DOI: https://doi.org/10.2298/SARH250515041C
UDC: 612.432.018

ORIGINAL ARTICLE / ОРИГИНАЛНИ РАД

Immunohistomorphometric response of pituitary growth hormone-producing cells in rats to prolonged exposure to moderately elevated ambient temperature

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SUMMARY
Introduction/Objective The main objective of this study was to investigate the effect of prolonged exposure (4, 7, 14, 21, 60 days) of rats to moderately high ambient temperature (35 ± 1°C) on the immunohistomorphometric parameters of pituitary somatotrophic (GH) cells.
Methods The experiment was conducted on 42 adult Wistar rats, equally divided into six experimental groups (n = 7). Five were continuously exposed to a temperature of 35 ± 1°C, while the control group was kept at 20 ± 2°C. GH cells were visualized using the peroxidase–antiperoxidase immunohistochemical method. The morphometric analysis was conducted using the M_{42} multipurpose test system.
Results Rats from all experimental groups had significantly ($p < 0.05$) reduced body mass compared with the control. After four and 14 days of exposure to moderate heat, the absolute pituitary weight was significantly ($p < 0.05$) increased by 23.1% and 27.7%, respectively, in comparison with the control. GH cells in all groups were oval and located near capillaries with numerous dark granules. Morphometric analysis of cellular and nuclear volumes of GH cells in the experimental group significantly decreased ($p < 0.05$) compared with the control group.
Conclusion It can be concluded that chronic exposure of adult male rats to moderately high ambient temperatures reduced the immunohistomorphometric parameters of GH cells.
Keywords: moderately high ambient temperature; immunohistomorphometry; somatotrophic cells; rats

INTRODUCTION

High ambient temperatures have become a significant environmental factor in recent decades, directly affecting all biological processes in the body and causing numerous consequences for the functioning of living organisms [1, 2, 3]. Due to climate change and global warming, the impact of high temperatures on body growth, food consumption, muscle mass growth [1], bone mineralization, energy metabolism, and reproduction has become an important aspect of thermophysiology [4].

Exposure to high or low environmental temperatures and continuous exposure to light or darkness are considered environmental stressors for the body [5–8]. In such conditions, a stressogenic reaction occurs, causing the neuroendocrine system response and particularly affecting the hypothalamic–pituitary axis [6, 9, 10]. Earlier studies showed that adrenocorticotropic [6, 11], somatotropic (GH), and mammotropic [7] cells of the pituitary gland are most sensitive to this kind of stress reaction.

GH cells synthesize and secrete growth hormone into the bloodstream; its release is regulated by several circulating hormones and metabolites [12]. The pulsatile control of GH secretion and release into the pituitary portal system is regulated by hypothalamic neurons through the release of stimulatory (GHRH) [12], or GH-inhibitory hormone, somatostatin (SRIH) [13]. GH regulates numerous physiological functions, including protein synthesis, cellular proliferation, body growth [2, 14], neuroendocrine responses, behavior, and metabolism through specific populations of neurons [15].

Current climate changes and global warming have also affected the Western Balkans and Southeastern Europe. It is expected that by 2035 the average annual temperature in this region will increase by 0.5–1°C, especially during the summer period [11]. Having in mind that during summer all animals and humans are subjected to longer or shorter periods of warm climate, we hypothesized that their exposure to high ambient temperatures might have a significant impact on the morphofunctional

Received • Примљено: May 14, 2025
Accepted • Прихваћено: May 28, 2025
Online first: May 30, 2025

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characteristics of GH cells. Therefore, this study aimed to elucidate the potential changes in the immunohistomorphometric characteristics of GH cells after short-term and prolonged exposures of animals to moderately elevated ambient temperature.

METHODS

Experimental animals and experimental design

The experiment was conducted on 2.5-month-old adult Wistar male rats. A detailed description of the experimental protocol can be found in our previous study [11]. Briefly, the experimental animals (n = 7 per group) were continuously exposed (4, 7, 14, 21, 60 days) to moderately high ambient temperature in a special heated chamber with controlled air temperature (35 ± 1°C) and air humidity of 30–40%, while the control group (n = 7) was kept at room temperature (20 ± 2°C). Food and water were given *ad libitum* to all animals throughout the whole experiment. After the sacrifice, the pituitary gland was removed, weighed, and subjected to immunohistochemical staining for GH cell visualization.

Immunohistochemical staining

The rat pituitary glands were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde, dehydrated in ethanol, cleared in xylol, and embedded in paraffin. The distal part of the glands was cut in a series of seven horizontal 5 μm-thick sections through three levels (superior, middle, and inferior) [11]. The immunohistochemical localization of pituitary GH cells was performed using the peroxidase–antiperoxidase method. The procedure is described in detail elsewhere [5, 9, 11].

