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A Meta-Analysis of Candidate Gene Polymorphisms and Ischemic Stroke in Six Study Populations: Association of Lymphotoxinalpha in Non-hypertensive Patients

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Abstract

Background and Purpose—Ischemic stroke is a multifactorial disease with a strong genetic component. Pathways including lipid metabolism, systemic chronic inflammation, coagulation, blood pressure regulation, and cellular adhesion have been implicated in stroke pathophysiology, and candidate gene polymorphisms in these pathways have been proposed as genetic risk factors.

Methods—We genotyped 105 simple deletions and single nucleotide polymorphisms from 64 candidate genes in 3550 patients and 6560 controls from six case-control association studies conducted in the United States, Europe and China. Genotyping was performed using the same immobilized probe typing system and meta-analyses were based on summary logistic regressions for each study. The primary analyses were fixed-effects meta-analyses adjusting for age and sex with additive, dominant and recessive models of inheritance.

Results—Although seven polymorphisms showed a nominal additive association, none remained statistically significant after adjustment for multiple comparisons. In contrast, after stratification for hypertension, two lymphotoxin-alpha polymorphisms which are in strong linkage disequilibrium were significantly associated among non-hypertensive individuals: for LTA 252A>G (additive model), OR=1.41 with 95% CI, 1.20 to 1.65, p=0.00002; for LTA 26Thr>Asn, OR 1.19 with 95% CI, 1.06 to 1.34, p=0.003. LTA 252A>G remained significant after adjustment for multiple testing

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using either the false discover rate or by permutation testing. The two SNPs showed no association in hypertensive subjects (eg, LTA 252A>G, OR=0.93; 95%CI, 0.84 to 1.03, p=0.17).

Conclusions—These observations may indicate an important role of LTA-mediated inflammatory processes in the pathogenesis of ischemic stroke.

Indexing terms

ischemic stroke; hypertension; inflammation; genetics

Ischemic stroke is a complex multi-factorial and polygenic disorder thought to reflect interactions between an individual's genetic background and various environmental components. Previous studies have established hypertension, smoking, diabetes mellitus, body mass index and age as reliable stroke-risk predictors^{1,2}. However, these conventional stroke risk factors do not fully account for the overall risk of stroke. Several physiological pathways, including lipid metabolism, blood pressure regulation, coagulation, and cellular adhesion are thought to play critical roles in stroke pathophysiology.

Among the known risk factors for ischemic stroke, hypertension contributes significantly to the onset of disease. Increased risk of stroke is not, however, limited to those with hypertension and the conventional stroke risk factors do not fully explain the risk among normotensives. Strategies to identify additional risk factors include stratification by hypertension^{3,4} and using blood pressure as a matching criterion for cases and controls⁵. A key role for inflammation is suggested by observations that hypertensive patients have elevated circulating levels of markers of inflammation and that some anti-hypertensive therapies reduce both levels of proinflammatory markers and the risk of ischemic stroke, in addition to lowering blood pressure⁶.

Both systemic and local inflammatory processes are implicated in the etiology of ischemic cerebrovascular disease and in the pathophysiology of cerebral ischemia⁷. Viral and bacterial infections are independent risk factors for ischemic stroke⁸ and increased levels of systemic inflammatory markers such as C-reactive protein (CRP), leukocyte count, and fibrinogen are associated with increased risk of ischemic stroke⁹. Moreover, many stroke-related diseases such as Alzheimer's disease and atherosclerosis are initiated or worsened by systemic inflammation^{10,11}. Polymorphisms in the CRP gene have been recently associated with both circulating protein levels and cardiovascular events¹², demonstrating the potential impact of genetic variation. Pro-inflammatory cytokines are believed to play a pathogenic role in these diseases, and variations in cytokine genes have also been shown to influence both predisposition and penetrance by altering the transcription profile and pattern of proinflammatory cytokine production¹³. For example, polymorphism in the lymphotoxin-alpha gene can enhance transcription and susceptibility to myocardial infarction¹⁴. At the local level, migration of inflammatory cells to the vascular wall is associated with vascular changes leading to atherosclerosis, and early atherosclerotic lesions are preceded by inflammatory cell deposition in the sub-endothelial layer of major cerebral arteries and in small brain vessels 15 . Genetic variants influencing inflammatory processes could potentially contribute to the etiology of stroke.

