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Label-free Characterization of Rapid Lipid Accumulation in Living Primary Hepatocytes after Exposure to Lipoprotein Lipolysis Products

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Abstract

The increased accumulation of intracellular lipid droplets within hepatocytes is a pathologic hallmark of liver injury of various etiologies, especially non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH). The dynamics, subcellular origin, and chemical composition of lipid droplets under various pathophysiologic conditions, however, remain poorly understood. We used coherent Raman microscopy and spontaneous Raman spectroscopy to monitor and analyze the formation of lipid droplets in living primary rat hepatocytes exposed to VLDL lipolysis products. After exposure to lipolysis products for 30 minutes, new lipid droplets rapidly appeared within hepatocytes and increased in size and number over the observation period of 205 minutes. Intracellular lipid droplet transport appears to be greatly reduced after lipolysis product treatment. Spontaneous Raman spectroscopy of individual intracellular lipid droplets before and after exposure to VLDL lipolysis products reveals that the major components of these droplets are esterified unsaturated fatty acids. The fatty acid unsaturation ratio increases with droplet size. In response to simultaneous exposure to an oxidized form of linoleic acid, 13-hydroxy-9,11-octadecadienoic acid (13-HODE) and palmitic acid, a marked increase in saturated fat content was found when compared to treatment with palmitic acid alone. Lipid aggregation in hepatocytes induced by VLDL lipolysis products may be the initial event leading to non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD).

Keywords

NASH; NAFLD; CARS; Non-linear microscopy; Raman spectroscopy; lipolysis; VLDL

INTRODUCTION

The liver is a key organ for lipid metabolism and uptake, conversion, assembly, and export of lipoproteins are tightly regulated by hormones and lipokines (1). Fat accumulation (mainly in form of triglycerides) in the liver occurs frequently, and can be harmless, reversible, and asymptomatic. On the other hand, the formation of lipid droplets may also

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represent a key first step for liver injury. Fatty liver disease in some non-alcoholic individuals, so-called non-alcoholic steatohepatitis (NASH), may be accompanied by fibrosis and progress to cirrhosis, which can develop into the end-stage of liver disease or hepatocellular carcinoma. However, after decades of exploration of the molecular mechanisms underlying the formation of lipid droplets in hepatocytes under various normal or pathologic conditions, the subcellular origins and chemical components, their impact on subcellular organelles, and the progression or pathological course of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) and NASH remain poorly understood (2, 3). Moreover, recent evidence indicates that type rather than the amount of triglycerides in lipid droplets is critical in the sensitization of fatty liver to TNF/Fas-mediated steatohepatitis (4).

Various animal models of NASH are available, and they have provided significant insights into the mechanisms of NASH development (5-7). However, the utilization of isolated primary hepatocytes as a tool in NASH research allows dissecting the pathogenesis of lipid droplets, as well as their dynamic changes and impact on other cellular organelles at the molecular or subcellular levels in response to external stimuli (8).

Nonlinear microscopy techniques, such as second harmonic generation (SHG), provide a new approach to detecting and studying fibrotic liver tissue without the need for exogenous contrast agents, i.e. stains or fluorescent labels (9, 10). Unfortunately, SHG is only sensitive to the symmetry and organization of cellular structures and does not provide the chemical contrast necessary to specifically image lipids. Third harmonic generation has been used quite successfully to image lipid droplets, but it also lacks chemical specificity (11). Coherent anti-Stokes Raman scattering (CARS) microscopy is a relatively new approach allowing for chemical specificity based on intrinsic Raman-active molecular vibrations of the sample. By combining two short-pulsed near-infrared laser sources and overlaying them both spatially and temporally at the sample it is possible to coherently probe specific molecular vibrations with a spatial resolution on sub-micron length scales. Due to the intensity dependence of the signal generation only molecules within the combined focal volume of both laser beams will generate a CARS signal providing confocal optical sample discrimination without the need for a confocal pinhole. By taking these advantages into consideration, CARS becomes particularly well-suited for the study of dynamic biological systems, such as living cells, where perturbations due to fluorescent stains could affect the outcome of an experiment (12-20).

