Published in final edited form as:

Alzheimers Dement. 2015 September ; 11(9): 1069–1079. doi:10.1016/j.jalz.2014.07.156.

Longitudinal plasma amyloid beta in Alzheimer's disease clinical trials

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Abstract

Background—Little is known about the utility of plasma A β in clinical trials of Alzheimer's disease.

Methods—We analyzed longitudinal plasma samples from two large multicenter clinical trials: (1) donepezil and vitamin E in mild cognitive impairment (n=405, 24 months) and (2) simvastatin in mild to moderate Alzheimer's (n=225, 18 months).

Results—Baseline plasma A β was not related to cognitive or clinical progression. We observed a decrease in plasma A β 40 and 42 among APOE- ϵ 4 carriers relative to noncarriers in the mild cognitive impairment trial. Patients treated with simvastatin showed a significant increase in A β compared to placebo. We found significant storage time effects and considerable plate-to-plate variation.

Conclusions—We found no support for the utility of plasma A β as a prognostic factor or correlate of cognitive change. Analysis of stored specimens requires careful standardization and experimental design, but plasma A β may prove useful in pharmacodynamic studies of anti-amyloid drugs.

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors have no conflict of interests relevant to blood biomarker discovery research.

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Keywords

Alzheimer's Disease; mild cognitive impairment; MCI; plasma amyloid; biomarkers; apolipoprotein E; bioassay; luminex; innogenetics; donepezil; simvastatin

1. INTRODUCTION

Biomarkers of Alzheimer's disease (AD) have profoundly affected the course of AD research, drug development, and clinical practice. Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) and neuroimaging measures of amyloid, presumably reflecting principal pathology of AD, are among the leading biomarkers. Given the somewhat invasive nature of CSF sampling and the expense of neuroimaging, plasma A β would be an attractive alternative biomarker. While it is known that there is communication between the peripheral and central A β pools (via receptor mediated as well as passive mechanisms), the utility of plasma A β measurements has remained limited. Some studies have shown correlations between plasma A β and dementia risk and/or progression, although many of such findings have been inconsistent. Biological and methodological issues likely contribute to these limitations, thereby underlining the need for a better understanding of the biology and dynamics of plasma A β as well as the need for studies with longer follow-up to determine the clinical utility of measuring plasma A β .

As with CSF, changes in plasma A β may reflect changes within the brain [1–3], but may also be more affected by peripheral factors. In subjects with familial AD or Down syndrome, plasma A β begins to increase before dementia onset, perhaps reflecting increased A β production [4–9]. Investigations of plasma A β as a predictor of dementia in sporadic or late-onset forms of AD have had inconsistent results (reviewed in [10]). Relationships have been found with plasma A β 40 or 42 and dementia, but the direction of these associations varies among studies [11–16]. Some studies have found an association between lower A β 42:40 ratios and higher risk of AD [17, 18]. Sources of variability in findings from existing studies are potentially due to variability in subject age and/or with disease severity [12, 19, 20], but may also relate to study size; very few large-scale studies have been attempted. A recently published study in a cohort of N=997 non demented elderly patients found that cognitive reserve and plasma A β 42:40 are associated, and the relationship is accentuated in those with low cognitive [21]. However the predictive value of the plasma A β 42:40 ratio was low.

Rodent studies demonstrate that a high cholesterol diet can increase levels of A β , which can be reversed by 3-hydroxy-3-methyl-glutaryl-(HMG) CoA reductase inhibitors (statins) drug treatment [22, 23]. Simvastatin, an HMG CoA reductase inhibitor penetrates the CNS and has been shown to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease and death. It was selected for use in an Alzheimer's Disease Cooperative Study (ADCS) randomized clinical trial to test the hypothesis that lipid lowering could reduce the clinical progression in subjects with AD who have cholesterol levels not otherwise requiring treatment. The study concluded that cholesterol levels decreased significantly in the statin group, but there was no effect on cognitive decline [24]. The effect of statin treatment on plasma A β was not assessed in the primary analysis, though it has been the subject of several investigations [25–28]. No studies

of A β in plasma or CSF have found an effect of statin treatment [29] [28, 30, 31], though several reported changes in amyloid precursor protein and improvements in cognition.

We assessed the relationships among plasma A β and clinical progression, treatment, and APOE using banked plasma from two large ADCS clinical trials: (1) donepezil and vitamin E in mild cognitive impairment (n=405, 24 months) [32, 33] and (2) simvastatin in mild to moderate Alzheimer's (n=225, 18 months) [24]. Our primary goal was to determine covariates that may be associated with plasma A β ₄₀, ₄₂ or ratio in the setting of AD clinical trials of 18 – 24 months duration. We also investigated the value of plasma A β as a predictive biomarker of clinical change, or an outcome measure in pharmacodynamic studies.

2. Methods

2.1 ADCS MCI trial

The 36 month, three arm, placebo controlled ADCS MCI trial examined the effect of vitamin E or donepezil in MCI patients (clinicaltrials.gov Identifier: NCT00000173)[33]. A total of 769 patients with amnesic MCI were randomized to vitamin E, donepezil, or placebo. Complete information on inclusion, exclusion criteria and the treatment regimen has been reported [32, 33]. Serial blood samples were taken and plasma was aliquoted and banked (Appendix A).