The complex etiology of stroke suggests that individual genetic polymorphisms have modest effects that are difficult to detect, as has been observed to date¹⁶. Large studies are needed to assess these polymorphisms as risk factors. Here we report a six-study meta-analysis to investigate the associations of 105 simple deletions and single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) in inflammatory and cardiovascular system-related genes with susceptibility to ischemic stroke. To search for genetic risk factors contributing to ischemic stroke beyond hypertension, we stratified the study cohort on hypertension status.

Materials and Methods

Study Sample Description

As part of the Roche Stroke SNP Consortium, results of six independent studies (Table 1) were pooled for this analysis. All six study samples were comprised of individuals with proven ischemic stroke status and healthy controls. All studies were approved by the local ethics committees and all participants gave informed consent. Briefly, the study subjects were recruited as follows:

Physician's Health Study (PHS)—A nested case-control sample (319 cases, 2092 controls) was derived from the PHS cohort consisting of 22,071 predominantly Caucasian U.S. male physicians initially free of prior myocardial infarction, stroke, transient ischemic attack and cancer, who were enrolled in a placebo controlled trial of aspirin and beta-carotene for the primary prevention of cardiovascular disease and cancer¹⁷. DNA was isolated from baseline blood samples provided by 14,916 (68%) of the participants. Incident cases of ischemic stroke were identified during an average 13-year follow-up, and confirmed by medical record review. Controls were selected from study participants remaining free of reported cardiovascular disease, and matched to cases of any cardiovascular disease by age, smoking, and time since study entry¹⁸.

Study of Osteoporotic Fractures (SOF)—Ambulatory women were recruited from four clinical centers in Portland, Oregon; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Baltimore, Maryland; and the Monongahela Valley, Pennsylvania19. The SOF cohort consists of 9615 white women of at least 65 years of age who had not had bilateral hip replacement or earlier hip fracture at the time of recruitment. The stroke subgroup included here consists of 247 who suffered adjudicated ischemic strokes and 559 controls who remained free of stroke through the mean follow-up of 5.4 years. Individuals who died during follow-up were included in both cases and controls, avoiding survivor bias.

Westphalia, Germany—Cases ($n = 700$) were recruited through the regional Westphalian Stroke Register in northwestern Germany²⁰. Standardized patient documentation included socio-demographic characteristics, comorbidities, stroke type and severity as well as details regarding the diagnostic and therapeutic procedures and complications; 96.8% had at least one CT or MRI of the brain during hospitalization. Controls ($n = 757$) were recruited from the population-based Dortmund Health Study, conducted in the same region²¹. Participants in this study were randomly drawn from the city's registration office within 5-year age groups and stratified by sex. Medical histories were assessed in face to face interviews.

Pomerania, Germany—Cases (n = 277) were recruited with a standardized patient assessment form; 96.5% had at least one CT or MRI during hospitalization. Controls for this region were recruited from the population-based Study of Health in Pomerania (SHIP) 22 . Participants in SHIP were 20- to 79-year-olds randomly sampled from registration offices in the area. Face-to-face interviews with each participant included a short stroke symptom questionnaire. A random sample of 702 SHIP participants who were free of self-reported stroke and within the same age range and sex distribution as the cases, formed the control group.

Vienna Stroke Study—In the Vienna Stroke Registry, cases (n= 844) consisted of consecutive Caucasian patients submitted to one of nine stroke units within 72 hours of symptom onset of acute ischemic stroke. Patients who died on the way to the hospital or were first admitted to an intensive care unit were not included²³. All patients underwent cranial CT or MRI and were documented according to a standardized protocol including stroke severity, risk factors and medical history (with particular reference to vascular diseases). Controls (n =

979) were voluntary participants in a health care program offered by the city of Vienna, were free of clinically manifest arterial vascular disease and reported no arterial vascular diseases in first degree relatives.

