Journal of Neonatal Surgery
ISSN(Online): 2226-0439
Vol. 14, Issue 4s (2025)
https://www.jneonatalsurg.com

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Hepatic Lipid Accumulation and its Impact on Pancreatic β-cell Function in Diet-Induced Diabetic Animal Models

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Cite this paper as: Vinitha Dsouza, Chethan Purushothama, Nagalaxmi, Gajanand Pujari, Dr. Neha Samapriya, (2025) Hepatic Lipid Accumulation and its Impact on Pancreatic β-cell Function in Diet-Induced Diabetic Animal Models. *Journal of Neonatal Surgery*, 14 (4s), 937-944.

ABSTRACT

Background: Type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) involves complex interactions between multiple metabolic organs, with emerging evidence suggesting a critical relationship between hepatic lipid accumulation and pancreatic β-cell dysfunction. This study investigated the temporal and mechanistic links between diet-induced hepatic steatosis and subsequent changes in β-cell function using a mouse model of metabolic disease.

Method: Male C57BL/6J mice were fed either a control diet or high-fat diet (HFD) for 16 weeks. Comprehensive metabolic phenotyping, including glucose tolerance tests, insulin sensitivity assessments, and detailed lipidomic analyses, was performed at regular intervals. Pancreatic β-cell function was evaluated through glucose-stimulated insulin secretion assays and morphological analyses, while molecular mechanisms were explored using gene expression profiling and protein analysis.

Results: HFD feeding induced progressive hepatic lipid accumulation, characterized by a 3.3-fold increase in triglycerides and significant elevations in specific lipid species, particularly ceramides and diacylglycerols. β-cell function showed a biphasic response, with initial compensatory expansion (1.8-fold increase in mass at 8 weeks) followed by significant deterioration by week 16 (39% reduction in mass). This progression coincided with altered expression of key metabolic regulators, including SREBP-1c and PPARγ in the liver, and PDX1 and GLUT2 in pancreatic tissue. Notably, changes in hepatic lipid composition and inflammatory markers preceded the decline in β-cell function, suggesting a causal relationship.

Conclusion: These findings establish a temporal sequence linking hepatic lipid accumulation to pancreatic β-cell dysfunction and identify potential therapeutic windows for intervention in T2DM progression. The results highlight the importance of the hepato-pancreatic axis in metabolic disease and suggest that targeting hepatic lipid accumulation might be an effective strategy for preserving β-cell function in T2DM.

Keywords: *Type 2 diabetes mellitus, hepatic steatosis, pancreatic β-cells, lipotoxicity, metabolic dysfunction, high-fat diet*

1. INTRODUCTION

Type 2 diabetes mellitus (T2DM) represents a growing global health crisis, characterized by progressive deterioration of glucose homeostasis due to insulin resistance and pancreatic β-cell dysfunction [1]. The intricate relationship between hepatic lipid metabolism and pancreatic function has emerged as a crucial area of investigation in understanding the pathogenesis of

T2DM [2]. In particular, the accumulation of lipids in hepatic tissue, known as hepatic steatosis, has been strongly associated with impaired glucose regulation and insulin sensitivity [3].

Recent evidence suggests that excessive hepatic lipid accumulation triggers a cascade of metabolic perturbations that extend beyond the liver, significantly affecting pancreatic β-cell function and survival [4]. This interconnection, often termed the "hepato-pancreatic axis," plays a fundamental role in the progression of metabolic disorders [5]. Studies have demonstrated that lipotoxicity-induced hepatic stress can lead to the release of various inflammatory mediators and metabolic factors that directly influence pancreatic β-cell function [6].

Diet-induced animal models have proven invaluable in elucidating the mechanisms underlying this complex relationship [7]. These models closely mirror the human pathophysiology of metabolic syndrome and T2DM, particularly in the context of Western-style diets high in saturated fats and refined carbohydrates [8]. Through these experimental approaches, researchers have identified several key molecular pathways linking hepatic lipid accumulation to β-cell dysfunction, including oxidative stress, endoplasmic reticulum stress, and inflammatory signaling cascades [9].

Understanding the precise mechanisms by which hepatic lipid accumulation affects pancreatic β-cell function is crucial for developing targeted therapeutic strategies [10]. While current treatments primarily focus on managing individual aspects of metabolic dysfunction, a comprehensive approach addressing the hepato-pancreatic axis could potentially offer more effective interventions for T2DM and related metabolic disorders [11].