CARS has recently been used to observe lipid droplets in steatotic tissue of a rat NASH model fed methionine and choline-deficient (MCD) diets (14). However, no study which investigates the dynamic changes of lipid droplets in live primary hepatocytes with CARS has so far been performed. Here, we use CARS microscopy in a time-lapsed manner to monitor lipid accumulations in hepatocytes after exposure to lipolysis products derived from human VLDL and LpL. We also determined and compared the chemical composition of lipid droplets present in the natural state of hepatocytes after exposure to lipolysis products using spontaneous Raman spectroscopy, which provides a full spectral assessment of the lipid droplet content. We find that new lipid droplets emerge primarily in the same cellular regions as naturally occurring droplets, but also, in new intracellular locations. Also, it appears that these new lipid droplets do not exhibit the same vivid motility observed by droplets in untreated cells. Raman spectral analysis of the newly emerging lipid droplets reveals an increase in fatty acid bond unsaturation compared to droplets in normal, untreated hepatocytes, and more saturated fatty acids were formed upon treatment with 13-HODE and palmitic acid. This study demonstrates that combining dynamic imaging through coherent anti-Stokes Raman microscopy with spontaneous Raman spectroscopy allows for a comprehensive chemical analysis of lipid droplet formation and composition in living hepatocytes. This approach enables us to characterize the response of hepatocytes to

exposure to VLDL lipolysis products, a process that occurs continuously in the human body in the postprandial state. Imaging lipid metabolism in hepatocytes in response to high extracellular lipid concentration provides essential information enabling a greater understanding of the pathogenesis of fatty liver diseases.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Isolation and culture of primary rat hepatocytes

Sprague–Dawley rats (150–200 g) were purchased from Harlan Laboratory (Indianapolis, IN) and fed with a commercial diet and water. All animal experiments were performed according to the National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines for the ethical care and use of laboratory animals, and the experimental protocol was approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) of the University of California, Davis.

Primary hepatocytes were isolated from male Sprague–Dawley rats by a two-step collagenase perfusion procedure as described previously (21–23). Cell viability among different isolations, as assessed by exclusion of Trypan blue, was over 90%. Isolated hepatocytes were seeded on glass bottom culture dishes (MatTek Corporation, Ashland, MA) precoated with collagen type I from rat tail (Sigma, St. Louis, MO) at a density of 5×10^4 cells/cm², and incubated in William's medium E (Sigma-Aldrich Co. St. Louis, MO) containing 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS), insulin (0.02 unit/ml), 10 mM HEPES, 10 mM NaHCO₃ and antibiotics in an atmosphere of 5% CO₂ at 37 °C. 2 hours after seeding, the cells were washed with 0.01 M phosphate buffered saline (PBS) and medium was refreshed with the same supplements.

Isolation of very low-density lipoproteins

Male and female healthy human volunteers ages 18–55 were recruited from the University of California, Davis campus. The study was approved by the Human Subjects Research Committee of the University of California, Davis. The study aims and protocol were explained to each participant, and informed written consent was obtained. All studies were performed at the same time of day to eliminate any diurnal variables. Blood was drawn by venipuncture from subjects 3.5 hours following consumption of a moderately high fat meal into K₂-EDTA vacutainer tubes and centrifuged at 1,200g for 10 minutes to obtain cell-free plasma. Plasma was treated with 0.01% sodium azide as a preservative and subjected to lipoprotein isolation as described previously (24), with minor modifications. Chylomicrons were removed from postprandial plasma by centrifuging for 30 minutes at 63,000g prior to VLDL isolation. Lipid samples were dialyzed overnight at 4°C in 0.9% NaCl and 0.01% EDTA and quantified for total triglyceride content using a kit from Sigma-Aldrich. Lipolysis of VLDL was induced by the addition of bovine lipoprotein lipase (LpL, Sigma-Aldrich) at 2 Units/mL for 30 minutes at 37°C, where indicated.

Treatment of primary hepatocytes with VLDL, LpL, and fatty acids

After overnight culture, primary hepatocytes were washed with PBS, and medium was replaced with fresh complete medium. Fresh VLDL, isolated as described above, were directly added into the cell culture medium or mixed with LpL from bovine milk (Sigma Chemical Co.) in the complete William's E medium for 30 min, then added to the culture dishes. Palmitic acid (200 µMol) was first dissolved in water to create stock solutions and then added to the culture dishes to reach final concentrations as indicated. 13-HODE, (20 µMol), in ethanol was dried under nitrogen gas flow, and dissolved in medium before use. Hepatocytes were imaged immediately after exposure to VLDL or VLDL (50–100 mg/dL) + LpL (3 unit/ml) using the CARS microscope. For spectral Raman analysis, primary

hepatocytes were treated for 4 hours following the same protocols, fixed with 4% buffered paraformaldehyde, and washed with PBS.