2.2 ADCS simvastatin trial

The potential benefit of 18 months of statin treatment on cognitive decline in AD was examined by the ADCS (clinicaltrials.gov Identifier: NCT00053599). Individuals aged 50 years or older with probable AD and Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) within the range 12 to 26 were included. Individuals were excluded if they had other neurological or psychiatric diagnoses that could interfere with cognitive function, were taking lipid lowering drugs, or had conditions requiring cholesterol lowering treatment as defined by the Adult Treatment Panel (ATP III) guidelines. They were also excluded if they had LDL cholesterol below 80 mg/dL or triglycerides >500 mg/dL. Complete information on inclusion, exclusion and treatment regimen has been reported [24]. As with the MCI study, blood samples were taken and plasma was banked (Appendix A).

2.4 Plasma analysis and internal standard

Plasma was assayed, quantified, and quality controlled as described in Appendices B and C. Each assay plate also included a plasma sample derived from blood drawn by venipuncture of a 56-year-old cognitively normal volunteer in a single afternoon. This internal standard provided a means for adjusting plate-to-plate variation and assessing freezer storage effects.

2.5 Statistical methods

Storage effects on the internal standard were estimated by ordinary least squares regression of A β concentration on the number of years since the sample was obtained from the volunteer. We examined the associations between covariates of interest and plasma A β at baseline using linear mixed-effects models adjusting for the internal standard [34]. The

covariates of interest include age, education, gender, APOE- ϵ 4, ADAS-Cog, ADL, MMSE, urea nitrogen, creatinine, total protein, albumin, total cholesterol, hemoglobin, and platelets. See Appendix D for details.

To estimate the correlation between *change* in A β and *change* specific covariates, we used a multivariate outcome linear mixed-effects model approach [35]. Typically one would estimate correlation of change by a two-step process: (1) calculate or estimate each individual's change from baseline for each outcome, (2) calculate the usual correlation coefficients for change in each pair of outcomes. Instead we used multivariate outcome mixed-effect models to estimate in a single step the correlation of change in each pair of outcomes. The model directly estimates the correlation between random slopes for two outcomes in one step. This approach is more efficient and powerful for detecting correlations of change.

To account for the plate effects in our longitudinal models of treatment and APOE- ϵ 4 group differences in A β 40, A β 42, and the log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40; we used linear mixed-effects models with subject-specific effects nested within plate-specific effects [34]. The models treat time as categorical and provide estimates of differences between groups at each time point. We also considered adding effect to the model for sample storage time, subject age, creatinine, hemoglobin, total protein, albumin, and platelets. We considered both the baseline level of the labs and change in the labs as potential covariates. Rather than pre-specifying which covariates should be included, we used the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) [36] to objectively select covariates. Briefly, AIC utilizes the familiar likelihood framework in combination with a penalty for model complexity with the goal of determining which covariates comprise the most predictive model.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Quality control

In the MCI trial, duplicate plasma samples were obtained from n=480 subjects at baseline, n=375 at 2 years, and n=338 subjects at 3 years. After excluding samples with CV greater than 20%, we analyzed data from n=405 subjects at baseline, n=349 at 2 years, and n=309 at 3 years. Similarly, for the simvastatin trial we obtained samples from n=242 subjects at baseline and n=206 at 1.5 years; and of these n=225 at baseline and n=190 at 1.5 years were used in the analysis. The range of storage times of the MCI samples was from 7.81 to 13.4 years across all study visits. The storage time range for samples from the simvastatin trial was 3.95 to 7.82 years.

3.2 Baseline characteristics

Table 1 shows the baseline characteristics of the subjects that had analyzable plasma A β samples passing quality control versus those that did not. In the MCI trial, subjects with versus without analyzable plasma A β data were younger, less female, more APOE- ϵ 4 positive, and had higher levels of Creatinine. In the simvastatin trial, subjects with analyzable plasma A β data had lower levels of Creatinine compared with those that did not have analyzable plasma A β data.

3.2 Storage effects and plate-to-plate variation of biological standard

Figure 1 depicts the storage effect that we observed from the biological standard that was aliquoted on each plate. Storage time of the biological standard ranged from 0 to 1.8 years. We found that estimated A β 40 and A β 42 concentrations of the biological standard declined significantly over time (–14.42 pg/ml A β 40 per storage year, SE=1.32, $p<0.001$; –1.893 pg/ml A β 42 per storage year, SE=0.616, $p=0.003$). The standard deviations of the residuals from these models, $\sigma=6.9$ pg/ml A β 40 and $\sigma=3.2$ pg/ml A β 42, provide measures of the plate-to-plate variability, controlling for storage. Figure 1 also demonstrates a wide range of estimated concentrations, even within a short time frame. In the samples assayed within 40 days of venipuncture, for instance, the range is nearly 21.6 pg/ml for A β 40, and about 7.58 pg/ml for A β 42. The inter-plate CV, adjusted for storage effect, was 15.1% for A β 40 and 24.5% for A β 42, while the median intra-plate CV was 6.0% for A β 40 and 8.3% for A β 42.