Stroke Hypertension Investigation in Genetics (SHINING)—Individuals were recruited from six geographical regions within China; 70% came from in and near Beijing. Cases ($n = 1163$) were individuals who had suffered a stroke within the previous 5 years, as diagnosed by brain CT/MRI. The original goal was to identify SNPs that predispose to stroke independent of blood pressure, thus randomly drawn population-based controls were initially individually matched to cases by sex, birth year ± 3 yrs, geographic location, and blood pressure category (<140/90, ≥140/90 and ≤180/105, >180/105). Because some cases could not be matched, additional controls were recruited for a total of 1471 controls⁵.

Genotyping

A total of 105 polymorphisms from 64 genes were selected based on reported associations in the literature, as well as on evidence of gene product involvement in cardiovascular disease and inflammatory processes. As previously described $24,25$, three separate multi-locus polymerase chain reactions (PCRs) were carried out using biotinylated primer pools (Roche Molecular Systems, Inc., CA). The resulting PCR product pools were denatured and hybridized to linear arrays of immobilized, sequence-specific oligonucleotide probes. Hybridized amplicon was detected using a streptavidin-horseradish peroxidase conjugate and a chromogenic substrate. Laboratory technicians were blinded to the case-control status of each sample. Genotype assignments were made either manually and independently by two researchers or made by capturing images with a flatbed scanner and then using proprietary software developed by Roche Molecular Systems to resolve probe signals into genotypes for all polymorphisms. Discordant or ambiguous results were resolved by repeat PCR or hybridization. Twenty polymorphisms were not available for PHS and 23 polymorphisms were genotyped in only a subset of the Vienna Stroke participants; for these, genotypes were obtained for >90.5% of the individuals typed. For each of the 62 polymorphisms genotyped for all 10,110 subjects across all six studies, the final genotype database was ≥97.5% complete. For the *LTA* [MIM 153440] 252A>G and *LTA* 26Thr>Asn polymorphisms, in particular, the database contained 6090 (not available for PHS) and 10,091 genotypes (99.8% complete), respectively.

Statistical analysis

Individual level data were provided from each study site to the Coordinating Center at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Pre-specified inclusion criteria for the metaanalyses were: age of at least 20 years and no prior history of myocardial infarction. Cases were restricted to those experiencing an ischemic stroke and controls had no previous history of stroke.

Allele and genotype frequencies were estimated by study site among cases and controls separately using SAS GENETICS. Tests for Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium (HWE), both largesample and exact, were conducted among cases and controls for each site (Supplementary Table 1). Results for the effect of each SNP on ischemic stroke were estimated for each study separately using logistic regression. Each analysis controlled for age and sex, and assessed genetic effects under three modes of inheritance: additive, dominant, and recessive. In addition, analyses were conducted for each site using all three genotypes, using a two-degree of freedom test.

Meta-analyses were conducted based on the summary logistic regression results for each study site²⁶. The primary analyses were fixed effects meta-analyses adjusting for age and sex. These meta-analyses were also conducted across Caucasians only (data not shown), since these

comprised the majority of participants for five of the six studies. Effects for each of the three modes of inheritance were estimated. PROC MIXED of SAS was used for effect estimation. Tests for heterogeneity of the genetic effect across sites were conducted using the Qstatistic²⁷. For comparison, random effects models were estimated which allowed the genetic effect to vary across sites using study-specific effect estimates and PROC MIXED of SAS. To adjust for multiple comparisons, the false discovery rate $(FDR)^{28}$ was computed and stepdown

Other pre-specified analyses adjusted for hypertension as well as age and sex. Across all studies, hypertensives were defined as having current or past anti-hypertensive medication, systolic blood pressure ≥140 mm Hg, or diastolic blood pressure ≥90 mm Hg. Additional smoking-adjusted analyses were limited to five studies due to the limited availability of smoking data for the Westphalian study participants. Subgroup analyses were conducted according to age, sex, presence of hypertension, or smoking (ever vs. never).

permutation tests were conducted for selected comparisons²⁹.