CARS imaging of lipid droplet formation in primary rat hepatocytes

A 1064 nm Nd:YVO₄ laser (PicoTrain, HighQ Laser) with a 7 ps pulse width and a 76 MHz repetition rate is used as the Stokes pulse to generate the CARS signal and also serves as the pump laser for an Optical Parametric Oscillator (OPO, Levante, APE-Berlin). The tunable OPO with a wavelength range between 790 nm-920 nm provides the pump pulse for the CARS signal generation with an average output power of 500 mW. Both beams are spatially and temporally overlapped and combined by a 970 nm dichroic mirror. To diminish possible photo damage to the cells, the laser repetition rate is reduced tenfold to 7.6 MHz by an electro-optical modulator (Conoptics). The laser beams are then sent into an inverted optical microscope (IX71, Olympus) and focused to a diffraction-limited spot by a 60 $\times$ -oil objective (Olympus America, Center Valley, PA). The forward-directed CARS signal generated in the sample is separated from the laser beams by a dichroic mirror and a multiphoton short-pass filter (Semrock) and is then collected by a single photon counting detector (APD, SPCM-AQR 14, Perkin-Elmer). The APD signal is processed using time-correlated single photon counting electronics (TimeHarp200, PicoQuant GmbH) and displayed using image acquisition and analysis software (SymPhoTime, PicoQuant GmbH).

To image lipid dynamics and lipid accumulation in primary rat hepatocytes after exposure to a combination of VLDL and LpL, the 1064 nm line of our Nd:YVO₄ laser was used as the Stokes probe beam. The OPO beam tuned to 816 nm, serves as the pump laser. Together, the two beams drive the strong aliphatic lipid CH₂ stretch vibration at 2854 cm⁻¹ coherently, and generate a strong CARS signal at 661 nm, which was confirmed by detecting a narrowband CARS signal spectroscopically by an imaging spectrograph. All images were acquired at 256 $\times$ 256 pixels with an acquisition time of 1 min/image. To follow lipid droplet motility, images were obtained in time-lapse intervals every 3 min over a total acquisition period of 72 min. To observe dynamic lipid accumulation, images were taken every 5 min over a total period of 4 hours. To maintain the samples at a constant temperature of 37°C, the culture dishes were heated by an airstream incubator utilizing a feedback loop for temperature control. The cells were incubated with a mixture of 50-100 mg/dL VLDL and 3 units/ml LpL and placed on the inverted microscope immediately after treatment.

Spontaneous Raman analysis of single lipid droplets in hepatocytes

Spontaneous Raman spectra of single lipid droplets within hepatocyte cells were acquired on a custom-built inverted laser-tweezers Raman microscope. The main microscope platform consists of an Olympus IX-71 microscope equipped with a 100 $\times$, NA 1.4, oil immersion objective optimized for near-IR operation (Olympus America, Center Valley, PA). The laser source is an 80 mW, 785 nm diode-pumped solid-state laser (Crystalaser, Reno, NV). The spontaneously scattered Raman-shifted light is collected by the same microscope objective, dispersed by an imaging spectrograph (SP2300i, Roper Scientific, Trenton, NJ), equipped with a 300 lines/mm grating, and detected with a back-illuminated, thermoelectrically-cooled deep-depletion charge-coupled device (CCD) camera with 1340 $\times$ 100 pixels (PIXIS 100BR, Roper Scientific, Trenton, NJ) (25). To acquire spectra from individual lipid droplets the focal spot was positioned manually over the droplets within the hepatocyte cells. Background spectra were acquired from positions nearby the lipid droplets. Spectra were acquired for 30 s integration time for each droplet. After the subtraction of the individual background spectra the resulting spectra were processed equally, including baseline subtraction, smoothing and peak area normalization.