3.3 Baseline associations with plasma A β 40, A β 42, and log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40

Table 2 summarizes the associations among covariates and A β 40 and A β 42. A β 40 was positively associated with A β 42 in both trials (2.223 pg/ml A β 40 per pg/ml A β 42 SE=0.118, $p<0.001$ in the MCI trial; and 4.606 pg/ml A β 40 per pg/ml A β 42 SE=0.335, $p<0.001$ in the simvastatin trial). In the MCI trial, we found A β 40 and A β 42 were positively associated with age (1.041 pg/ml A β 40 per year of age, SE=0.324, $p=0.001$; and 0.163 pg/ml A β 42 per year of age, SE=0.083, $p=0.047$); urea nitrogen (0.8697 pg/ml A β 40 per mg/dl urea nitrogen, SE=0.432, $p=0.045$; and 0.3515 pg/ml A β 42 per mg/dl urea nitrogen, SE=0.113, $p=0.002$); and creatinine (25.712 pg/ml A β 40 per mg/dl creatinine, SE=9.656, $p=0.008$; and 10.890 pg/ml A β 42 per mg/dl creatinine, SE=2.531, $p<0.001$). In the simvastatin trial, A β 40 was positively associated with hemoglobin (3.949 pg/ml A β 40 per g/dl hemoglobin, SE=1.954, $p=0.044$); and A β 42 was positively associated with ADAS-Cog (0.0714 pg/ml A β 42 per ADAS-Cog point, SE=0.0334, $p=0.033$). The log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40 was significantly associated with creatinine (0.16 per mg/dl, SE= 0.07, $p=0.026$) and platelets (-7.4×10^{-4} per 1000/ μ l, SE= -3.1×10^{-4} , $p=0.016$) in the MCI trial.

3.4 Correlates of change

Table 3 summarizes the correlates of change in A β 40 and A β 42. In MCI, change in A β 40 was positively correlated with change in A β 42 ($\rho=0.842$, 95% CI 0.779 to 0.912) and change in A β 40 was positively correlated with change in platelets ($\rho=0.170$, 95% CI 0.036 to 0.308). Similarly, in the simvastatin trial, change in A β 40 was correlated with change in A β 42 ($\rho=0.713$, 95% CI 0.606 to 0.804). In the MCI trial, change in log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40 was correlated with ADAS-Cog ($\rho=0.145$, 95% CI 0.019 to 0.274), ADL ($\rho=-0.178$, 95% CI -0.309 to -0.055), and urea nitrogen ($\rho=-0.168$, 95% CI -0.305 to -0.039). Note that higher scores on ADAS-Cog indicate *worse* cognition and higher scores on the ADL indicate *better* daily function.

3.5 APOE- ϵ 4 group differences in A β change

The top of Figure of 2 shows the modeled change in A β 40 and A β 42 by the number of APOE- ϵ 4 alleles. In MCI we see significantly greater change from baseline in A β 40 and A β 42 at three years among APOE- ϵ 4 non-carriers compared to carriers. Change in A β 40 at

three years was greater in those with no alleles compared to those with one allele (41.7 pg/ml, SE=6.69, $p<0.001$) or two alleles (55.7 pg/ml, SE=9.54, $p<0.001$). Change in log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40 at year 3 in MCI was greater for those with one versus no allele (0.12, SE=0.04, $p=0.019$). The AIC selected model of A β 40 included age; baseline creatinine; and baseline and change in hemoglobin, albumin and platelets. The AIC selected model of A β 42 included age; and change in creatinine, hemoglobin, and platelets. The AIC selected model of log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40 included baseline creatinine, total protein, hemoglobin, and platelets; and change in creatinine, total protein, albumin, and platelets. No significant differences between APOE- ϵ 4 groups were observed in the simvastatin trial.

3.6 Treatment group differences in A β change

The bottom of Figure 2 shows the modeled change in plasma A β species by treatment group. In the MCI trial, A β 40 and A β 42 increased more at 3 years in the placebo group compared to donepezil (33.9 pg/ml A β 40, SE=7.68, $p<0.001$; 12.63 pg/ml A β 42, SE=2.04, $p<0.001$) or vitamin E (39.3 pg/ml A β 40, SE=7.53, $p<0.001$; 7.81 pg/ml A β 42, SE=2.01, $p<0.001$). Change in log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40 was greater at 3 years with vitamin E compared to placebo (0.14, SE=0.049, $p=0.012$), but no difference was found with donepezil. In the simvastatin trial, both A β species increased more at 18 months in the simvastatin group compared to placebo (21.3 pg/ml A β 40, SE=6.55, $p=0.001$; 4.34 pg/ml A β 42, SE=0.923, $p<0.001$), but the difference in change of log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40 was not significant (-0.10 , SE=0.062, $p=0.010$).

3.7 Treatment group differences in A β change within APOE- ϵ 4 subgroups

Figure 3 shows the modeled change in plasma A β species by treatment group within each APOE- ϵ 4 group. For APOE- ϵ 4 carriers in the MCI trial, both A β species increase significantly more at 3 years in the placebo group compared to vitamin E (64.8 pg/ml A β 40, SE=10.8, $p<0.001$; 15.89 pg/ml A β 42, SE=2.65, $p<0.001$), and A β 42 increased more at 3 years in the placebo group compared to donepezil (15.96 pg/ml A β 42, SE=2.68, $p<0.001$). The log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40 decreased more with donepezil compared to placebo (-0.21 , SE=0.074, $p=0.009$). For APOE- ϵ 4 carriers in the simvastatin trial, both A β species increased significantly at 18 months in the simvastatin group compared to placebo (43.8 pg/ml A β 40, SE=8.99, $p=0.001$; 8.28 pg/ml A β 42, SE=1.37, $p<0.001$); and the log ratio decreased more with simvastatin (-0.18 , SE=0.091, $p=0.044$). For APOE- ϵ 4 non-carriers in the MCI trial, both A β species increased more at 3 years in the placebo group compared to donepezil (53.4 pg/ml A β 40, SE=11.3, $p<0.001$; 10.28 pg/ml A β 42, SE=3.17, $p=0.002$); and there was no difference in change in log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40. There were no significant differences in A β change between simvastatin and placebo among the APOE- ϵ 4 non-carriers.