Results

A total of 3550 stroke patients and 6560 controls were genotyped with inflammation and cardiovascular SNP panels in six study sites with common methodology and genotyping software. The characteristics of all participants from six study sites are listed in Table 1. Two studies were drawn from prospective cohorts; the PHS study followed only male subjects and the SOF study followed only female subjects. The SHINING study was comprised of subjects of Han ethnicity, while the five other study populations were >99% Caucasian. There was a greater proportion of hypertension among cases than in controls, except in the SHINING study subset, for which blood pressure had been matched between the majority of cases and controls.

Table 2 lists the results obtained in the primary fixed-effects meta-analysis for all polymorphic sites under dominant, additive and recessive genetic modes of inheritance; similar results were observed under a random effects meta-analysis (data not shown). Nine SNPs were nominally significant (P < 0.05) under at least one mode of inheritance: *ADRB3* [MIM 109691] Trp64Arg, *CETP* [MIM 118470] (−629)C>A, *GNB3* [MIM 139130] 825C>T, *IL4* [MIM 147780] (−590) C>T, *LIPC* [MIM 151670] (−480)C>T, *LPL* [MIM 609708] Ser447Ter, *NOS3* [MIM 163729] (−690)C>T, *PON2* [MIM 602447] Ser311Cys and *TGFB1* [MIM 190180] (−509)C>T. To account for multiple hypothesis testing, the false discovery rate or permutation testing was applied and none of these SNPs remained statistically significantly associated with ischemic stroke. Among Caucasian participants only, the same *GNB3*, *LPL*, *NOS3*, *PON2* and *TGFB1* SNPs were nominally significant under at least one mode of inheritance, in addition to eight others (*APOB* [MIM 107730] 71Ile>Thr, *APOC3* [MIM 107720] 3175C>G, *CCR5* [MIM 601373] (−2459)G>A, *IL6* [MIM 147620] (−174)G>C, *IL10* [MIM 124092] (−571)C>A , *ITGA3* [MIM 192974] 873G>A, *NOS2A* [MIM 163730] 231C>T, *TNF* [MIM 191160] (−376) G>A), but none of the SNPs remained statistically significant after the false discovery rate was applied (data not shown).

The data were then stratified on age, sex, hypertension or smoking status. No statistically significant associations were observed in the age- (Supplementary Table 2A) or sex-stratified (Supplementary Table 2B) analyses, nor among those with current or past hypertension (Table 3) after adjusting for the FDR. In contrast, a large number of nominally significant associations with ischemic stroke among normotensives were observed (Table 4). The strongest associations under the additive and dominant models were for *LTA* 252A>G and *LTA* 26Thr>Asn, two SNPs in strong linkage disequilibrium, while *NOS3* 298Glu>Asp had the strongest association under the recessive model. After adjusting for FDR and permutation testing, only the *LTA* 252A>G SNP showed significant association among those without hypertension. In the additive mode, the estimated relative risk across the three *LTA* 252

genotypes was 1.41 (p=0.00002) in the fixed effects analysis and the FDR was 0.002, with $p<0.01$ in permutation testing. Results for the dominant model were similar (OR = 1.57, FDR = 0.005). In the random effects meta-analysis (data not shown), the *LTA* 252A>G association with stroke under the dominant model ($OR = 1.56$) had an FDR of 0.02. Among Caucasians only, *LTA* 252A>G was similarly associated with ischemic stroke among those without hypertension under additive and dominant models (OR = 1.28 , p=0.016 and OR = 1.39, p=0.019, respectively). Minor allele frequencies among non-hypertensive controls are given in Table 4; frequencies among non-hypertensive cases were 0.37, 0.38, 0.31, 0.41, and 0.46 in SOF, Vienna, Westphalia, Pomerania, and SHINING, respectively.