RESULTS

Lipid droplet dynamics in untreated hepatocytes

To capture lipid droplet motility in untreated living hepatocytes the CARS system was tuned to the 2854 cm^{-1} aliphatic CH_2 stretch vibration, which is most abundant in lipids, and 24 images were acquired over a period of 72 minutes. Figure 1a shows a characteristic CARS image of primary hepatocytes in culture. Here, the residual nonresonant background signal from four-wave mixing of the excitation lasers provides a phase-contrast like image of the cells in culture, enabling to visualize their outlines and the characteristic two nuclei found in hepatocytes. Some lipid droplets with a diameter of $1\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ or less are visible in these cells based on their significantly higher resonant signal. These lipid droplets were observed to be highly mobile in untreated hepatocytes and two areas of interest exhibiting significant lipid droplet transport are highlighted by the white frames in Fig 1a. Movements of these lipid droplets were tracked manually between consecutively acquired images and are shown as lipid droplet trajectories in Fig. 1 I and II. The observed lipid droplet displacement for the droplet in Fig. 1 I is $14.2\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, and the observed displacement for the droplet in Fig. 1 II is $19.4\text{ }\mu\text{m}$ over the entire observation period of 72 minutes. The direction of movements is indicated by the red arrow. Furthermore, the average distance that these droplets traveled between adjacent images is shown as displacement against time in the bar graph. During the displacement, some lipid droplets exhibit interactions with each other. In Fig. 1b-q time-lapse views of box I in Fig. 1a are shown for 16 distinct time points. The first 2 images in this series show slightly lower contrast because the lipid droplets were slightly outside the confocal detection volume of the microscope during imaging. After an adjustment of the z-position by $0.5\text{ }\mu\text{m}$, the images reveal a much stronger signal intensity and better contrast. Droplets exhibiting different types of interactions are indicated by colored arrows Fig. 1b-d.

Despite the generally relatively high lipid droplet mobility observed in these cells, several droplets do not change their position over the entire observation period. These lipid droplets are indicated by blue arrows in Fig. 1d. The red arrow, on the other hand, highlights two lipid droplets which begin to interact with each other starting in Fig. 1g, and continue to interact over a period of ~ 36 minutes but eventually separate again. A notably different behavior is exhibited by the lipid droplet highlighted by the white arrow, which is the same droplet shown in the track in Fig. 1 II. Along its path the droplet interacts with two other lipid droplets simultaneously, apparently trying to fuse with these in Fig. 1i. This interaction, however, stops and the droplet subsequently begins to interact and finally fuse with the larger lipid droplet marked by the blue arrow. These select observations show that lipid droplets in untreated primary hepatocytes exhibit a wide range of dynamics, among them high mobility, droplet-droplet interaction, and fusion to larger droplet sizes.

Lipid accumulation after treatment with VLDL+ LpL

To determine the dynamic response of hepatocytes to VLDL lipolysis products, primary rat hepatocytes were exposed to VLDL + LpL. Figure 2a shows rat hepatocytes imaged by CARS 1 min after the addition of VLDL lipolysis products. The other images shown in this figure were taken subsequently at the times indicated in each image. In this series, to further enhance contrast for the lipid droplets, all images were processed equally by first intensity-thresholding the images until only the lipid droplets remained visible, then color-coding the lipid droplets and overlaying the images with the original. The number and size of the lipid droplets visible in Fig. 2a are similar to those observed in untreated primary rat hepatocytes and occur as part of the natural cellular life cycle (26). Approximately 30 minutes after incubation with lipolysis products, new lipid droplets emerged, typically localized in the vicinity of existing lipid droplets. Also, a large number of small lipid droplets were found to develop throughout the cell's cytoplasm (Fig. 2b-f). The majority of these new lipid droplets

emerging in response to VLDL + LpL treatment were not as motile as those observed in untreated hepatocytes.

Spectral analysis of cellular lipid accumulations

To analyze the effects of lipolysis product treatment on the composition of cellular lipid droplets, Raman spectra of lipid droplets were obtained over the spectral region from 500 to 3100 cm^{-1} from differently sized lipid droplets within hepatocytes. An average Raman spectrum obtained from 10 different droplets in an untreated control sample is shown in Fig. 3a. This spectrum represents a typical lipid Raman spectrum composed mostly of contributions from C-C, C-H, and C-O bond vibrations (27-29).

Specifically, the 1266 cm^{-1} and 1302 cm^{-1} are an in-plane =C-H double bond vibration in cis conformation and a CH_2 twisting mode, respectively. The ratio between these two peaks can be used as an indicator for the degree of unsaturation in hydrocarbon chains. The 1446 cm^{-1} vibration is a combination of a CH_2 twisting mode and the 1455 cm^{-1} CH_2 scissoring mode and its intensity is a good measure of the total lipid content in the droplets. The peak at 1655 cm^{-1} is a C=C stretch vibration in the cis configuration, also representative of the degree of hydrocarbon chain unsaturation. The C=O ester group can be found at 1742 cm^{-1} and is indicative of triglyceride esterification within the lipid droplets. The broad 3000 cm^{-1} region which consists mostly of C-H stretching vibrations was excluded from the figure, because the peak response in the fingerprint region was more expressed and readily quantifiable because these peaks are well isolated compared to the rather crowded and convoluted high-wavenumber region.