4. DISCUSSION

In comparison to CSF, plasma A β has been an inconsistent predictor of dementia in sporadic or late-onset forms of AD. Associations have been found between plasma A β 40 and 42 and dementia, but the direction of these associations vary among studies [11–15, 37]. More consistency has been found in the ratio of plasma A β 42:40, with non-demented patients usually having higher risk of AD with lower A β 42:40 ratios [17, 18]. In terms of predicting

whether patients with MCI will convert to AD, no consistent change in plasma A β or ratio has been found [12, 13, 37]. However, studies demonstrate that age-related changes (increases) in plasma A β and reduced A β 40:42 ratio are primarily restricted to MCI patients or individuals with worsening cognitive status [37].

Variability in these findings is potentially due to sample variability in subject age and/or with disease severity [12, 20], but may also relate to study size. Very few large-scale studies have been attempted. A recently published study in a large cohort of elderly patients identified an association between low cognitive reserve and plasma A β 42:40, which accentuated the relationship between low plasma A β 42:40 and greater cognitive decline in non-demented participants [21]. As mentioned above, plasma A β has been reported to begin increasing before dementia onset in subjects with familial AD or Down Syndrome, perhaps reflecting increased A β production [5–7]. The same has not been found in sporadic or late-onset forms of AD. Although relationships have been found with plasma A β 40 or 42 and dementia, the direction of these associations is variable. In particular, a recent Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) study of plasma A β 42 in normal, mildly impaired and mildly demented cohorts, found that plasma A β measurements were not useful in distinguishing among the cohorts, and showed minimal association with disease progression [37]. Although discouraging, this study found a significant association between plasma A β 42 and brain amyloid, as indicated by CSF A β 42. The ADNI study also found a correlation of plasma A β 42 and other biomarkers of A β pathology [37]. As opposed to studies examining levels of peptide, reports on ratio of plasma A β 42:40, have had more consistent results, with lower A β 42:40 ratios predicting higher risk of AD [17, 18]. Furthermore, a large cohort study of elderly patients found that low cognitive reserve and plasma A β 42:40, which accentuated the relationship between low plasma A β 42:40 and greater cognitive decline in non-demented participants [21].

We found that APOE- ϵ 4 carriers demonstrated significant reduction of A β compared to non-carriers in our MCI cohort, while this relationship was not observed in the AD statin trial. A possible explanation is that APOE- ϵ 4 group differences in plasma A β are only apparent in milder populations, and populations with more severe impairment are more homogeneous across APOE- ϵ 4 groups.

Despite the fact that both studies found no effect on their primary outcomes, we did observed significant, though inconsistent, treatment effects on A β in both trials. Active groups in the MCI trial demonstrated decreased A β and the statin group demonstrated increased A β . Although the original statin trial itself was negative, our plasma biomarker data suggests further study of the effect of statins on A β is warranted. It is surprising that presumed symptomatic agents, donepezil and vitamin E, appeared to affect plasma A β in AD. All of our treatment-related findings should be interpreted with caution until confirmed in studies with parallel CSF or amyloid imaging.

We observed greater inter-assay CVs than some previous reports, but our intra-assay CVs were within the range of many prior reports (e.g. [37]). Collection, preparation and handling of plasma samples can all influence variability. The inter-assay CVs we observed could have been elevated due to preparation, handling, or storage of the samples or the analytic kits.

Recent data also suggest that technical precision may also be involved. Using a robotized method for specific steps allowed for a large improvement in consistency over results reported in the literature, and several significant relationships between plasma and CSF biomarkers have been found using this method [38]. Although the authors concluded that these associations are not strong enough to support use of plasma A β as a diagnostic screening test, these data and those observed in immunotherapy trials (e.g. [39], for review [40]) suggests that plasma A β 42 may be useful as a pharmacodynamic marker.

Due to plate-to-plate variability seen with the Innogenetics platform, we find that inclusion of one or more internal standard controls and sound experimental design and analysis are crucial. In particular, we recommend that samples be randomized so that key features (e.g. treatment assignment, APOE- ϵ 4, gender) are well balanced on each plate. Good experimental design can help ensure that plate effects are not confounded with other effects of interest.

The statistical models (Appendix D) included fixed-effect covariates for mean-centered biological standard assayed on each plate. This model allows for plate-level covariate adjustment, similar to familiar adjustments for subject-level covariates. A more naïve approach subtracts the biological control from each observation before submitting to the final regression analysis. In a perfectly balanced design, point estimates from the covariate adjustment approach would be identical to the naïve approach, but naïve standard error estimates would be incorrect because they do not account for variability in the biological control. We also include subject- and plate-specific random effects to account for the correlation structure of these repeated measures, plate-clustered data.