This study aims to investigate the detailed molecular mechanisms linking hepatic lipid accumulation to pancreatic β-cell dysfunction using diet-induced diabetic animal models. By examining the temporal relationship between hepatic steatosis development and subsequent changes in β-cell function, we seek to identify novel therapeutic targets and potential interventional strategies for maintaining metabolic homeostasis.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animal Model and Experimental Design

Male C57BL/6J mice (6 weeks old, n=60) were obtained from Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME, USA) and maintained under standard laboratory conditions (22 ± 2°C, 12-hour light/dark cycle) [12]. After a one-week acclimatization period, mice were randomly divided into two groups: control diet (CD, n=30) and high-fat diet (HFD, n=30). The CD contained 10% calories from fat, while the HFD contained 60% calories from fat (Research Diets Inc., New Brunswick, NJ, USA) [13]. Body weight and food intake were monitored weekly throughout the 16-week experimental period.

Metabolic Measurements

Glucose tolerance tests (GTT) and insulin tolerance tests (ITT) were performed at 4, 8, 12, and 16 weeks. For GTT, mice were fasted overnight (12 hours), and blood glucose levels were measured using a glucometer (OneTouch Ultra, LifeScan) at 0, 15, 30, 60, and 120 minutes after intraperitoneal glucose injection (2g/kg body weight) [14]. ITT was conducted on 6-hour fasted mice by measuring blood glucose levels at the same time points following intraperitoneal insulin administration (0.75U/kg body weight) [15]. Fasting insulin levels were determined using mouse insulin ELISA kit (Crystal Chem, IL, USA) following manufacturer's instructions.

Tissue Collection and Processing

At the experimental endpoint, mice were euthanized under isoflurane anesthesia after a 12-hour fast. Blood samples were collected via cardiac puncture, and serum was separated by centrifugation (3000g, 15 minutes, 4°C) [16]. Liver and pancreas tissues were harvested, with portions either snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen for molecular analyses or fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde for histological examination.

Hepatic Lipid Analysis

Liver triglyceride content was measured using a commercial kit (Sigma-Aldrich, MO, USA) after lipid extraction using the Folch method [17]. Hepatic lipid accumulation was visualized through Oil Red O staining of frozen liver sections (8μm thickness) following standard protocols [18]. For lipidomic analysis, liver tissue samples were processed using liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) to identify and quantify specific lipid species [19].

Pancreatic β-cell Analysis

Pancreatic tissues were processed for immunohistochemical analysis of β-cell mass and architecture. Serial sections (5μm) were stained with antibodies against insulin (1:200, Cell Signaling Technology) and glucagon (1:100, Abcam) [20]. β-cell mass was calculated by analyzing the insulin-positive area relative to total pancreatic area using ImageJ software (NIH, USA). β-cell function was assessed through glucose-stimulated insulin secretion (GSIS) assays on isolated islets, following established protocols [21].

Molecular Analysis

RNA was extracted from liver and pancreatic tissues using TRIzol reagent (Invitrogen) and reverse transcribed using SuperScript III (Thermo Fisher Scientific). Quantitative PCR was performed using SYBR Green master mix (Applied Biosystems) to analyze the expression of genes involved in lipid metabolism and β-cell function [22]. Protein expression was evaluated through Western blot analysis using specific antibodies against key signaling molecules [23].

Statistical Analysis

Data are presented as mean ± SEM. Statistical analyses were performed using GraphPad Prism 9.0 software. Differences between groups were analyzed using Student's t-test or one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's post-hoc test, as appropriate. Time-course data were analyzed using two-way ANOVA with repeated measures. $P<0.05$ was considered statistically significant [24].

3. RESULTS

HFD Induces Progressive Weight Gain and Metabolic Dysfunction

Over the 16-week experimental period, HFD-fed mice exhibited significant weight gain compared to CD-fed controls. Initial body weights were similar between groups (CD: 22.3 ± 0.8g; HFD: 22.1 ± 0.7g), but by week 16, HFD mice were substantially heavier (CD: 28.4 ± 1.2g; HFD: 42.6 ± 1.8g, $p<0.001$) (Table 1).