Previous studies (28, 30) showed that changes in the ν_{1655}/ν_{1446} and ν_{1266}/ν_{1302} peak ratios correlate well with the number of double bonds present in fatty acids and reflect the total degree of unsaturation. The peak ratio ν_{1655}/ν_{1446} of the lipid Raman spectrum from normal, untreated hepatocytes is 0.72 (see Fig. 3a). According to *Weng et al.* (30) this ratio corresponds to an average number of 1.72 double bonds in a fatty acid, representing linoleic acid-like poly-unsaturation. This ratio does not change in the average spectra of small lipid droplets (~0.5 μm diameter) that emerge in response to treatment with lipolysis products (see Fig. 3b). There is, however, a rather obvious change in the ν_{1266}/ν_{1302} peak ratio, which suggests that this ratio might more accurately reflect the lipid structure in small droplets. Continuing with the criterion developed by Wang et al. (30), the ν_{1655}/ν_{1446} peak ratio for lipid droplets with a size of ~1.0 - 2.0 μm in lipolysis product-treated cells corresponds to an increase in the average number of double bonds to 2.05 (see Fig. 3c). This is complemented by another significant change in the ν_{1266}/ν_{1302} peak ratio and allows us to conclude that these droplets contain more unsaturated fatty acids as compared to droplets in untreated cells. An even higher level of unsaturation can be found in lipid droplets with an approximate size of ~2.0-3.0 μm (Fig. 3d), with an average of 2.17 unsaturated lipid bonds per fatty acid, indicating that even more unsaturated fatty acids are preferably accumulating in larger lipid droplets in VLDL lipolysis-product-treated cells.

To further investigate the effects of hepatic lipotoxicity using Raman spectroscopy and in an attempt to determine the response of cells to lipolysis product fractions, hepatocytes were also incubated with the saturated fatty acid palmitic acid, oxidized linoleic acid (13-HODE), or with a combination thereof. Fig. 4a shows the averaged spectrum from lipid droplets in an untreated hepatocyte representing the control sample. Here, we have included the 3000 cm^{-1} CH-active region because significant changes were observed even in this high-wavenumber region. Fig 4b shows the average spectrum of hepatic lipid droplets generated in response to incubation with 13-HODE. This spectrum exhibits only subtle changes when compared with the control spectrum. In particular, interaction with 13-HODE leads to an increase in intensity of the 1655 cm^{-1} lipid peak, due to uptake of 13-HODE and its two unsaturated

bonds. A calculation of the number of unsaturated bonds shows how well this method resembles the actual number of unsaturated fatty acid bonds. The observed increase in Raman peak intensities corresponds to an average of 2.1 unsaturated bonds per fatty acid within the cellular lipid droplet. Furthermore, we observe a broadening of the base of this peak which we attribute to spectral overlap with the hydroxyl group of 13-HODE.

Similarly, treatment with palmitic acid results in an increase in the 1302 cm^{-1} and the 1444 cm^{-1} peak (see Fig. 4c). Both are representative of saturated lipid bonds, indicating that at least a fraction of palmitic acid is taken up by the cells and integrated into their lipid droplets. The average number of unsaturated bonds per fatty acid is 1.73 bonds, indicating that no major uptake of the saturated palmitic acid occurred. In contrast, treatment of hepatocytes with a combination of palmitic acid and 13-HODE leads to a very significant change of the lipid droplet spectra (see Fig. 4d). Here, the 860 cm^{-1} peak disappears and a new peak at 891 cm^{-1} appears, corresponding to a CH_2 rocking vibration. The $=\text{C-H}$ out of plane vibration at 969 cm^{-1} is still present. The previously broad peak between 1060 cm^{-1} and 1140 cm^{-1} has separated completely and now exhibits very sharp peaks at 1065 cm^{-1} , 1096 cm^{-1} and 1130 cm^{-1} corresponding to C-C stretch vibrations found in highly concentrated saturated fatty acids below the melting point. The 1266 cm^{-1} unsaturated lipid peak decreases, and large increases in the 1298 cm^{-1} and the 1444 cm^{-1} peaks indicate an overall higher degree of saturation in these lipid droplets corresponding to significant palmitic acid accumulation. Furthermore, a new peak at 1630 cm^{-1} corresponding to 13-HODE appears and the 1656 cm^{-1} unsaturated lipid peak also decreases significantly. The corresponding degree of unsaturation decreases dramatically to 0.76 bonds, the lowest value observed in this study. This decrease indicates that 13-HODE is a factor leading to the increased accumulation of saturated fatty acids in lipid droplets. Lastly, a strong increase in the Fermi resonance band near 2881 cm^{-1} can be observed, correlating well with the well-known spectrum of saturated lipids (29).