We also recommend that samples from an individual be aliquoted to the same plate. This helps ensure that plate effects are not confounded with longitudinal effects. Unfortunately, this means that storage effects are confounded with longitudinal effects; however we have found that storage effects are small relative to plate-to-plate variation. In this setting, estimates of group differences are valid under the assumption that storage effects are similar in the groups being compared.

When considering our results and those from other groups, an important factor to consider is blood processing time. The ADCS choses to process blood samples for plasma stores centrally to reduce variations in pre-analytic handling. This requires that whole blood samples are shipped in ambient temperature gel packs overnight and processed at approximately 24hrs postdraw. Our decision to maintain this strategy is supported by our internal studies (Rissman and Aisen, unpublished observations) and investigations by other groups that have tested stability of A β in plasma. Stability experiments assessing the effect of time-to-processing demonstrate that mean (SD) A β 1–40 decreased from 267 (46) pg/ml at time 0 to 190 (41) pg/ml at 24 hours and 143 (33) pg/ml at 48 hours; or an average decrease of about 2.6 pg/ml/hr [41]. Similarly, A β 1–42 decreased from 29 (4) pg/ml at time 0 to 2 (4) pg/ml at 24 hours and 19 (3) pg/ml at 48 hours; or an average decrease of about 0.2 pg/ml/hr. Their conclusion was that processing should be done within 24 h and peptide ratios should be created to minimize artificial results. Other groups conducted similar experiments and found plasma concentrations of A β (particularly A β -42) appeared stable in

whole blood processed as long as 24 hours after collection [42]. While comparisons of absolute A β across studies is problematic, group comparisons within a study in the present manuscript should be less so. This is because samples from different groups of interest have been handled similarly within a particular study, and samples have been randomized to plates to prevent confounding of plate and group effects.

With improvements of assay conditions (e.g., with increasing sensitivity and reproducibility, and standardization of specimen handling to minimize interactions with other blood constituents and collection materials); and sound experimental design and analysis to control confounding factors such as batch effects, age and renal function; plasma A β may become a useful biomarker of brain amyloidosis. This, in turn, could greatly facilitate the development and clinical application of disease-modifying therapies for AD.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

Supported by NIH/NIA AG010483, AG032755, and 1KL2RR031978 awarded by the University of California, San Diego Clinical and Translation Research Institute (1UL1RR031980). The authors thank Louise Lindberg and Kathleen Lao (ADCS, UCSD) for technical support.

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Appendix A. Sample Collection

Informed consent was obtained from patients and their caregivers for all procedures, in accordance with local regulatory procedures in the context of each clinical trial to be described below. Consent to banking for AD research was obtained for all samples. Whole blood samples from the two clinical were drawn at sites in the US and Canada. Blood collection was performed with a 21g needle and drawn into lavender top EDTA tubes. Samples were shipped overnight at room temperature and processed at a central laboratory. Average time between blood collection and processing was 24hrs. Plasma preparation was accomplished by centrifugation of whole blood at 1800g (3000 rpm, Eppendorf 5810R centrifuge with an A-4-81 rotor) for 10 minutes. Plasma was immediately removed after centrifugation, separated into 500ul aliquots into 1.5ml Eppendorf sterile polypropylene microtubes and stored at –80 degrees until use.

Appendix B. Plasma A β multiplex bioassays

Banked plasma was assessed for A β 40 and 42 using Innogenetics Plasma Abeta Forms kits (1–40 and 1–42), according to the manufacturer instructions. Briefly, beads were placed on a washed filter plate and incubated while shaking with antibody conjugate and undiluted plasma samples overnight for 14–18 hours at 4°C. All samples were assayed in duplicate. Pre-aliquoted standards and controls came with the kit and plasma samples and were run in duplicate. The next day, the plates were washed and a detection conjugate was added and incubated while shaking at room temperature for one hour. The plate was then washed again and a reading solution added and allowed to incubate while shaking for 2–3 minutes. Plates were read on a BioRad Bioplex 200. Readings flagged as suspect based on percent aggregated beads > 30% were excluded.

Appendix C. Calibration, quantification, and quality control

Quantification of luminescent bioassays requires standard curves that map luminescence values to concentrations. We derive standard curves by assaying samples of known concentration. The Innogenetics platform provides six standards containing synthetic A β

standard samples of known concentration, and one sample with no A β . These standards were assayed in duplicate on each assay plate, and modeled with a four parameter logistic model to estimate standard curves as recommend by the FDA [51]. Models allowed non-constant power of the mean error variance if warranted, which provides more efficient estimation of the regression parameters [52]. If the four parameter logistic model with non-constant variance failed to converge, a four parameter logistic model with constant variance was applied, followed by a three parameter logistic model with non-constant variance as necessary. One plate from the simvastatin study only had duplicate readings from only 3 non-zero standards, and therefore a quadratic model with non-constant variance was used. The lower limit of quantification was determined by the lowest concentration at which the coefficient of variation (CV) was less than 20%. Plasma from each individual was analyzed on the same plate so that subject effects were nested within plate effects. Duplicate samples with CV exceeding 20% and samples with a missing reading were excluded from further analysis. Although re-running of samples with >20% CVs may have aided in increasing sample number, this was not possible. To mitigate plate-to-plate variability, plates were purchased in bulk and run consecutively. In addition, our internal plasma standard (described in methods) was aliquoted in duplicate to each plate to measure and control for plate effects in all assays.