All animal procedures were compliant with EU Directive 2010/63/EU and approved by the Local Animal Care Committee of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine – Skopje (No. 0201-4506/2 from 7.11.2011).

Stereological measurements

The cellular volume (Vc_{GH}; μm³), nuclear volume (Vn_{GH}; μm³), and volume density of immunopositive GH cells (Vv_{GH}; %) were determined on 5 μm-thick sections. Measurements were made with the multipurpose test system M_{42} on 50 test fields at × 1000 magnification, previously described in detail by Popovska-Perčinić et al. [5]. Digital recordings were made on a DM RB photomicroscope (Leica, Wetzlar, Germany).

Statistical analysis

The morphometric data obtained for each rat were averaged per experimental group, and the standard deviation (SD) was calculated. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by a Tukey test was used to compare differences between the groups. A probability value of 5% or less was considered statistically significant.

Ethics: All animal procedures were approved by the Animal Care Committee of the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, University in Skopje (No. 0201-4506/2) and followed the instructions provided in the EU Directive 2010/63/EU.

RESULTS

Body mass, absolute and relative pituitary weights

The body mass and the absolute and relative pituitary weights are given in Table 1 and Figure 1. It was found that the body mass in rats exposed to moderate heat for 4, 7, 14, 21, and 60 consecutive days was significantly ($p < 0.05$) reduced by 19.8%, 22.6%, 16.4%, 22.6%, and 37.6%, respectively, compared with the controls. After 4 and 14 days of exposure to moderate heat, the absolute pituitary weight was significantly ($p < 0.05$) increased by 23.1% and 27.7%, respectively, in comparison with the control group. The relative weight of the pituitary gland was significantly ($p < 0.05$) increased by 36% only in rats exposed to moderate ambient temperature for four days.

Immunohistochemical characteristics of GH cells

The GH cells of the control group were intensely stained, with an oval shape and a prominent spherical nucleus located centrally within the cell cytoplasm (Figure 2A). The

Table 1. Absolute and relative pituitary weight in animals exposed to moderately high ambient temperature

Group	Absolute pituitary weight (mg)	Relative pituitary weight (mg%)
Control	6.5 ± 0.6	2.5 ± 0.1
4 days	8.0 ± 0.4* (+23.1%)	3.4 ± 0.3* (+36.5)
7 days	6.3 ± 0.5 (-3.1%)	2.4 ± 0.2 (-4.0%)
14 days	8.3 ± 0.6* (+27.7%)	2.9 ± 0.2 (+16%)
21 days	6.4 ± 0.5 (-1.5%)	2.5 ± 0.1 (0.0%)
60 days	5.8 ± 0.5 (-10.1%)	2.6 ± 0.2 (+4%)

The values are expressed as means ± SD;
*p < 0.05 *vs.* control

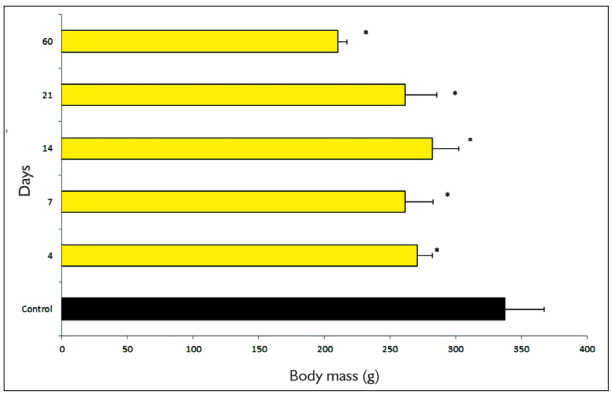

Figure 1. Body mass in animals exposed to moderately high ambient temperature 4, 7, 14, 21, and 60 days; the values are expressed as means ± SD;
*p < 0.05 vs. control

location of GH cells was not significantly changed in the experimental groups. The shape of most cells was oval (Figure 2B–F). However, there were also some stellate cells with noticeable cytoplasmic processes (Figure 2D). Generally, rats exposed for a prolonged time to moderately elevated ambient temperature had smaller GH cells containing darker cytoplasmic areas throughout their cytoplasm. They were found mostly arranged in groups (Figure 2B).

Stereological parameters

In rats exposed to moderate heat for 4, 7, 14, 21, and 60 days, the morphometric analysis of pituitary GH cells showed a significant decrease in their volume ($p < 0.05$) by 18.4%, 25.8%, 14.1%, 24.4%, and 19.1%, respectively (Figure 3A), compared to the control. The nuclear volume of these cells was significantly reduced by 9.5%, 5.3%, 7.4%, 3.2%, and 10.6%, respectively, in comparison with the control group (Figure 3B). The volume density of GH cells was significantly reduced ($p < 0.05$) after 4, 7, and 60 days by 23.7%, 13.2%, and 15.9%, respectively, compared with the control (Figure 3C).