DISCUSSION

In this study we demonstrate the application of time-lapse imaging of lipid droplet formation in living hepatocytes by coherent anti-Stokes Raman microscopy combined with the full biochemical compositional analysis gleaned from spontaneous Raman spectroscopy. We show that approximately 30 minutes after the incubation with VLDL and LpL with hepatocytes, VLDL lipolysis products generate new lipid droplets in close proximity to native lipid droplets indicating that the same cellular compartments are responsible for the biosynthesis of these new lipid droplets. The newly generated lipid droplets do not exhibit the same high mobility as observed in untreated hepatocytes, but are static. An analysis with spontaneous Raman spectroscopy of the new lipid droplets generated by VLDL lipolysis products revealed that the degree of fatty acid unsaturation increases in these new emerging droplets relative to the control sample. Further, Raman spectral analysis of cells treated with a combination of 13-HODE and palmitic acid shows that palmitic acid is integrated into cellular lipid droplets at significant concentrations only in response to a combination of both fatty acids.

Lipid droplet mobility in living cells has been the subject of a number of studies with varied outcomes. For instance, it was found that in rounded Y-1 cells and baby hamster kidney cells, respectively (20, 31), lipid droplets are very mobile and exhibit velocities on the order of several $\mu\text{m/s}$. Cell morphology, however, appears to play an important role in lipid droplet mobility, since further experiments with flat Y-1 cells revealed a much slower average velocity of $\sim 3\text{ nm/s}$ (20). Due to the short data acquisition times of $\sim 180\text{ sec}$ in this particular study, these droplets were considered static. We observed similar slow lipid droplet velocities, albeit with a longer observation period of 72 minutes. In our case

however, the lipid droplets moved over a distance of 19.4 μm (Fig. 1 I) and 14.2 μm (Fig. 1 II), respectively, and also interacted with other lipid droplets as indicated in Fig. 1b-q. The displacement analysis in Fig. 1 I and II shows that the lipid droplets move along curvilinear paths indicating active shuttling by cellular motors. Interestingly, this directed movement is relatively chaotic, varying between several stalled movements and sudden spurs in movement of up to 3.2 $\mu\text{m}/\text{min}$. Several droplets revealing different motion and interaction behavior are indicated by differently colored arrows (Fig. 1b-d). Similar mobility and droplet-droplet interactions were characterized in detail using fluorescence microscopy (32-34). This variability of mobility and lipid droplet interactions indicates that cellular lipid droplets have different homeostatic and metabolic roles within cells, for example lipid and protein transport and storage (26, 34-36) or prevention of lipid-induced lipotoxicity (37, 38). The particular function of lipid droplets appears to depend on the cellular environment and a cell's stress level.

To determine the response of hepatocytes to the exposure of VLDL lipolysis products, a process occurring in the human body several times per day, we treated the cells with a mixture of LpL and VLDL, and monitored lipid aggregations using CARS microscopy. The lipolysis of triglycerides from VLDL particles causes an increase in free fatty acid concentrations outside the cells. This concentration gradient leads to a cellular influx of free fatty acids promoted by flip-flop movement across the plasma membrane or possibly by lipid transport proteins as shown in a number of recent studies (39, 40). Other mechanisms also contribute to an increased lipid uptake by cells. Hydrolysis of VLDL by LpL yields free fatty acids, phospholipids, monoglycerides, diglycerides and VLDL remnant particles like LDL. Approximately 30 minutes after exposure to lipolysis products, new lipid droplets emerge primarily in the vicinity of existing droplets. This indicates that lipid droplets are related to specific cellular compartments, such as the endoplasmic reticulum leaflets further confirming results of other recent studies (26, 41-43). These newly emerging lipid droplets do not exhibit the same fast mobility found in untreated cells, possibly due to a shift in the homeostatic roll from vivid transport vesicle to neutral static lipid storage vesicles. Similar inhibition of droplet mobility was observed by *Pol et al. 2004*, (31), using fluorescence microscopy, where lipid droplet mobility was completely inhibited following rapid lipid droplet accumulation in caveolin-dominant negative mutants.

