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Oxidative Phosphorylation in Creatine Transporter Deficiency

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Abstract

X-linked creatine transporter deficiency (CTD) is one of the three types of the cerebral creatine deficiency disorders. CTD arises from pathogenic variants in the X-linked gene *SLC6A8*. We report the first phosphorus (³¹P) MRS study of patients with CTD, where both phosphocreatine and total creatine concentrations were found to be markedly reduced. Despite the diminished role of creatine and phosphocreatine in oxidative phosphorylation in CTD, we found no elevation of lactate or lowered pH, indicating that the brain energy supply still largely relied on oxidative metabolism. Our results suggest that mitochondrial function is a potential therapeutic target for CTD.

Keywords

¹H MRS; ³¹P MRS; Creatine; Creatine transporter deficiency

INTRODUCTION

Creatine and its phosphorylated form play a central role in the energy metabolism in nervous tissue.¹ In particular, creatine and phosphocreatine (PCr) are coupled to the rapid exchanges between adenosine diphosphate (ADP) and adenosine triphosphate (ATP); the latter is the energy currency of all cells. Consequently, creatine is considered essential for proper brain development and function. Creatine is primarily synthesized in kidneys and liver by arginine:glycine amidinotransferase (AGAT) and guanidinoacetate methyltransferase (GAMT).² The enzymatic action of AGAT produces guanidinoacetate as a substrate for the production of creatine by GAMT. Creatine passes the blood brain barrier via the creatine

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transporter to support energy metabolism in the brain.³ Creatine is finally converted to creatinine through a spontaneous process and excreted in urine.⁴

Cerebral creatine deficiency disorders are rare inherited metabolic conditions in which the formation or transport of creatine is disrupted. Among children with intellectual disabilities of unknown origin, about 1–2% may have creatine deficiency.⁵ Symptoms include but are not limited to developmental, speech and language delay, movement disorders, hypotonia, feeding intolerances, hyperactivity, seizures, and autistic-like behaviors.⁵ Three types of cerebral creatine deficiency disorders exist: (a) AGAT deficiency (OMIM 612718; *GATM*, 15q21.1), (b) GAMT deficiency (OMIM 612736; *GAMT*, 19p13.3) and (c) creatine transporter deficiency (CTD, OMIM 300352; *SLC6A8*, Xq28). The first two are recessive disorders of creatine synthesis, while the third, CTD, is caused by pathogenic variants in the X-linked gene *SLC6A8*. These variants in *SLC6A8* are thought to affect transport of creatine and its precursors across the blood-brain barrier and amongst the different cell types in the brain.⁶ Patients with AGAT or GAMT deficiency can be effectively treated by oral creatine supplementation.⁷ In contrast, most patients with CTD respond poorly to creatine supplementation because of the blockade of creatine transport into brain cells.⁵

Creatine deficiency in the brain was first revealed by MRS in 1994.⁸ Both proton (¹H) and phosphorus (³¹P) MRS have become important tools for clinical study of AGAT and GAMT deficiency, including monitoring of their treatment with oral creatine supplementation. In general, these studies have found that the signals of total creatine (tCr = creatine plus PCr) and PCr of patients with AGAT and GAMT deficiency were greatly decreased.^{7–10} After treatment with oral creatine supplementation, increases in the total creatine signal in ¹H spectra and the PCr signal in ³¹P spectra were observed, accompanied by significant improvement in symptoms.^{7–10}

CTD was first reported in 2001.^{11,12} Subsequent ¹H MRS studies demonstrated prominent reduction of the total creatine signal in ¹H spectra.^{11,13,14} To date, however, ³¹P MRS, which is a powerful tool for studying brain energy metabolism, has not been applied to CTD. Measuring phosphate-containing brain metabolites by ³¹P MRS is clearly of interest for understanding CTD and its treatments, as ample evidence has indicated the pivotal role of PCr and other phosphorus-containing metabolites in tissue's response to energy demand.^{15,16} In this study, we sought to examine brain energetics under abnormally low total creatine levels using ³¹P MRS and ¹H MRS in male patients with CTD.

