Interindividual Variability in Absorption, Distribution, Metabolism,
and Excretion of Food Phytochemicals Should Be Reported

Christine Morand*†‡ and Francisco A. Tomás-Barberán*‡

†Univrsité Clermont Auvergne, Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique (INRA), Unité de Nutrition Humaine (UNH), Centre de Recherche en Nutrition Humaine d’Auvergne (CRNH Auvergne), F-63000 Clermont-Ferrand, France
‡Food and Health Laboratory, Research Group on Quality, Safety, and Bioactivity of Plant Foods, Center for Applied Soil Science and Biology of the Segura (CEBAS), Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), Campus de Espinardo, 30100 Murcia, Spain

It has been rather difficult to demonstrate the biological effects of food phytochemicals and especially (poly)phenols in human intervention trials. Although accumulating evidence from epidemiological and experimental studies support the preventive role of these phytochemicals, particularly in cardiovascular disease (CVD), the demonstration of direct effects decreasing different disease biomarkers in human studies remains elusive. In fact, in an intervention trial, it is easy to find volunteers that positively respond to the intervention, while others do not. This heterogeneity in responsiveness has often led to inconclusive results in clinical trials that aim to demonstrate the health effects of specific phytochemical compounds.

The determinants for this interindividual variability have been studied during the last 4 years within the European COST Action POSITIVe (https://www6.inra.fr/cost-positive). The results of this scientific network have shown that interindividual variations in absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion (ADME) of the phytochemicals can be a key determinant. When trying to establish correlations between variations in ADME and the observed effects on CVD biomarkers, it has been difficult to find studies in which the individual values for the effect observed and the ADME are reported, making the establishment of this correlation impossible.

A large variability in ADME of food phytochemicals and particularly (poly)phenols between different individuals in an intervention study that aims to investigate the impact on cardiovascular end points has probably been considered as a negative result or due to an inaccurate experimental design. Often, error bars showing standard errors are reported, instead of larger error bars based on standard deviations (SDs), to show “nicer” figures. This large SD is an indication of the high variability in ADME among different volunteers and can reflect differences in gut microbiota metabolism, intestinal absorption, human metabolism, tissue uptake, or kidney excretion. If the circulating phytochemical metabolites resulting from both microbial and host metabolism of parent compounds are responsible for the biological effects observed, then a large between subject variability in the CVD biomarkers would be expected. This is probably the case, although there is no report available that has studied this correlation.

Studies showing large SDs (interindividual variability) in the absorption and excretion of phytochemical metabolites have been reported for flavanone rutinosides, proanthocyanidins, ellagitannins, lignans, and isoflavones, among others, showing that this can be a very common situation in intervention trials with (poly)phenols (Table 1).

Therefore, the variability among individuals needs to be reported because it reflects relevant differences in human genetics (polymorphisms) (digestive enzymes, intestinal transporters, phase I and phase II metabolism, and kidney transporters) and also in the gut microbiota composition and functionality that affect the catabolism of non-absorbed phytochemicals in the small intestine.

The study of this variability using previously published data has always been a problem, because most of the reported data are shown as mean values of different volunteers and include some statistical figures to show the dispersion of the data. Therefore, it is not possible to evaluate the physiological response (biomarkers of effects) of each specific individual after the intake of a specific polyphenol-rich food or an isolated phytochemical and to correlate these results with the concentration of circulating metabolites.