Appendix D. Statistical Analysis

To estimate the association at baseline between A β and covariates of interest, x , we fit mixed-effect models of the form:

$$A\beta_{0ijk} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 x_i + \gamma_2 A\beta_{bio k} + \alpha_{0i} + \alpha_{1k} + \varepsilon_{ijk} \quad (1)$$

Here $A\beta_{0ijk}$ is the baseline concentration A β 40 or A β 42 (or the log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40) for subject i , duplicate reading $j=1$ or 2 , from plate k ; the γ 's are fixed effects; α_{0i} are subject-specific random intercepts; α_{1k} are plate-specific random intercepts; and ε_{ij} are residuals. We assume the α 's and ε 's are drawn from Gaussian distributions. The parameter of interest is γ_1 , which is an estimate of how much A β changes per unit change in the other covariate of interest. We used the A β concentrations from the healthy control sample aliquoted to each plate to help adjust for plate effects. This was accomplished by including a fixed effect, denoted γ_2 in (1), for the mean-centered biological standard reading for plate k , denoted "A $\beta_{bio k}$ " in (1). When modeling the log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40, we included a covariate for both biological standard readings. Rather than modeling the mean of duplicate A β assays, we chose to include both in our mixed-effect model. This approach allows the analysis to be more robust to outliers and to utilize information about the assay variation that is otherwise lost. A similar model was fitted for A β 40, A β 42, and the log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40.

To estimate group effects over time, the base model of longitudinal A β in each treatment group was of the form:

$$A\beta_{ijk}(t) = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 1\{t_j=0\} + \gamma_2 1\{t_j=1\} + \gamma_3 1\{t_j=2\} + \gamma_4 1\{t_j=3\} + \gamma_5 A\beta_{bio k} + \alpha_{0i} + \alpha_{1k} + \varepsilon_{ijkt} \quad (2)$$

Here $A\beta_{ijk}(t)$ is the $A\beta_{40}$ or $A\beta_{42}$ reading (or the log ratio of $A\beta_{42}$ to $A\beta_{40}$) for subject i , duplicate reading j , on plate k , at time t years; the γ 's are fixed effects; $1\{t_j=x\}$ is 1 if $t_j=x$ and 0 otherwise; the α 's are random effects, and ε_{ij} are residuals similar to model (1). We again adjust for the mean-centered plasma biological standard on each plate, $A\beta_{biok}$, and we adjust for both standards when modeling the log ratio of $A\beta_{42}$ to $A\beta_{40}$.

The statistical software *R* version 3.0 [56] was used for all analyses. Calibration and quantification of plasma $A\beta$ was performed using the *calibFit* package [57], linear mixed-effects models were fit with *nlme* [58], and graphical displays were produced with *ggplot2* [59]. AIC model selection was accomplished via forward and backward search starting with the model with all covariates included. The significance level was set at $\alpha=0.05$ and no corrections were made for multiple comparisons.

Figure 1. Storage Effects

Each plate included an aliquot from the same healthy control sample. We observed a significant linear effect of storage time on the estimated concentration of this sample. Estimated storage time plots are from an ordinary least squares regression. Shaded regions indicate 95% confidence bounds.

Figure 2. Linear mixed effects model estimates of change in plasma Aβ by treatment and APOE-4

Change in plasma Aβ was modeled by number of APOE-ε4 alleles (top) and treatment group (bottom). Covariates in these models were selected by AIC. Specifically models of Aβ40 included age; baseline creatinine; and baseline and change in hemoglobin, albumin and platelets. The models of Aβ42 included age; and change in creatinine, hemoglobin, and platelets. Models of Aβ42 to Aβ40 (log) ratios included baseline creatinine, total protein, hemoglobin, and platelets; and change in creatinine, total protein, albumin, and platelets.

Figure 3. Linear mixed effects model estimates of change in plasma Aβ by treatment within APOE-ε4 subgroups

Change in plasma Aβ was modeled by treatment among APOE-ε4 carriers (top) by treatment among APOE-ε4 non-carriers (bottom). Covariates in these models were selected by AIC. Specifically models of Aβ40 included age; baseline creatinine; and baseline and change in hemoglobin, albumin and platelets. The models of Aβ42 included age; and change in creatinine, hemoglobin, and platelets. Models of Aβ42 to Aβ40 (log) ratios included age; and baseline and change in creatinine, total protein, hemoglobin, albumin, and platelets.

Table 1

Baseline Characteristics

Mean (standard deviation) and counts (percentages) of baseline characteristics among those with plasma A β samples that passed quality controls versus not. P-values are from Wilcoxon rank-sum or Fisher's exact tests.

