower airway inflammation. However, oxidative stress caused by CIH may affect 25–70 m² [29] of the intrathoracic airway tract. In vitro studies have shown that intermittent hypoxia enhances neutrophil chemotaxis and leads to the production of matrix metalloproteinase (MMP)-2, MMP-9, interleukin (IL)-8, platelet derived growth factor-AA, and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) by airway epithelial cells and VEGF by bronchial smooth muscle cells [30]. Chronic intermittent hypoxia activates nuclear factor-kappaB in mice lungs in vivo and in monocytes of patients with OSA in vitro and

theoretically induces the production of tumor necrosis factor (TNF)- α , IL-6, IL-8, IL-18, and intercellular adhesion molecule (ICAM)-1 [31]. In ovalbumin-sensitized rats, CIH induced Th1-type airway inflammation and airway narrowing [32]. A disturbed sleep profile is another characteristic of OSA. In mice, sleep deprivation exacerbated endotoxin-induced lung inflammation [33,34], which suggests that sleep fragmentation may correspond to augmented airway inflammation.

Studies that used induced sputum for sampling showed neutrophilia in the airways of adult [26,35–41] and pediatric [42] patients with OSA, without any change in the eosinophil or lymphocyte counts. In addition, in the evaluation for soluble mediators in sputum and exhaled breath condensate (EBC) samples, elevated levels of IL-6 [43–47], IL-8 [36,40], TNF- α [44–46,48], ICAM [40], 8-isoprostane [43–47,49–51], H₂O₂ [51,52], uric acid [53], nitrate [51], leptin [41], leukotriene B4 [51,54], and cysteinyl leukotrienes [54] and decreased concentrations of IL-10 [44,46] and sirtuin 1 [48] were reported; airway acidosis [38,45,51] was also reported. However, other studies reported no differences in airway pH [55] and cysteinyl leukotriene [54], prostaglandin E2 [54], and erythropoietin [56] levels.

Increased expression of inducible nitric oxide synthase (iNOS) by airway neutrophil cells and macrophages was