DISCUSSION

Global warming is characterized by an increase in the average annual temperatures. The Western Balkans and Southeastern Europe have experienced prolonged periods of high ambient temperatures during the summer months [11, 16].

In this research, a significant decrease in body weight was found in all groups compared with the control. The largest decrease (-37.6%) was recorded in animals that were exposed to moderately high environmental temperatures for 60 days. Similar results were obtained after exposure of rats to a temperature of 35 ± 1°C for 30 days [5], as well as after acute exposure of mice to temperatures between 34–38.5°C [17]. Increased water intake and reduced food intake are most probably the causes of body weight reduction, which was observed in rats [18] and broilers [1].

The increased absolute weight of the pituitary gland was observed after the fourth and 14th day of exposure to elevated ambient temperature, whereas increased values of the relative weight were registered only after the 4th day. A similar result was reported in earlier studies after acute [19] and chronic [5] (30 days) exposure of rats to high environmental temperature.

Literature data on the effects of temperature on GH cells are very scarce. Most of them concern acute exposure, such as studies from Vigas et al. [20], which describe the stimulatory effect of high temperature on GH release for several

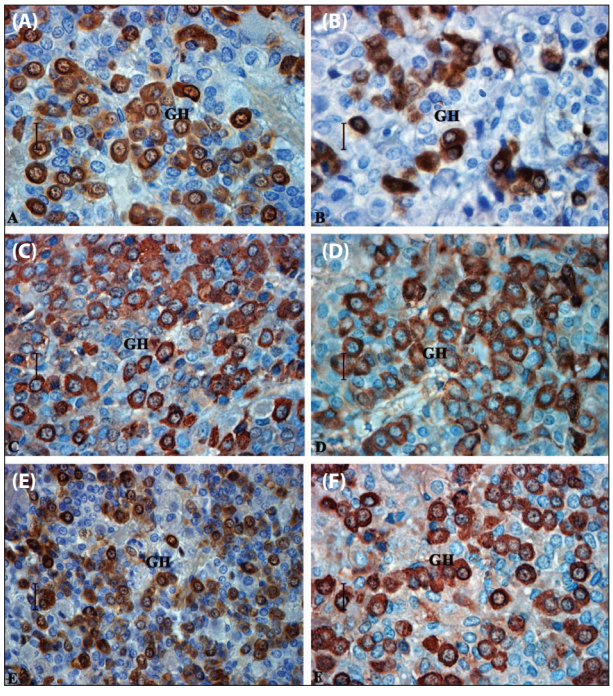

Figure 2. Representative micrographs of immunopositive GH cells in controls (**A**), in animals exposed to moderately high ambient temperature 4 days (**B**); 7 days (**C**); 14 days (**D**); 21 days (**E**); and 60 days (**F**); peroxidase–antiperoxidase method; bar: 16 µm