Variable	N	MCI			P-value
		Without A β (N=364)	With A β (N=405)	Combined (N=769)	
Age [yrs]	769	73.70 (7.42)	72.23 (7.10)	72.93 (7.28)	0.008
Gender : Female	769	182 (50%)	170 (42%)	352 (46%)	0.030
Education [yrs]	769	14.57 (3.12)	14.70 (3.05)	14.64 (3.08)	0.423
APOE- ϵ 4 alleles:	769				0.007
0		146 (40%)	199 (49%)	345 (45%)	
1		186 (51%)	161 (40%)	347 (45%)	
2		32 (9%)	45 (11%)	77 (10%)	
ADAS11	765	11.33 (4.31)	11.23 (4.44)	11.28 (4.38)	0.636
ADL	768	46.00 (4.94)	45.91 (4.63)	45.95 (4.77)	0.455
MMSE	769	27.13 (1.89)	27.39 (1.81)	27.27 (1.85)	0.054
Urea Nitrogen	689	16.90 (4.11)	17.66 (5.16)	17.34 (4.76)	0.290
Creatinine	689	0.869 (0.190)	0.915 (0.227)	0.896 (0.213)	0.010
Total Protein	689	7.082 (0.431)	7.053 (0.449)	7.065 (0.441)	0.240
Albumin	689	4.161 (0.233)	4.175 (0.246)	4.169 (0.240)	0.466
Total Cholesterol	688	215.2 (37.2)	213.1 (37.1)	214.0 (37.1)	0.480
Hemoglobin	686	13.95 (1.18)	14.11 (1.25)	14.04 (1.22)	0.126
Platelets	686	233.1 (54.6)	224.9 (52.8)	228.4 (53.7)	0.068

Variable	N	AD			P-value
		Without A β (N=181)	With A β (N=225)	Combined (N=406)	
Age [yrs]	406	74.88 (9.44)	74.35 (9.18)	74.58 (9.29)	0.533
Gender : Female	406	102 (56%)	139 (62%)	241 (59%)	0.309
Education [yrs]	406	14.40 (3.38)	14.14 (3.08)	14.25 (3.21)	0.290
APOE- ϵ 4 alleles:	358				0.626
0		64 (39%)	86 (44%)	150 (42%)	

Variable	N	AD			P-value
		Without A β (N=181)	With A β (N=225)	Combined (N=406)	
1		78 (48%)	84 (43%)	162 (45%)	
2		21 (13%)	25 (13%)	46 (13%)	
ADAS11	403	24.35 (9.82)	24.07 (10.28)	24.19 (10.07)	0.669
ADL	406	67.7 (10.0)	68.0 (10.3)	67.9 (10.2)	0.491
MMSE	406	20.32 (4.72)	20.37 (4.69)	20.35 (4.70)	0.900
Urea Nitrogen	405	17.27 (4.87)	17.18 (4.96)	17.22 (4.91)	0.779
Creatinine	405	0.904 (0.202)	0.860 (0.208)	0.879 (0.206)	0.010
Total Protein	405	7.171 (0.437)	7.141 (0.477)	7.154 (0.459)	0.267
Albumin	405	4.122 (0.290)	4.174 (0.309)	4.151 (0.301)	0.076
Total Cholesterol	405	211.8 (30.1)	212.1 (30.8)	212.0 (30.5)	0.888
Hemoglobin	401	13.99 (1.23)	14.01 (1.24)	14.00 (1.24)	0.975
Platelets	398	246.5 (74.7)	249.1 (57.2)	247.9 (65.4)	0.233

Table 2

Baseline Associations

Associations between the indicated variables at baseline as estimated by linear mixed effect model with plasma A β 40 or A β 42 as the outcome. Each estimate is on a different scale. For example, in MCI, A β 40 increased an estimated 1.04 pg/ml per year of age.

Variable	Baseline Associations with A β 40 (pg/ml)			AD		
	Estimate	SE	p-value	Estimate	SE	p-value
A β 42 (pg/ml)	2.22	0.12	<0.001***	4.61	0.34	<0.001***
Age (years)	1.04	0.32	0.001**	0.00	0.26	0.988
Education (years)	0.18	0.78	0.819	-0.45	0.80	0.572
Gender:						
Male	160.83	5.75	0.268	130.83	5.13	0.849
Female	165.99	4.65		130.11	8.44	
ApoE- ϵ 4:						
0	159.15	6.02	0.301	128.61	8.40	0.625
1	166.71	4.88		123.03	5.76	
2	162.17	7.61		125.63	8.74	
ADAS-Cog	0.44	0.52	0.394	0.42	0.24	0.077†
ADL	-0.50	0.49	0.310	-0.16	0.23	0.500
MMSE	-1.49	1.26	0.239	-0.46	0.52	0.379
Urea nitrogen (mg/dl)	0.87	0.43	0.045*	-0.45	0.49	0.365
Creatinine (mg/dl)	25.71	9.66	0.008**	12.36	11.80	0.296
Total protein (g/dl)	-3.60	5.07	0.478	-2.08	5.01	0.679
Albumin (g/dl)	2.31	9.01	0.797	7.06	7.81	0.367
Total cholesterol (mg/dl)	0.03	0.06	0.580	-0.06	0.08	0.473
Hemoglobin (g/dl)	-1.29	1.79	0.472	3.95	1.95	0.044*
Platelets (1000/ μ l)	0.08	0.04	0.051†	-0.04	0.05	0.386