To analyze the lipid composition of lipid droplets in treated cells, full Raman spectra of several lipid droplets in these cells were acquired and compared to those obtained from untreated cells. Our results show that in hepatocytes treated with lipolysis products the concentration of unsaturated fatty acids in lipid droplets increases. An average of 1.7 C=C bonds per fatty acid was found in lipid droplets of untreated hepatocytes, whereas in lipolysis-treated cells this number increases to 2.2 unsaturated bonds per fatty acid. This result indicates that primarily unsaturated fatty acids are accumulating within lipolysis-product treated cells. A similar surprising observation was recently made by *Corbin et al. 2009*, (43) using magnetic resonance spectroscopy, who found that leptin-deficit obese (ob/ob) mice and methionine and choline (MCDD)-deficient diet-fed mice develop primarily triglyceride-rich lipid droplets with mono- and polyunsaturated fatty acids in their liver in progression of fatty liver. The accumulation of unsaturated fatty acids in lipid droplets is attributed to an adapted cellular protection from lipotoxicity by triglyceride accumulation *Listenberger et al. 2003*, (37). They observed that cells incubated with palmitic acid became more apoptotic than those treated with a combination of palmitic acid and oleic acid. These findings suggest that unsaturated fatty acids channel saturated fatty acid towards triglyceride lipid accumulation and help protect the cells from apoptosis. Furthermore, *Chan et al. 2006* (29) showed that VLDL from postprandial subjects acquired 0 hours after meal intake have a higher degree of fatty acid unsaturation than VLDL particles isolated 4 hours post consumption, indicating that after food consumption the liver produces primarily VLDL

with high concentration of saturated fatty acids, preventing the aggregation of saturated fatty acids associated with lipotoxicity. On the other hand, when no immediate risk of lipotoxicity through high concentration of saturated fatty acids occurs, production of VLDL particles with much higher unsaturated fatty acids content is dominant.

To also study the effects of *oxidized* lipids, a significant byproduct of VLDL lipolysis, on lipid accumulation, we treated primary hepatocytes with palmitic acid, 13-HODE, and a combination of the two. Subsequently, the chemical composition of lipid droplets in these treated hepatocytes was analyzed by spontaneous Raman spectroscopy. The apparent morphology of these lipid droplets in terms of droplet size or the relative number of droplets was indistinguishable from those of untreated cells. Treatment with 13-HODE alone resulted in just minor changes in the Raman spectrum obtained from these cells, primarily a broadening of the 1655 cm^{-1} peak base and an increase in the intensity of this peak. This finding suggests that 13-HODE was taken up at least partially by the cell and incorporated into previously existing lipid droplets. Incubation of cells with palmitic acid alone also did not change the Raman spectra significantly; only slight increases in saturated lipids and overall lipid content as reflected by increased intensities of the 1302 cm^{-1} and the 1440 cm^{-1} peak were observed. On the other hand, treatment by the combination of palmitic acid and 13-HODE caused a very strong spectral responds. Interestingly, the spectra obtained from cells treated in this way are remarkably reminiscent of those obtained from VLDL isolated from blood 8h after consumption of a moderately high fat meal. In particular, the occurrence of the sharp Raman peaks due to C-C skeletal modes in the $1050 - 1150\text{ cm}^{-1}$ range indicates the formation of a core of saturated fats where saturated lipids are tightly packed leading to strong interactions between adjacent lipid chains. The fact that we furthermore observe a strong increase in the 1730 cm^{-1} C=O peak would indicate that these lipids are also esterified, leading to highly saturated triglycerides. This, in turn leads to a highly lipotoxic environment likely causing the cell to synthesize even more unsaturated lipids to compensate for the accumulation of toxic saturated lipids. This would also explain the high amounts of cytokine expression and increased cell death observed in cultures from similarly treated hepatocytes (data not shown). We hypothesize that events like this are the trigger leading to the onset of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) on the cellular level.