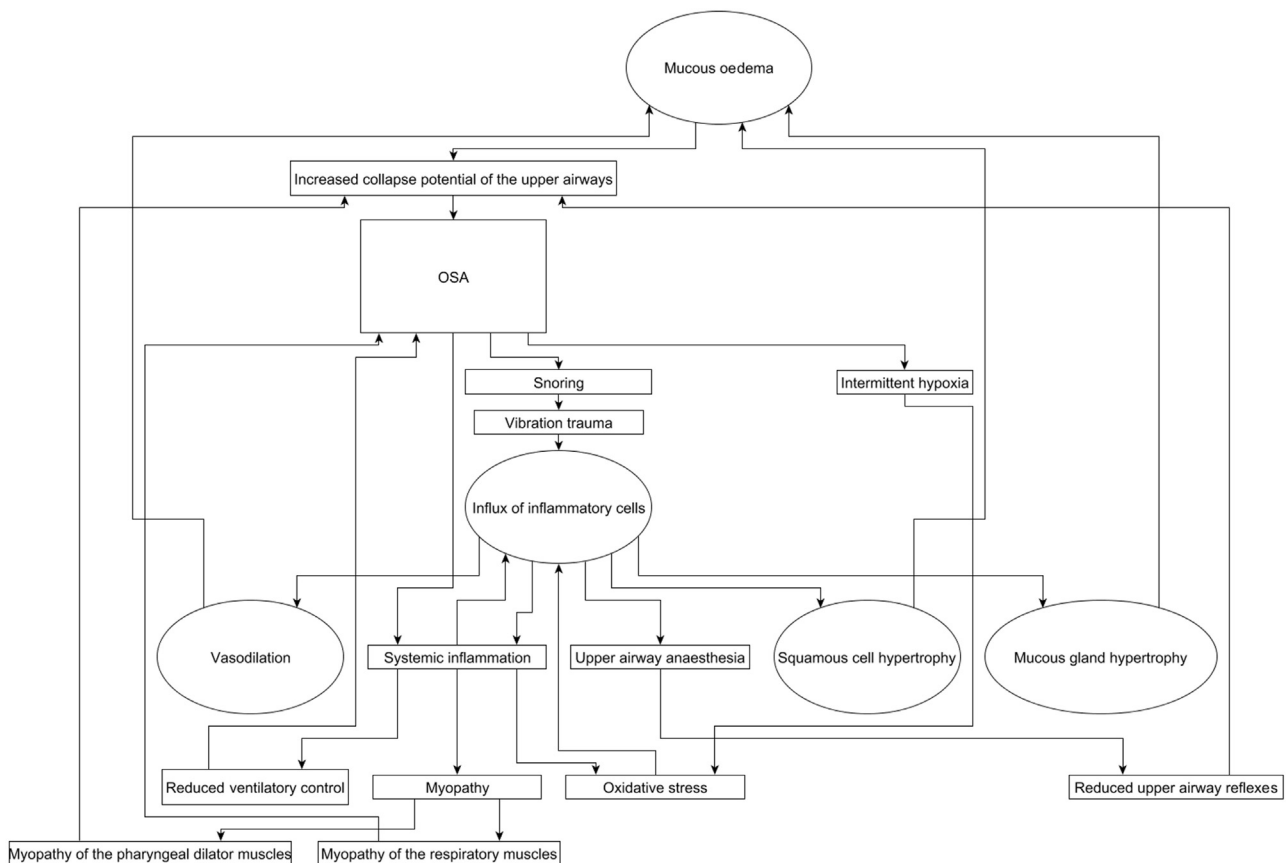


Fig. 1 – Upper airway inflammation in obstructive sleep apnea. Snoring and intermittent hypoxia lead to inflammatory and structural changes in the upper airways (highlighted in ellipses). Mucosal edema reduces the pharyngeal diameter. In addition, upper airway inflammation corresponds to decreased activity of the upper airway dilator muscles via reduced reflexes and myopathy and enhances systemic inflammatory processes.

reported in OSA [39]. Upon stimulation by IL-1, interferon- γ , or TNF- α , neutrophils may produce nitric oxide via iNOS [57]. Nitric oxide excess in the airways can be detected from exhaled breath (fractional exhaled nitric oxide, FENO). FENO was shown to be elevated in OSA in some [36,38,39,51,58–61] but not all studies [62–66]. Because of methodological discrepancies, these studies cannot be easily compared. However, taken together, a mild increase in FENO can be concluded [67]. The levels of exhaled carbon monoxide, a marker of oxidative stress, were also found to be elevated in OSA [51].

Exhaled breath contains thousands of volatile molecules and their concentration is related to airway and systemic inflammation as well as metabolism [68]. The pattern of exhaled volatile metabolites has been extensively investigated in OSA using so called electronic noses [67]. Various studies have reported altered exhaled volatile organic compound patterns in adult [55,69,70] and pediatric [71] patients with OSA. In addition, a recent study observed differences in the exhaled volatile compound concentrations of patients with OSA and those with COPD and the COPD–OSA overlap syndrome [72]. The breath pattern was correlated with the disease severity in the adults [55] and children [71]. The exhaled volatile molecular pattern was significantly altered by sleep [69] and CPAP [55,73]. However, CPAP-induced changes were significantly dependent on comorbidities [73]. Because of the nonspecific nature of electronic nose measurements, the individual molecules responsible for the differences in OSA are not known. Elevated levels of exhaled butanol [74], toluene, ethylbenzene, p-xylene, phenylacetic acid, hexane, heptane, octane, nonane, decane, acetone, and isoprene [75] as well as an overnight increase in exhaled pentane [64] were reported in OSA. In addition, CPAP withdrawal resulted in alterations in the concentrations of several volatile organic compounds [76].

Some studies investigated airway inflammation in patients who suffered from concomitant OSA and COPD. Upon analyzing bronchoalveolar lavage fluid (BALF) samples, Wang et al. reported a higher elevation in airway neutrophilia in the overlap syndrome than in COPD alone [77]. In contrast, Lacedonia et al. reported similar neutrophil counts in induced sputum samples [35]. The discrepancies may be because of the low sample size in the latter study, as neutrophil counts tended to be higher in the overlap group ($74.33\% \pm 14.8$) than in the COPD group ($63.33\% \pm 13.22$) [35]. In the analysis of BALF cytokines, the COPD–OSA overlap syndrome was characterized by elevated levels of TNF- α and IL-8 compared with COPD alone [77]. In patients with severe asthma, OSA resulted in higher levels of sputum IL-8 and subsequent sputum neutrophilia [78].