METHODS

Participants

Fourteen male patients with CTD (mean age = 7.4 years; range 3 to 14 years) were recruited from the National Institutes of Health under protocol: 'Observational Study of Males with Creatine Transporter Deficiency (Vigilan), [ClinicalTrials.gov](https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/study/NCT02931682) Identifier: NCT02931682'. CTD diagnosis was confirmed by ascertaining a pathogenic variant in *SLC6A8* through direct sequencing, as well as biochemical confirmation of elevated creatine to creatinine ratio in urine. All patients with CTD were under propofol anesthesia during ¹H and ³¹P MRS scans.

MR procedures

In vivo ^1H and ^{31}P MRS scans were performed on a Siemens Skyra 3 T scanner (Siemens Healthcare, Erlangen, Germany). After the patient was placed in the magnet, ^{31}P MRS was performed first, followed by ^1H MRS. ^{31}P Spectra were obtained using a custom-built RF coil assembly consisted of a circular ^{31}P surface coil (inner diameter = 7.5 cm) and a ^1H half-volume coil. The proton coil was mounted on a semi-cylindrical plastic tube (outer diameter = 20.3 cm) and consisted of two overlapped octagonal loops (length and width = 12.7 cm). The coil assembly was connected to the 3 T scanner via two interface boxes (Stark Contrast MRI Coils Research, Erlangen, Germany), one for the ^1H coil and the other for the ^{31}P coil. The boxes contained transmit-receive switches, pre-amplifiers and RF filters. After ^{31}P spectra were obtained, a Siemens 20-channel ^1H volume head coil (inner diameter = 22.9 cm and length = 25.4 cm) was used to acquire ^1H MRS data.

A gradient echo based three-plane localizer was used to properly position the patient. Static magnetic (B_0) field shimming was performed using the Siemens 3D shim tool that includes full first- and second-order shimming. A voxel of $4 \times 4 \times 4 \text{ cm}^3$ located right above the ^{31}P coil was selected to perform B_0 shimming in the occipital lobe (see Figure 1). To evaluate shimming results, a point resolved spectroscopy (PRESS) sequence was used to acquire a water spectrum from the shim voxel.

^{31}P MRS

^{31}P spectra were acquired using a Siemens FID sequence with hard pulse length = 500 μs , SW = 5 kHz, number of data points = 1024, repetition time (T_R) = 2 s, and number of averages (NA) = 128. Fully relaxed ^{31}P spectra (T_R = 25 s and NA = 64) were also acquired for seven patients with CTD in addition to the scans with T_R = 2 s. No ^1H decoupling was applied. To avoid uneven distortion of ^{31}P signal intensities, no nuclear Overhauser enhancement irradiation was applied.

^1H MRS

B_0 field shimming for ^1H MRS was performed using a Siemens 3D shim tool in the same $4 \times 4 \times 4 \text{ cm}^3$ voxel as that selected for ^{31}P MRS. ^1H spectra were acquired with a PRESS sequence. The RF excitation pulse was a Sinc-Gauss pulse and the refocusing pulses were an optimized selective 180° pulse. T_R = 2 s, spectral width = 2 kHz, number of data points = 2048, NA = 128. The spectra were acquired from a single voxel of $2 \times 2 \times 2 \text{ cm}^3$ at the center of the shim voxel (see Figure 1). For each patient, ^1H MRS spectra were acquired at echo time (T_E) = 30 ms and 135 ms.