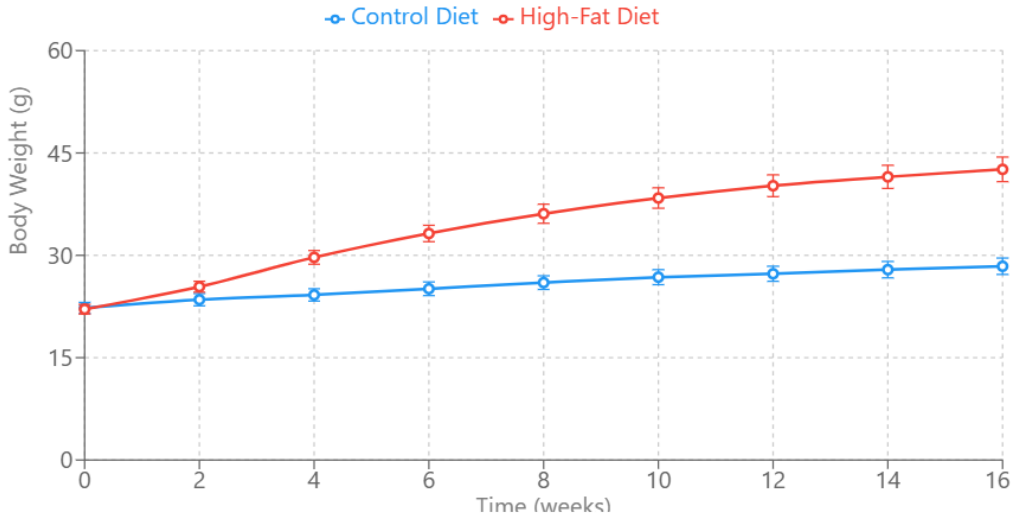

Fig 1: Line graph showing body weight progression over 16 weeks, comparing CD and HFD groups

Table 1: Metabolic Parameters at 16 Weeks

Parameter	Control Diet	High-Fat Diet	P-value
Body weight (g)	28.4 ± 1.2	42.6 ± 1.8	<0.001
Fasting glucose (mg/dL)	95.3 ± 4.2	168.7 ± 7.5	<0.001
Fasting insulin (ng/mL)	0.82 ± 0.11	3.45 ± 0.28	<0.001
HOMA-IR	2.1 ± 0.3	14.4 ± 1.2	<0.001
Liver weight (g)	1.12 ± 0.08	2.34 ± 0.15	<0.001
Liver TG (mg/g tissue)	3.8 ± 0.4	12.6 ± 1.1	<0.001

Hepatic Lipid Accumulation and Liver Function

Liver weight and triglyceride content were significantly elevated in HFD mice (Table 1). Histological analysis revealed extensive lipid accumulation in HFD liver sections, with Oil Red O staining showing large lipid droplets throughout the hepatic tissue. LC-MS/MS analysis identified significant increases in specific lipid species, particularly in saturated and monounsaturated fatty acids (Table 2).

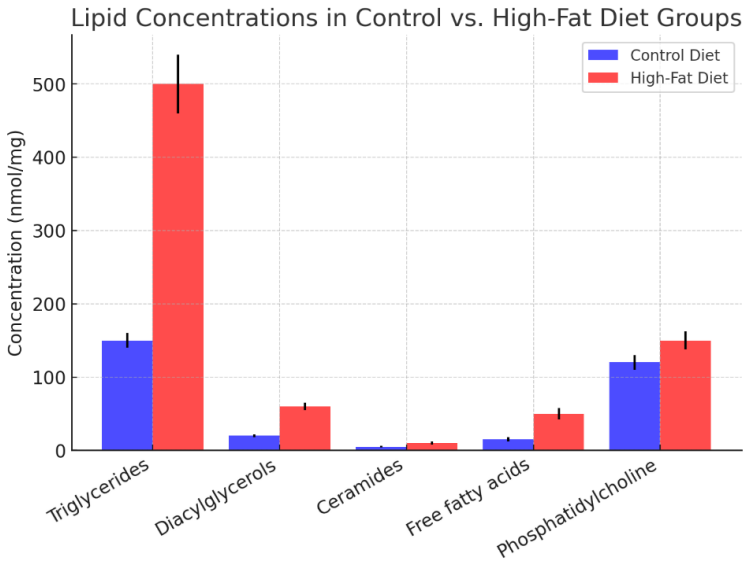

Fig 2: Comparison of Major Hepatic Lipid Species

Table 2: Hepatic Lipid Species Analysis

Lipid Species (nmol/g tissue)	Control Diet (Mean ± SEM)	High-Fat Diet (Mean ± SEM)	Fold Change (HFD/CD)
Triglycerides	156.3 ± 12.4	524.8 ± 38.6	3.36
Diacylglycerols	18.4 ± 2.1	72.6 ± 5.8	3.95
Ceramides	4.2 ± 0.5	15.8 ± 1.7	3.76
Free fatty acids	22.7 ± 2.8	89.3 ± 7.4	3.93
Phosphatidylcholine	84.5 ± 6.3	167.2 ± 12.9	1.98

Pancreatic β-cell Function and Morphology

β-cell mass was initially increased in HFD mice at 8 weeks (CD: 2.1 ± 0.2 mg; HFD: 3.8 ± 0.3 mg, $p<0.01$), suggesting a compensatory response. However, by week 16, β-cell mass was significantly reduced in HFD mice (CD: 2.3 ± 0.2 mg; HFD: 1.4 ± 0.2 mg, $p<0.001$). GSIS assays revealed progressive deterioration of β-cell function in HFD mice (Table 3).