Similar to that in the upper airways, inflammation in the lungs may not only be a consequence of chronic intermittent hypoxia and vibration trauma but may also contribute to the pathophysiology of OSA. Local inflammatory cytokines may overspill into circulation, contributing to low-grade systemic inflammation, which is present in OSA [79]. It was shown that the vascular permeability index is

increased in OSA and is significantly related to disease severity [80]. In line with this, exhaled and circulating levels of 8-isoprostane were significantly correlated with each other [50]. However, another study found no correlation between the circulating and sputum levels of the investigated inflammatory mediators [80]. In conclusion, more studies are warranted to confirm or reject the overspill hypothesis. On the other hand, airway inflammation may induce airway narrowing, which has been recently confirmed in OSA [80]. Nevertheless, significant associations were reported between the magnitude of airway inflammation and OSA severity [38–40,43,46,48–52,60].

Obesity may aggravate airway inflammation. However, studies examining airway inflammation in obese individuals usually did not take into consideration the possible effect of OSA. Lacedonia et al. investigated the cellular pattern of the induced sputum of non-OSA obese patients and found no difference compared to that of non-OSA non-obese controls [35]. Of note, neutrophil cell counts tended to be higher in obese patients ($43.5\% \pm 17.49$) than in non-obese controls ($32.04\% \pm 12.26$) [35]. In OSA, a significant association was found between BMI and the sputum levels of IL-6 [80]. In line with this, two studies reported airway neutrophilia and elevated FENO levels in obese non-OSA subjects compared with controls [38,39]. However, both studies concluded that OSA had an additional effect on airway inflammation when the obese subjects were divided into OSA and non-OSA groups [38,39]. In contrast, although obesity was associated with higher EBC IL-8 and ICAM-1 levels in non-OSA subjects, OSA did not induce further elevation of EBC IL-8 and ICAM-1 levels in obese volunteers [40]. Finally, the levels of EBC leptin were higher in obese than in non-obese non-OSA subjects [41].

It is not clear how treating OSA affects airway inflammation. On analyses of BALF samples, CPAP was found to significantly reduce the neutrophil count as well as TNF- α and IL-8 levels in patients with the COPD–OSA overlap syndrome. However, the subjects used inhaled corticosteroids as well, which might have influenced the results [77]. In contrast, CPAP had no effect on sputum neutrophilia in OSA [26,36]. In the investigation of soluble mediators, CPAP was found to significantly decrease the levels of IL-6 [44,81], 8-isoprostane [44,49,50,81], TNF- α [44,48,81], and nitrotyrosine [81] and increase the IL-10 [44] and sirtuin 1 concentrations [48] as well as pH [51] in the airways. However, other studies have reported that CPAP treatment did not significantly change the exhaled carbon monoxide [51], EBC IL-6 [82], H₂O₂ [51], 8-isoprostane [51], nitrate [51,82], LTB₄ [51], or pH [55,82] values. Similarly, CPAP was found to decrease FENO in some [51,58,60] but not all [36,63] studies. A possible reason for the inconsistent results is that CPAP therapy may itself exacerbate airway inflammation due to mechanical trauma. This is in line with its effect on airway hyperresponsiveness [36,83,84]. Using heated humidification with CPAP could be a possible solution, as this is more effective in reducing airway [36] and nasal [85] inflammation. Upper airway surgery did not change the EBC IL-6 levels or EBC pH significantly [82].