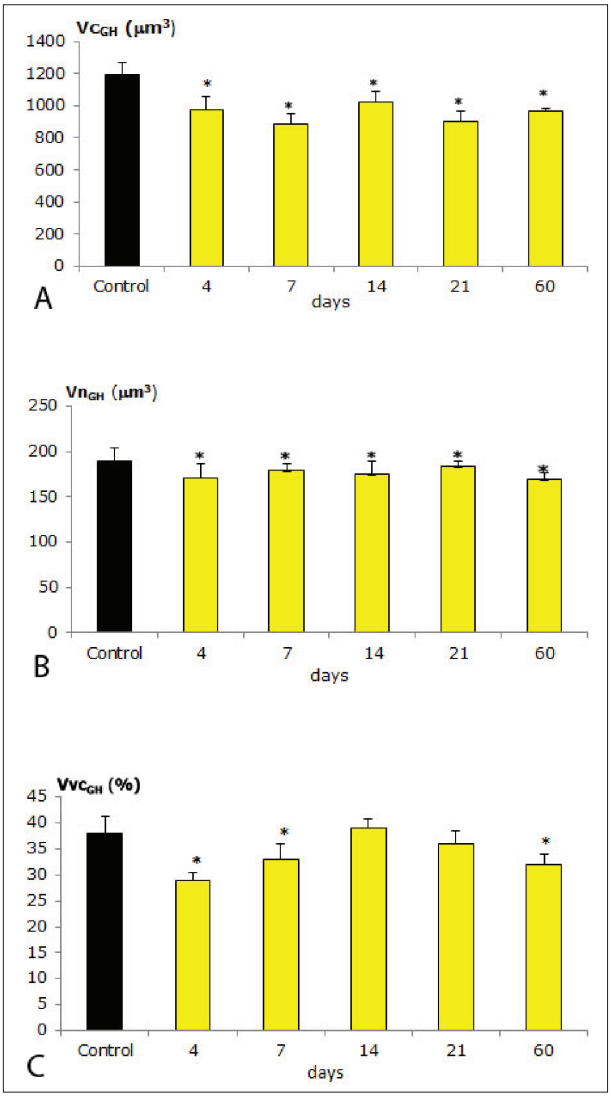

Figure 3. Stereological parameters of immunopositive GH cells in adult male rats after exposure to moderately high ambient temperatures; **A**) Vc-volume of cells (µm3); **B)** Vn-volume of nuclei (µm3); and **C)** Vvc-volume of density (%); the values are expressed as means ± SD; *$p < 0.05$ *vs.* control

minutes to an hour. The current study aimed to expand the information on the properties of GH cells after prolonged exposure to moderately high temperatures.

The stereological analysis in this study showed that the cellular and nuclear volumes of GH cells were significantly reduced compared with the control. These results indicate a decreased activity of somatotropic cells during the entire heat exposure period. A decrease in the stereological parameters of GH cells was also observed after 30 days of exposure to moderately high temperatures [5], which is in agreement with our results. The inhibitory effect of GH secretion and reduced blood GH concentration were noticed after acute and chronic stress [21], as well as during short-term acclimation to high temperatures [22]. This can be explained by the increased secretion of SRIH from the hypothalamus, which serves as a suppressor of GH hormone release [21].

Trifunović et al. [22] and Nestorović et al. [7] reported similar findings after chronic exposure of adult rats to other types of stressors (immobilization, sound, constant light). The decreased somatotropes' activity might be due to the increased SRIH blood concentration, known to exhibit an inhibitory effect on the secretion of GH from the pituitary somatotropic cells [23]. Similar results after exposure to a moderately warm ambient environment were also obtained in birds [24]. Studies in rats reported that increased SRIH synthesis and storage and decreased GH-releasing hormone mRNA synthesis play a major role in the GH inhibitory effects on glucocorticoids [25]. In addition, it was shown that glucocorticoids are directly involved in the increase of pituitary GHS-R mRNA levels by stimulating GHS-R gene transcription [26]. This might be a possible explanation for the decreased activity of GH cells found in this study since reduced serum corticosterone concentration was found in our previous research in rats subjected to moderately high temperatures for 7–60 days [11].

CONCLUSION

Prolonged exposure of adult male rats to moderately high ambient temperature has an inhibitory effect on the immunohistochemical and stereological parameters of GH cells.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development, and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia (grant No. 451-03-137/2025-03/200113).

Conflict of interest: None declared.

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Имунохистоморфометријски одговор ћелија хипофизе које производе хормон раста код пацова на продужено излагање умерено повишеној температури околине

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САЖЕТАК

Увод/Циљ Основни циљ овог истраживања био је да се испита ефекат продужене изложености (4, 7, 14, 21, 60 дана) пацова умерено високој температури околине (35 ± 1° *C*) на имунохистоморфометријске параметре соматропних (ГХ) ћелија хипофизе.

Методе Експеримент је спроведен на 42 одрасла Вистар пацова, подељена у шест експерименталних група ($n = 7$), од којих је пет непрекидно изложено температури од 35 ± 1° *C*, док је контролна група држана на 20 ± 2° *C*. ГХ ћелије су имунохистохемијски визуелизоване методом пероксидаза–антипероксидаза. Морфометријска анализа је спроведена коришћењем вишенаменског тест-система M_{42}.

Резултати Пацови из свих експерименталних група имали су значајно ($p < 0,05$) смањену телесну масу у односу на контролну групу. После четири и 14 дана излагања умереној топлоти, апсолутна тежина хипофизе је значајно ($p < 0,05$) повећана за 23,1% односно 27,7%, у поређењу са контролном групом. ГХ ћелије у свим групама биле су овалног облика и смештене у близини капилара са бројним тамним гранулама. Морфометријска анализа ћелијских и нуклеарних запремина ГХ ћелија у експерименталној групи значајно је смањена ($p < 0,05$) у односу на контролну групу.

Закључак Може се закључити да је хронична изложеност одраслих мужјака пацова умерено високим температурама околине смањила имунохистоморфометријске параметре ГХ ћелија.

Кључне речи: умерено висока температура околине; имунохистоморфометрија; соматотропне ћелије; пацови