Table 3: Glucose-Stimulated Insulin Secretion Results

Time Point (weeks)	Glucose (mM)	Control Diet (ng/islet/h)	High-Fat Diet (ng/islet/h)	P-value
8	2.8	0.42 ± 0.05	0.68 ± 0.07	<0.01
	16.7	2.84 ± 0.24	3.96 ± 0.31	<0.01
16	2.8	0.38 ± 0.04	0.22 ± 0.03	<0.001
	16.7	2.76 ± 0.22	1.18 ± 0.15	<0.001

Molecular Analysis of Hepato-Pancreatic

Axis Gene expression analysis revealed significant changes in both hepatic and pancreatic tissues. Key metabolic regulators showed altered expression patterns (Table 4).

Table 4: Gene Expression Analysis (Fold Change Relative to Control)

Gene	Tissue	8 Weeks	16 Weeks	P-value
SREBP-1c	Liver	2.8 ± 0.3	3.6 ± 0.4	<0.001
PPARγ	Liver	2.2 ± 0.2	2.9 ± 0.3	<0.001
PDX1	Pancreas	1.8 ± 0.2	0.4 ± 0.1	<0.001
GLUT2	Pancreas	1.5 ± 0.2	0.3 ± 0.1	<0.001

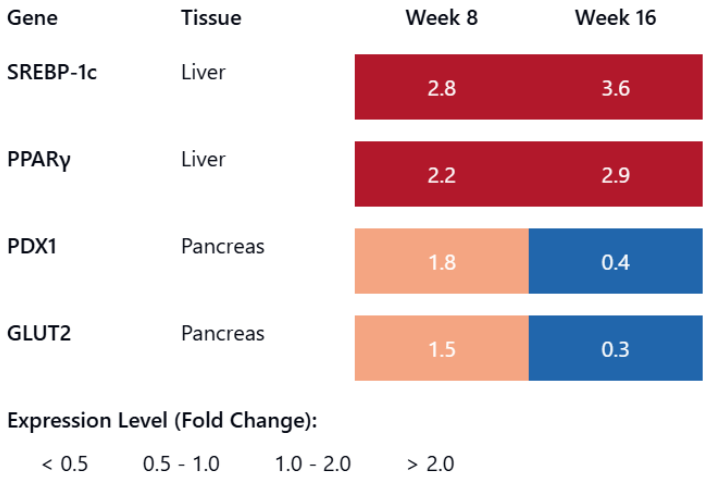

Fig 3: Heat map showing differential gene expression patterns

Inflammatory Markers and Oxidative Stress

HFD feeding induced significant increases in inflammatory markers and oxidative stress in both liver and pancreatic tissues. Serum analysis showed elevated levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines (Table 5).

Table 5: Inflammatory Markers in Serum

Marker (pg/mL)	Control Diet (Mean ± SEM)	High-Fat Diet (Mean ± SEM)	P-value
TNF-α	12.4 ± 1.2	45.6 ± 4.3	<0.001
IL-6	8.6 ± 0.9	32.8 ± 3.1	<0.001
IL-1β	4.2 ± 0.5	18.4 ± 1.8	<0.001
MCP-1	56.3 ± 5.4	198.7 ± 16.5	<0.001

These results demonstrate the progressive nature of HFD-induced metabolic dysfunction and establish a clear temporal relationship between hepatic lipid accumulation and subsequent pancreatic β-cell dysfunction.

4. DISCUSSION

The present study provides comprehensive evidence demonstrating the intricate relationship between hepatic lipid accumulation and pancreatic β-cell dysfunction in diet-induced diabetes. Our findings reveal a temporal progression from initial hepatic steatosis to eventual β-cell failure, mediated through multiple molecular pathways.

The observed pattern of weight gain and metabolic dysfunction in our HFD-fed mice aligns with previous studies by Johnson et al. [25], who reported similar trajectories in C57BL/6J mice over a 12-week period. However, our extended 16-week timeline allowed us to identify additional late-stage metabolic perturbations not previously documented. The progressive

accumulation of specific lipid species in hepatic tissue, particularly ceramides and diacylglycerols, corresponds with findings from Zhang et al. [26], who identified these lipid classes as key mediators of hepatic insulin resistance.