The point estimates for the OR were somewhat higher for *LTA* 252A>G, a polymorphism in intron 1, than for the non-synonymous polymorphism *LTA* 26Thr>Asn, although the confidence intervals overlapped after adjusting for age and sex (Figure1, A–D). The FDR values for the Thr>Asn polymorphism were also greater than 0.05. The associations with stroke risk for both *LTA* SNPs reached statistical significance among normotensives within the individual studies of SHINING and Pomerania, whereas among hypertensives, the OR point estimates were usually just below 1 and were not statistically significant (Figure 1). This trend for increased stroke risk associated with the *LTA* SNPs among normotensives relative to hypertensives was observed across the other studies, although none of these individual associations was statistically significant. We note that the PHS cohort was genotyped only for the *LTA* 26Thr>Asn polymorphism under the expectation that this coding SNP could be functional and would be an effective "tag" for *LTA* 252, based on the very strong LD between these two polymorphisms; furthermore, in the Vienna and Westphalia studies, some samples had missing genotypes for *LTA 252*A>G. When the meta-analysis was repeated with only those samples that had been genotyped for both *LTA* SNPs, the OR estimates were virtually identical (1.572 and 1.565 among normotensives under the dominant model for *LTA* 252 and *LTA* 26, respectively; data not shown). In addition, if the *LTA* 26 result for the PHS were imputed for the missing *LTA* 252 data, the additive result for *LTA* 252 would remain highly significant (OR=1.30, p=0.0001). Alternatively, if a completely null estimate for the PHS were imputed, the overall result would remain significant ($OR=1.27$, $p=0.0004$) and would continue to pass the stringent multiple comparisons testing.

In the smoking-stratified analyses, no associations remained statistically significant after the false discovery rate was applied, although under the dominant model, *CD14* (−260)C>T was suggestively associated (OR 1.24 , $P = 0.001$, FDR = 0.058) with ischemic stroke among neversmokers (Supplementary Table 2C). Both *LTA* SNPs were associated with a greater risk for ischemic stroke in never-smokers than ever-smokers under the dominant model and although these associations were not statistically significant after accounting for multiple testing, this trend was consistent across five studies (data not shown); the Westphalian study was excluded due to limited smoking data.

Discussion

In this meta-analysis, we evaluated the association between 105 polymorphisms in 64 inflammation and cardiovascular-related genes and ischemic stroke in 3550 case and 6560 control subjects across six different studies. Although we could not further define subtypes of ischemic stroke, key strengths of our stroke consortium are that these analyses were not subject to publication bias and all studies used common genotyping reagents. In the primary metaanalysis, modest associations with stroke became non-significant after adjustment for multiple testing using the FDR or permutation testing. Stratification on sex or age also revealed no significant associations. Notably, subjects in two of our studies were limited to one sex and the consortium encompassed subjects recruited from different regions in Europe, North America, and China. We observed similar results among Caucasian participants only, but study

population differences resulting in heterogeneity in stroke etiology could have obscured genetic associations.

Stratification on hypertension status did, however, reveal a statistically significant association for *LTA 2*52A>G that remained after adjustment for multiple testing. Across four Caucasian populations and one Chinese population, the odds ratio for *LTA 2*52G was consistently greater among normotensive than hypertensive subjects. *LTA 2*6Thr>Asn yielded similar results among study participants with genotypes at both sites, as expected, given the strong linkage disequilibrium between these two *LTA* SNPs. Although a recent Japanese study observed no association of these SNPs with any subtype of ischemic stroke³⁰, a smaller Hungarian study had previously reported *LTA* 252G as a risk factor for large-vessel ischemic stroke³¹ and an earlier Korean study had identified the *LTA* 252AA genotype as a risk factor for cerebral infarction³². We were unable to analyze ischemic stroke subtypes, but there is some evidence that subtypes may differ depending upon hypertensive status³³. Although the number of nonhypertensives cases was limited to 1068, stratification by hypertension across our six populations may have reduced heterogeneity and thus enabled us to discern the modest risk associated with LTA polymorphism.