Postprocessing

The ^{31}P data were read into a customized program, written in IDL (Harris Geospatial Solutions, Boulder, CO, USA), to set the first two complex points of the FIDs with T_R = 2 s and the first three complex points of the FIDs with T_R = 25 s to zeroes, in order to reduce strong and broad baseline signals. The frequency offset of phosphocreatine (PCr) was set to zero ppm and the spectra were zero and first order phase corrected. The ^{31}P data were processed using jMRUI and fitted with the AMARES algorithm¹⁷ using prior spectral knowledge of ^{31}P metabolites.^{17,18} The ^{31}P basis set consisted of β -ATP, nicotinamide

adenine dinucleotide (NAD), α -ATP, γ -ATP, PCr, membrane phospholipids (MPs), glycerophosphocholine (GPC), glycerophosphoethanolamine (GPE), intracellular inorganic phosphate (P_i^{in}), extracellular inorganic phosphate (P_i^{ex}), phosphocholine (PC), phosphoethanolamine (PE) and uridine diphosphate glucose (UDPG). The ^1H spectra were fitted using LCModel 6.3–1J with the standard basis sets for the echo times of 30 ms and 135 ms.

Following earlier studies of cerebral creatine deficiencies, the metabolites measured by proton MRS were expressed as ratios to N-acetylaspartate (NAA).^{13,14} Total creatine, total choline (tCho), glutamate (Glu), myo-Inositol (mI) and lactate (Lac) were obtained from LCModel fitting of the ^1H MRS data acquired at $T_E = 30$ ms. Lactate was also extracted from the ^1H MRS data acquired at $T_E = 135$ ms, which is the optimal echo time for analyzing the lactate methyl doublet. ^{31}P -containing metabolites including PCr, ATP, P_i^{in} , P_i^{ex} , NAD were fitted using jMRUI from the ^{31}P MRS data acquired at $T_R = 2$ s ($n = 14$) and 25 s ($n = 7$). Uridine diphosphate glucose (UDPG) was extracted from ^{31}P spectra with $T_R = 25$ s. ^{31}P metabolite ratios such as total P_i ($tP_i = P_i^{\text{in}} + P_i^{\text{ex}}$)/PCr, PCr/ γ -ATP and UDPG/NAD were also calculated. Intracellular and extracellular pH values as indicated by the difference in chemical shift between inorganic phosphate and PCr were measured.

RESULTS

Metabolites by ^1H MRS

Typical water linewidth (full width at half maximum) from the 64 cm^3 cubical shim voxel was 11–13 Hz. Echoing previous findings using proton MRS,^{11,13,14} ^1H spectra from patients with CTD show that total creatine was markedly reduced as evidenced by the weak creatine signal at $T_E = 30$ ms (Figure 2a) and $T_E = 135$ ms (Figure 2b). The linewidth and signal-to-noise (SNR) of NAA were found to be 5.1 ± 0.5 Hz and 55 ± 5 , respectively. The average total creatine/NAA ratio was 0.12 ± 0.02 ($n = 14$; Table 1). In comparison, the total creatine/NAA ratio of healthy subjects reported in the literature is in the range of 0.65–0.81.^{19–23} The lactate/NAA ratio of patients with CTD measured at $T_E = 30$ and 135 ms was 0.042 ± 0.007 ($n = 14$) and 0.025 ± 0.014 ($n = 14$), respectively (Table 1). This is in line with the normal lactate level in the resting brain of healthy subjects found in other studies.^{19,22,23}

Ratios of the other major metabolites detected by proton MRS, the Glu/NAA, Cho/NAA, and mI/NAA, were found to be 0.92 ± 0.14 , 0.10 ± 0.01 and 0.51 ± 0.05 ($n = 14$), respectively, in patients with CTD, which are in agreement with the corresponding ratios of healthy subjects found in the literature (Table 1).

Metabolites and pH by ^{31}P MRS

Typical ^{31}P spectra acquired from a patient with CTD at $T_R = 2$ s and 25 s are shown in Figure 3a and 3b, respectively, these were scaled according to their number of signal averages. Resonances of PE, PC, P_i^{ex} , P_i^{in} , phosphodiester (PDE = GPE + GPC) + MP, PCr, NAD, and γ -, α -, and β -ATP were observed. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first report of *in vivo* measurement of brain ^{31}P spectra of patients with CTD. The key feature of the ^{31}P spectra is that the signal intensity of PCr was significantly reduced relative to healthy

subjects. The doublets of γ - and α -ATP, and the NAD, PE, PC, and P_i^{ex} signals were clearly resolved even without proton decoupling. The linewidth and SNR of PCr were found to be 5.4 ± 0.5 Hz and 24 ± 4 , respectively. The PCr/ γ -ATP, tP_i/γ -ATP, tP_i/PCr , NAD/ γ -ATP, UDPG/ γ -ATP, and UDPG/NAD ratios were summarized in Table 2 for $T_R = 2$ s and 25 s, respectively. The corresponding ratios of healthy subjects obtained from the literature were also given in Table 2.^{24–33}