Variable	MCI			AD		
	Estimate	SE	p-value	Estimate	SE	p-value
Age (years)	0.16	0.08	0.047*	-0.02	0.04	0.663
Education (years)	0.33	0.19	0.081 [†]	0.07	0.12	0.570
Gender:						
Male	39.43	1.29	0.761	19.09	0.73	0.955
Female	39.07	1.18		19.05	0.72	
ApoE-ε4:						
0	40.10	1.37	0.419	18.81	0.80	0.406
1	38.70	1.24		19.63	0.83	
2	38.25	1.89		18.07	1.26	
ADAS-Cog	-0.13	0.13	0.311	0.07	0.03	0.033*
ADL	-0.03	0.13	0.827	-0.04	0.03	0.285
MMSE	0.17	0.32	0.591	-0.11	0.07	0.135
Urea nitrogen (mg/dl)	0.35	0.11	0.002**	0.01	0.07	0.883
Creatinine (mg/dl)	10.89	2.53	<0.001***	2.75	1.72	0.110
Total protein (g/dl)	-1.51	1.30	0.244	-0.94	0.74	0.201
Albumin (g/dl)	1.37	2.33	0.555	0.39	1.12	0.731
Total cholesterol (mg/dl)	0.00	0.02	0.759	0.00	0.01	0.760
Hemoglobin (g/dl)	-0.07	0.47	0.884	0.23	0.29	0.429
Platelets (1000/μl)	-0.01	0.01	0.622	-0.01	0.01	0.384

Variable	MCI			AD		
	Estimate	SE	p-value	Estimate	SE	p-value
Age (years)	0.00	0.00	0.912	0.00	0.00	0.878
Education (years)	0.01	0.01	0.115	0.00	0.01	0.576
Gender:						
Male	-1.42	0.04	0.131	-1.89	0.05	0.751
Female	-1.47	0.05		-1.90	0.06	
ApoE-ε4:						
0	-1.40	0.05	0.056 [†]	-1.90	0.06	0.181

Baseline Associations with log ratio of A β 42 to A β 40

Variable	MCI			AD		
	Estimate	SE	p-value	Estimate	SE	p-value
1	-1.48	0.05		-1.84	0.06	
2	-1.45	0.06		-1.93	0.08	
ADAS-Cog	0.00	0.00	0.363	0.00	0.00	0.877
ADL	0.00	0.00	0.889	0.00	0.00	0.591
MMSE	0.01	0.01	0.205	0.00	0.00	0.638
Urea nitrogen (mg/dl)	0.00	0.00	0.226	0.00	0.00	0.430
Creatinine (mg/dl)	0.16	0.07	0.026*	0.09	0.09	0.280
Total protein (g/dl)	-0.07	0.04	0.077†	-0.04	0.04	0.278
Albumin (g/dl)	-0.01	0.06	0.857	-0.02	0.06	0.787
Total cholesterol (mg/dl)	0.00	0.00	0.912	0.00	0.00	0.292
Hemoglobin (g/dl)	0.00	0.01	0.765	-0.02	0.01	0.254
Platelets (1000/ μ l)	-7.4×10^{-4}	-3.1×10^{-4}	0.016*	0.00	0.00	0.944

Table 3
Correlations of Change

Correlations between change in Aβ40 and change in each other indicated variable as estimated by multivariate outcome mixed-effect models. We estimated the lower and upper bounds of the 95% confidence intervals by 1,000 simulations. Correlations that are significantly different from zero are indicated in bold.

	Variable	MCI	AD
		Corr. (95% CI)	Corr. (95% CI)
Aβ40	Aβ42	0.842 (0.779,0.912)	0.713 (0.606,0.804)
	ADAS-Cog	−0.038 (−0.152,0.075)	−0.016 (−0.206,0.179)
	ADL	−0.072 (−0.181,0.044)	−0.043 (−0.239,0.144)
	MMSE	−0.071 (−0.197,0.051)	−0.015 (−0.204,0.176)
	Urea nitrogen	−0.024 (−0.161,0.106)	-
	Creatinine	0.034 (−0.094,0.159)	-
	Total protein	0.015 (−0.112,0.131)	-
	Albumin	0.010 (−0.125,0.128)	-
	Total Cholesterol	0.039 (−0.090,0.175)	−0.001 (−0.199,0.199)
	Hemoglobin	−0.014 (−0.149,0.125)	-
	Platelets	0.170 (0.036,0.308)	-
Aβ42	ADAS-Cog	0.044 (−0.062,0.162)	0.033 (−0.147,0.216)
	ADL	−0.100 (−0.218,0.006)	−0.040 (−0.219,0.141)
	MMSE	−0.115 (−0.251,0.002)	−0.081 (−0.278,0.114)
	Urea nitrogen	0.053 (−0.077,0.186)	-
	Creatinine	0.032 (−0.108,0.156)	-
	Total protein	−0.035 (−0.167,0.085)	-
	Albumin	−0.065 (−0.194,0.071)	-
	Total Cholesterol	−0.021 (−0.148,0.100)	−0.127 (−0.303,0.050)
	Hemoglobin	−0.079 (−0.205,0.044)	-
	Platelets	0.038 (−0.095,0.161)	-
log ratio of Aβ42 to Aβ40	ADAS-Cog	0.145 (0.019, 0.274)	−0.089 (−0.263, 0.120)
	ADL	−0.178 (−0.309,−0.055)	0.185 (−0.008, 0.351)
	MMSE	0.062 (−0.073, 0.205)	−0.048 (−0.239, 0.143)
	Urea nitrogen	−0.168 (−0.305,−0.039)	
	Creatinine	0.009 (−0.133, 0.152)	
	Total protein	−0.060 (−0.193, 0.074)	
	Albumin	−0.098 (−0.228, 0.043)	
	Total Cholesterol	−0.018 (−0.151, 0.118)	0.161 (−0.021, 0.360)
	Hemoglobin	−0.087 (−0.222, 0.031)	
	Platelets	−0.085 (−0.212, 0.052)	