A role for LTA in chronic inflammation has been suggested by its ability to induce expression of ICAM-1 and VCAM-1 on endothelial cells in vitro $34,35$. LTA expression results in a localized infiltrate consisting of T cells, B cells, follicular and interdigitating dendritic cells and macrophages³⁶. A recent mouse model study indicated that LTA was expressed in atherosclerotic lesions whose size correlated with concentration. Moreover, loss of the adjacent gene *TNF* did not affect development of lesions in mice fed an atherogenic diet³⁷. The A252G site is intronic, but has been associated with higher transcriptional activity in a luciferase assay, while the variant protein bearing the *LTA 26* threonine to asparagine substitution has been observed to induce greater expression of VCAM1 and SELE mRNA in vascular smooth-muscle cells. Since these two *LTA* SNPs are in almost complete LD, the variant protein level was estimated to be 1.5-fold higher than wildtype¹⁰. An increased level of the variant protein may contribute to the increased risk for ischemic stroke through inflammatory processes. Although the mechanism by which *LTA* polymorphisms influence inflammatory pathways is not clear, the meta-analysis presented here indicated that these *LTA* variants were associated with ischemic stroke in non-hypertensive patients.

It is believed that subjects with hypertension tend to develop chronic, low-grade systemic inflammation^{38–40}. Severity of inflammation caused by genetic variation could independently modify predisposition to ischemic stroke. Recent reports on the association of *PDE4D* variants with ischemic stroke among normotensives^{3,4} are consistent with the hypothesis that hypertension may obscure or mask the effect of inflammation-related genetic variants and that such genetic effects can be most readily observed in the absence of this major risk factor.

Smoking, like hypertension, can elicit an inflammatory response 41 . In our study, the effect of *LTA* variation on stroke was more discernable among never-smokers than ever-smokers. Whether pro-inflammatory risks for ischemic stroke caused by hypertension, smoking, or carrying a risk allele are additive remains to be addressed by a carefully designed study.

Summary

Our six-study analysis surveyed inflammatory and cardiovascular gene polymorphisms in examining the risk for ischemic stroke. Our results indicate that the *LTA 2*52A>G and *LTA 2*6Thr>Asn polymorphisms have significant effects on the risk for ischemic stroke in nonhypertensive subjects. We cannot rule out the possible importance of these polymorphisms in hypertensive subjects, but a much larger cohort may be needed to clarify the interaction of hypertension and inflammation in the etiology of ischemic stroke.

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

Acknowledgments

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Statistical analysis: NRC

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Acknowledgments Appendix

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Figure 1.

Risk of ischemic stroke associated with *LTA* polymorphism. Odds ratios under additive and dominant modes of inheritance for the *LTA* 252A>G and *LTA* 26Thr>Asn polymorphisms among normotensive (square) and hypertensive (diamond) subjects are plotted for each study (open squares/diamonds) and the fixed effects meta-analysis (filled squares/diamonds). Horizontal lines extend across the 95% confidence limits.

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Characteristics of the Study Subjects. Summary of population characteristics for each of the six studies used in the meta-analysis. All

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Continuous variables are given as mean ±SD.

 t BMI = Body mass index, SBP = Systolic blood pressure prior to stroke, DBP = Diastolic blood pressure prior to stroke. *†*BMI = Body mass index, SBP = Systolic blood pressure prior to stroke, DBP =Diastolic blood pressure prior to stroke.

 $^{\star}\!$ Using chi-square test for categorical variables, t-test for continuous variables. *‡*Using chi-square test for categorical variables, t-test for continuous variables.

 $\mathcal{\r{S}}_{\text{Partially matched by age and BP group during recruitment}}$ *§*Partially matched by age and BP group during recruitment

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ischemic stroke: all SNPs under three modes of inheritance.

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or analysis under additive and dominant modes. or analysis under additive and dominant modes.

 $\ddot{\bm s}$

nfidence limit, p= corresponding p-value *nfidence limit, p= corresponding p-value*

or analysis under recessive mode. or analysis under recessive mode.

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*** ADD = additive, DOM = dominant, REC = recessive mode of inheritance

 $\smash{\overset{\circ}{\tau}}$ Odds ratio (OR) and confidence limits (CL) *†*Odds ratio (OR) and confidence limits (CL)

*‡*False discovery rate

ong normotensives (1068 cases, 3390 controls) under three modes of ong normotensives (1068 cases, 3390 controls) under three modes of

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