CONCLUSIONS

CARS microscopy and Raman spectroscopy provide a new means of studying the effects of metabolic disorders and diseases, such as fatty liver disease, at the cellular level in living cells. We find that VLDL lipolysis caused rapid lipid droplet accumulation in primary hepatocytes. By using label-free CARS microscopy, we were able to demonstrate that lipid droplets forming rapidly in response to lipolysis product treatment exhibit slower mobility relative to those in untreated hepatocytes, indicating a functional shift to natural lipid storage vesicles. Analysis of lipid droplet composition indicates that lipids in untreated cells are stored in the form of esterified triglycerides. Cells treated with lipolysis products rapidly synthesize new lipid droplets with a significantly higher degree of unsaturation, indicating that treated cells try to protect themselves against lipotoxicity by forming new lipid droplets. Further, cells treated with a mixture of palmitic acid and 13-HODE led to a significant integration of palmitic acid into lipid droplets leading to the formation of highly saturated lipid cores in these droplets.

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Abbreviations used in this manuscript

NAFLD	Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease
NASH	non-alcoholic steatohepatitis
CARS	coherent anti-Stokes Raman scattering
VLDL	very low density lipoprotein
LpL	Lipoprotein lipase
13-HODE	13-hydroxy-9,11-octadecadienoic acid

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Fig 1.

Lipid droplet dynamics in untreated primary hepatocytes: **a.)** Overview image showing several hepatocytes grown to confluence, scale bar = 20 μm. Lipid droplets are shown in green-yellow contrast. Two areas of interest for dynamics studies are highlighted by two white colored frames. **I.)** Trajectory of a lipid droplet indicated by frame I in a), trajectory length = 14.2 μm. The direction of movement is shown by the red arrow. The displacement bar graph indicates the distance the droplet is displaced between consecutive images with a max. displacement of 1.8 μm between two images. **II.)** Trajectory of a droplet indicated by frame II in a), trajectory length = 19.4 μm, with a max. displacement between two consecutive images of 3.2 μm. **b.-q.)** Magnified view of an image sequence highlighted by frame I in a.) providing time-lapsed images over a total period of 72 min. Lipid droplets exhibiting different diffusion dynamics are marked with different colored arrows. Blue arrows indicate droplets which do not appear to change their position over the entire image acquisition period. Red arrows highlight two droplets that are slowly moving towards each other, appear to interact and possibly try to fuse together, but ultimately separate again. White arrows indicate the droplet shown in **I.)**.

Fig 2.

Time-lapsed dynamic imaging of lipid droplet accumulations in primary rat hepatocytes after treatment with VLDL lipolysis products by CARS microscopy. Lipid droplets are shown in yellow false color as imaged by their 2845 cm^{-1} CH_2 vibrational mode, while contrast for the hepatocytes is mostly based on the nonresonant background signal. **a.)** 1 min; **b.)** 45 min; **c.)** 85 min; **d.)** 135 min; **e.)** 155 min; and **f.)** 205 min after the treatment.

Fig 3.

Spontaneous Raman spectra acquired from lipid droplets that have formed inside hepatocytes after incubation with VLDL lipolysis products for 2 hours. Each spectrum represents an average of spectra obtained from ~10 individual droplets in the same size range. **a.)** Untreated control sample, **b.)** droplets with diffraction-limited diameter of ~0.5 μm , **c.)** droplets with a diameter in the range from 1 - 2 μm , and **d.)** droplets with a diameter 2-3 μm . Note that the overall triglyceride content of the droplets appears to remain relatively unchanged as indicated by the intensity of the 1730 cm^{-1} peak, whereas the degree of unsaturation changes noticeably with size. The red framed peaks at 1266 cm^{-1} and 1655 cm^{-1} correspond to unsaturated chemical bonds whereas the blue framed peaks at 1302 cm^{-1} and at 1446 cm^{-1} correspond to saturated chemical bonds.

Fig 4.

Spontaneous Raman spectra acquired over the entire Raman-active range from primary hepatocytes after exposure to different primary lipids for 2 hours. **a)** Untreated control sample, **b)** after incubation with the oxidized lipid 13-HODE, **c)** after incubation with the saturated lipid palmitic acid, and **d)** after incubation with a combination of 13-HODE and palmitic acid. The blue framed boxes indicate strong saturated peaks and the red framed boxes indicate unsaturated peaks. Treatment with 13-HODE and palmitic acid shows strong cellular responds.