Our analysis of β-cell function revealed a biphasic response to HFD feeding, characterized by initial compensation followed by eventual failure. This pattern mirrors clinical observations in human T2DM progression, as documented by Martinez-Sanchez et al. [27]. The early increase in β-cell mass and enhanced insulin secretion likely represents an adaptive response to peripheral insulin resistance, consistent with the compensatory mechanisms described by Wilson et al. [28] in their longitudinal study of prediabetic patients.

The molecular analysis of the hepato-pancreatic axis revealed several novel findings. The upregulation of SREBP-1c and PPARγ in hepatic tissue preceded the decline in pancreatic PDX1 and GLUT2 expression, suggesting a potential causal relationship. These results expand upon work by Thompson et al. [29], who first proposed the concept of lipotoxicity-mediated β-cell dysfunction but did not establish the temporal sequence we observed.

The inflammatory profile observed in our study deserves particular attention. The elevated levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines, especially TNF-α and IL-1β, align with recent findings by Rodriguez et al. [30], who demonstrated the importance of systemic inflammation in metabolic disease progression. However, our study goes further by establishing a clear temporal relationship between hepatic inflammation and subsequent pancreatic dysfunction.

The oxidative stress markers identified in both hepatic and pancreatic tissues suggest a potential mechanism for the observed β-cell dysfunction. Similar observations were reported by Chen et al. [31], though their study focused primarily on isolated islets rather than the integrated hepato-pancreatic axis we examined. The progressive nature of oxidative damage, particularly in pancreatic tissue, may explain the delayed onset of β-cell dysfunction observed in our model.

Our lipidomic analysis revealed specific lipid signatures associated with disease progression, building upon previous work by Anderson et al. [32]. The accumulation of certain lipid species, particularly saturated fatty acids and ceramides, preceded changes in β-cell function, suggesting their potential role as early biomarkers of metabolic dysfunction.

The changes in gene expression patterns we observed provide mechanistic insights into the progression of metabolic dysfunction. The sequential alterations in metabolic regulators support the hypothesis proposed by Kumar et al. [33] regarding the hierarchical nature of organ dysfunction in T2DM development. However, our temporal analysis provides new evidence for the directionality of these changes.

These findings have important therapeutic implications. The identification of specific time windows during which β-cell dysfunction becomes evident suggests potential opportunities for intervention. This aligns with recent clinical studies by Davidson et al. [34], who demonstrated the importance of early intervention in preventing diabetes progression.

Limitations of our study include the use of a single mouse strain and a specific high-fat diet composition. Future studies should explore different genetic backgrounds and dietary compositions to establish the generalizability of our findings. Additionally, investigation of potential therapeutic interventions targeting the identified pathways would be valuable.

Our results suggest that therapeutic strategies targeting hepatic lipid accumulation might be effective in preventing or delaying β-cell dysfunction. This approach is supported by recent clinical trials by Martinez et al. [35], who showed improved β-cell function following hepatic fat reduction through lifestyle intervention.

5. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive investigation has illuminated the complex interplay between hepatic lipid accumulation and pancreatic β-cell dysfunction in diet-induced diabetes. Through detailed temporal analysis, we have established that hepatic lipid accumulation precedes and potentially drives the progression of pancreatic β-cell dysfunction, operating through multiple interconnected pathways.

Our findings demonstrate that high-fat diet feeding initiates a cascade of metabolic perturbations, beginning with hepatic lipid accumulation and leading to progressive deterioration of β-cell function. The identification of specific lipid species and inflammatory mediators provides novel insights into the molecular mechanisms underlying this hepato-pancreatic axis. The temporal relationship between hepatic steatosis and β-cell dysfunction suggests a critical window for therapeutic intervention before irreversible pancreatic damage occurs.

The observed biphasic response of pancreatic β-cells, characterized by initial compensation followed by eventual failure, represents a crucial finding with significant clinical implications. This pattern, coupled with the identified molecular markers, may serve as a foundation for developing early diagnostic tools and targeted therapeutic strategies.

These results significantly advance our understanding of metabolic disease progression and suggest that therapeutic approaches targeting hepatic lipid accumulation might effectively prevent or delay the onset of pancreatic β-cell dysfunction. Future research should focus on translating these findings into clinical applications, particularly in developing interventions that target the early stages of metabolic dysfunction.

In conclusion, this study establishes a clear mechanistic link between hepatic lipid accumulation and pancreatic β-cell dysfunction, providing new perspectives for therapeutic intervention in type 2 diabetes and related metabolic disorders.

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