UDPG is the immediate precursor of glycogen, the latter stores glucose for energy metabolism in brain.³⁴ The P_β peak of UDPG resonating at -9.83 ppm was detected in the spectrum with $T_R = 25$ s (Figure 3b). The UDPG signal was not clearly observed in the data acquired at $T_R = 2$ s likely due to the long T_1 of UDPG.²⁹ Figure 4 shows the result of summing the seven patients' spectra with $T_R = 25$ s, which reveals the P_β peak of UDPG at -9.83 ppm. The UDPG/NAD ratio of the patients with CTD was found to be 0.51 ± 0.16 ($n = 7$) at $T_R = 25$ s. Our result is comparable to the UDPG/NAD ratio of healthy volunteers (0.28–0.88) reported in the literature.^{29,31–33} A representative individual spectrum showing spectral fitting of UDPG by jMRUI is provided in the supplementary material.

From the in vivo ^{31}P spectra, the pH values of patients with CTD were also measured using the chemical shift difference between P_i and PCr. The intracellular pH of patients with CTD was found to be 7.06 ± 0.02 ($n = 14$), which is in line with previous measurements from healthy subjects and patients with cerebral creatine deficiencies due to enzyme defects.⁷ The extracellular pH was found to be 7.51 ± 0.06 ($n = 14$), which is also in agreement with normal brain values.

Oxidative phosphorylation

PCr is converted to creatine (Cr) by creatine kinase in response to increased energy demand.^{35–37} In patients with CTD, the tP_i/PCr ratio was found to be 2.7 ± 0.5 ($T_R = 2$ s, $n = 14$) and 2.8 ± 0.4 ($T_R = 25$ s, $n = 7$). In comparison, for healthy subjects, the tP_i/PCr ratio reported in the literature is 0.26–0.44. As shown in Table 2, there was also a similarly striking difference in PCr/ γ -ATP ratio between patients with CTD (from 0.22 ± 0.03 ($T_R = 2$ s, $n = 14$) to 0.26 ± 0.03 ($T_R = 25$ s, $n = 7$)) and healthy subjects (1.02–1.48).

DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the PCr signal in the ^{31}P spectra of patients with CTD is significantly reduced, which echoes the large reductions in total creatine observed in previous 1H MRS studies.^{11,13,14} Since CTD was first identified in 2001,¹¹ 1H MRS has been used to detect reductions in total creatine in CTD. Because CTD is a rare disease, studies performed to date have been limited to a few participants. This study measured ^{31}P and 1H MRS in 14 male patients with CTD, the largest cohort to date. This has allowed us to perform robust quantitative analyses of the observed metabolic changes and compare them to literature data.

Abnormal NAA levels have not been reported in patients with CTD. This is also supported by our proton MRS data which shows that the metabolite/NAA ratios are all within the normal range except for Cr/NAA (Table 1). With oral creatine supplementation, treatment of

patients with cerebral creatine deficiencies arising from enzymatic defects did not change NAA levels.^{7,9} The tCr/NAA ratio measured in the current study is in agreement with earlier proton MRS studies of CTD.¹³ As observed in the earlier studies of patients with CTD, the total creatine/NAA ratio in our patient group is also markedly below those of normal brain (Table 1).