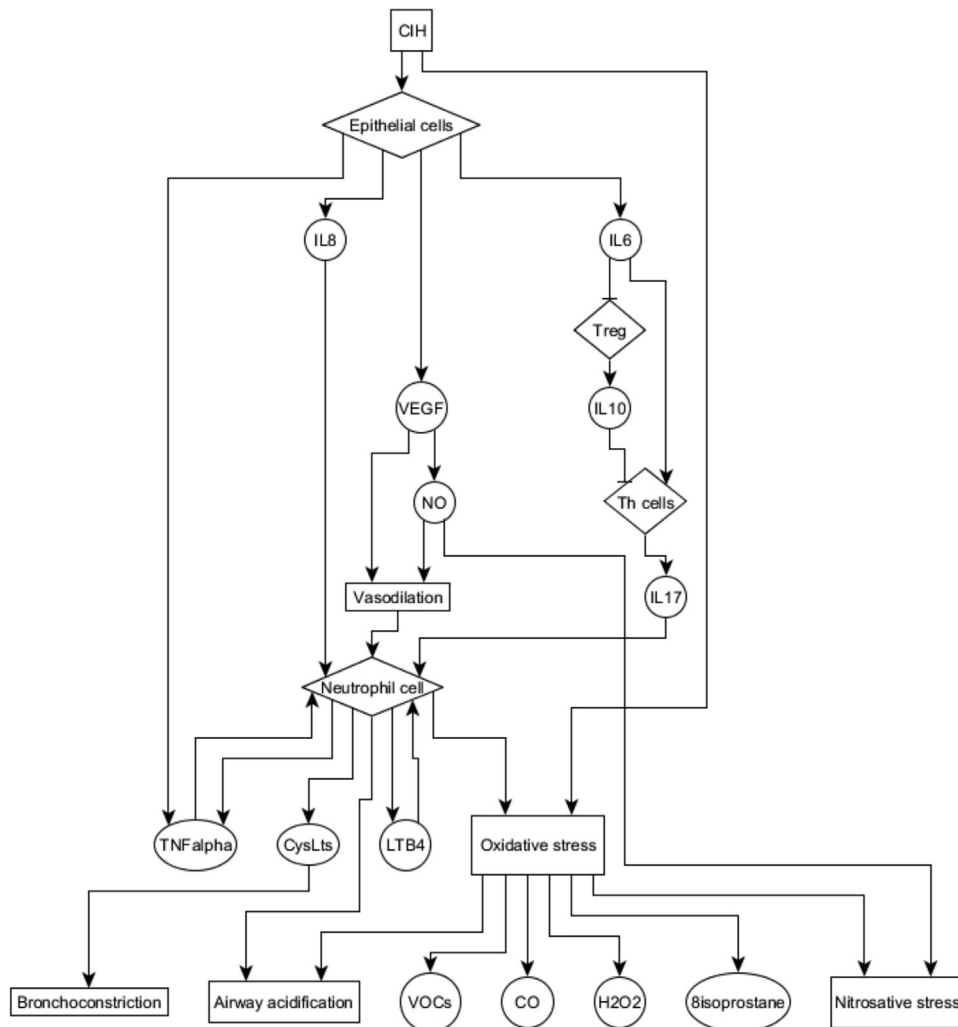


Fig. 2 – Elements of airway inflammation in obstructive sleep apnea. Chronic intermittent hypoxia (CIH) induces production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, including interleukin (IL)-6, IL-8, and tumor necrosis factor (TNF)-alpha as well as VEGF. These induce neutrophil cell and lymphocyte influx, which potentiate oxidative and nitrosative stress, bronchoconstriction, and airway acidification and accelerate airway inflammation through positive feedback mechanisms. In addition, increased production of VEGF and nitric oxide leads to bronchial vasodilation. This not only facilitates the influx of circulating inflammatory cells toward airway mucous but also allows overspill of airway inflammatory cytokines and markers of oxidative and nitrosative stress into circulation.

4. Summary

Obstructive sleep apnea may trigger lower airway inflammation primarily through intermittent hypoxia and oxidative stress and secondarily through vibration trauma and sleep fragmentation. This inflammation is characterized by type 1 cytokines and airway neutrophilia (Fig. 2). Obesity, a major co-factor in OSA pathophysiology, may directly affect airway inflammation and may also worsen overnight hypoxia [18], accelerating OSA-induced changes in the airways. The reduction in lung volumes, either induced by parenchymal lung disease or obesity, would worsen OSA due to anatomical, chemical, and neuronal factors.

Currently, information on whether treating OSA with CPAP improves airway function and inflammation is limited.

This highlights the need for the development of pharmacological anti-inflammatory treatments for OSA. However, to date, data on the effects of these drugs are very limited.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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