In the demonstration of the cardiovascular health effects of food phytochemicals, the classical approach has aimed to evaluate foods with different doses of the bioactive compared to a placebo on a panel of biomarkers of the effect, assessed in the biological fluids [plasma oxidized cholesterol, high-density lipoprotein (HDL), low-density lipoprotein (LDL), etc.] or through functional measurements (flow-mediated dilatation, blood pressure, and arterial stiffness). These studies often lead to statistically non-significant results or results with a very low significance because some volunteers show a high response to the treatment, while others only show a very limited or no

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Table 1. Cases for Large Interindividual Variability in (Poly)phenol Gut Microbiota Metabolism and ADME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Food product</th>
<th>Food phytochemical</th>
<th>Gut microbiota metabolites produced</th>
<th>Metabolites excreted</th>
<th>Interindividual variability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berries, pomegranate, nuts, and tea</td>
<td>Ellagitannins and ellagic acid</td>
<td>Urolithins</td>
<td>Uroliothin glucuronides and sulfates</td>
<td>Metabolites reported and differences in quantity of excreted metabolites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citrus fruits and beverages</td>
<td>Hesperetin rutinosides</td>
<td>Hesperetin and hydroxylphenylacetic and phenylpropionic acids</td>
<td>Hesperetin glucuronides and sulfates and hydroxylphenylacetic and phenylpropionic acids</td>
<td>Differences in the quantity of absorbed and excreted metabolites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soybean</td>
<td>Isoflavones</td>
<td>Daidzin, O-desmethylangolensin, and equol</td>
<td>Glucuronide and sulfate conjugates</td>
<td>Metabolites reported and differences in quantity of excreted metabolites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hop (beer)</td>
<td>Isoxanthohumol</td>
<td>Prenylatingenin</td>
<td>Glucuronide and sulfate conjugates</td>
<td>Differences in the quantity of absorbed and excreted metabolites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocoa, apple, grape and wine, fruits, and tea</td>
<td>Proanthocyanidins</td>
<td>Valerolactones</td>
<td>Glucuronide and sulfate conjugates</td>
<td>Differences in the quantity of absorbed and excreted metabolites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flaxseed</td>
<td>Lignans</td>
<td>Enterolactone and enterodiol</td>
<td>Glucuronide and sulfate conjugates</td>
<td>Differences in the quantity of absorbed and excreted metabolites</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Response. If the metabolites of the food (poly)phenols are eventually responsible for the health effects and if there is a large between-subject variability in their ADME, it is essential to study if the variability in the effect correlates with differences in ADME of the food phytochemicals. Therefore, the new approach should aim to look at a correlation between a biomarker of effect and biomarkers of exposure to the phytochemical metabolites.

After studying the interindividual variability of ADME, volunteers can be stratified according to their degree of exposure to the food bioactive metabolites. This stratification, conducted before starting or after an intervention trial, can also be a sensible approach, insofar as an upstream statistical power analysis has been performed to allow for this stratification. This method has already been successfully used to study the effects on CVD biomarkers after the stratification of individuals consuming soybean isoflavones into equal producer and non-producer phenotypes, as well as after the intake of pomegranate ellagitannins stratified by urolithin-producing metabolotypes. In these studies, the equal producers, after soybean isoflavone intake, and the urolithin metabolotype B volunteers, after the intake of pomegranate ellagitannins, responded better to the treatment, while a non-significant effect was observed in the equal non-producers and the urolithin metabolotypes A and 0 volunteers.4,5

In future studies, the reporting of the observed values for each subject regarding both biomarkers of exposure to the phytochemical metabolites and biomarkers associated with cardiometabolic risk is strongly recommended, for the posterior conducting of correlation studies. This approach is essential for the better understanding of why some compounds work in some individuals while having a smaller effect or not at all in others. Ultimately, the results will help estimate the personal health benefits that an individual can gain from different phytochemical-rich foods while, at the same time, helping to make progress in the development of effective and innovative dietary solutions for the improvement of cardiometabolic health. For the human intervention trials that examine the impact of food phytochemicals on health biomarkers without any assessment of exposure or bioavailability, the lack of ADME data can be considered a limitation of the study, and this should be acknowledged in the publication.

**AUTHOR INFORMATION**

Corresponding Authors

*Telephone: +33-968396200, ext. 6334. Fax: +33-968396213. E-mail: fatomas@cebas.csic.es.

ORCID

Christine Morand: 0000-0001-8128-1032
Francisco A. Tomás-Barberán: 0000-0002-0790-1739

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