Detection of a small amount of lactate using short T_E ^1H MRS ($T_E = 30$ ms) is known to be unreliable due to spectral overlapping by macromolecules and potential contamination by scalp lipid signals. We further acquired ^1H MRS spectra at $T_E = 135$ ms from patients with CTD to minimize macromolecular contribution to the spectra. At $T_E = 135$ ms, the signal of lactate methyl ^1H doublet at 1.3 ppm is inverted by evolution of its scalar coupling to the α -proton of lactate.³⁸ Overall, we detected no significant increase in lactate at either $T_E = 30$ ms or $T_E = 135$ ms (Table 1). As elevated lactate is a marker of increased glycolytic activities,³⁹ a lack of significant elevation of lactate in CTD suggests that brain energy production remains dominated by oxidative metabolism in the presence of severe shortage of creatine and PCr. This conclusion is corroborated by the observation of normal intracellular pH in the brain of patients with CTD, as increased lactate production is strongly correlated with tissue acidosis.

UDPG is well-known as the immediate precursor of glycogen. Although brain does not have a very significant reserve of glycogen, its importance in meeting the energy demand of neuronal activities has been clearly recognized.⁴⁰ UDPG was recently detected using ^{31}P MRS at 7 Tesla in the human brain *in vivo*.^{29,31–33} Figure 4 represents, to the best of our knowledge, the first *in vivo* detection of UDPG at 3 Tesla. As shown by Table 2, the UDPG level of the CTD patients is within the range of healthy subjects reported in the literature^{29,31–33} despite the large reduction in Cr and PCr.

The phospholipid signal, commonly referred to as MP, overlaps with phosphoesters at low magnetic fields.^{25, 41} Without proton decoupling, free phosphoesters are often overestimated at low magnetic fields due to difficulties in reliably modeling the asymmetrical MP signal without proton decoupling.²⁵ Therefore, the phosphomonoester (PME = PE + PC) and PDE results were not listed in Table 2. As the reported values of PME and PDE in normal brain span a very large range,^{25,26,42} it is difficult to detect any potential abnormalities in phosphoesters and corresponding cell membrane metabolism in patients with CTD at 3 Tesla.

Cr and PCr are considered essential in brain energy metabolism. The large amount of PCr in normal brain is thought to be necessary to act as an effective, mobilizable reservoir of high-energy phosphates to recycle ATP. Consistent with the overall reduction in total creatine, we found a largely reduced PCr signal in ^{31}P MRS spectra of patients with CTD. A large reduction in PCr was also observed in untreated patients with AGAT and GAMT deficiencies. With oral creatine supplementation (and diet restriction in the case of GAMT deficiency to reduce concomitant overproduction of guanidinoacetate), PCr gradually returns to normal or close to normal levels accompanied by significant clinical improvement.^{7–9} The treatment of AGAT and GAMT deficiencies requires lifelong ingestion of creatine as the human body normally consumes about 2–3 g of creatine per day, while most patients with

CTD are not effectively treated with creatine supplementation. Even with AGAT and GAMT deficiencies, there are concerns regarding the adverse effects associated with long-term creatine oral supplementation.⁴³ Therefore, exploration of alternative treatment strategies for cerebral creatine deficiencies may be necessary. A recent preclinical study of *SLC6A8* knockout mice has showed the benefit of using chemically modified creatine to facilitate creatine transport.⁴⁴ Proteomic studies of animal models of creatine transporter deficiency have also found structural abnormalities in mitochondria, supporting targeting mitochondrial function for CTD.⁴⁵ Both our ¹H and ³¹P MRS results indicate that under very low availability of creatine and PCr, oxidative phosphorylation remains the primary venue to support brain energy metabolism. The markedly reduced PCr is consistent with altered mitochondrial function. Therefore, enhancing mitochondrial function⁴⁶ may be beneficial for patients with CTD.

In summary, the lack of significant lactate elevation, normal intra- and extracellular pH values, and a large reduction in PCr observed in patients with CTD suggest that energy production under severely impaired creatine transport remains dominated by oxidative metabolism. As oral creatine supplementation lacks efficacy for treating CTD, our results point to alternative treatment strategies, for example, by enhancing brain mitochondrial function.

CONCLUSION

This study was the first to apply phosphorus MRS to CTD. As expected, both total creatine in ¹H spectra and PCr in ³¹P spectra were significantly reduced in patients with CTD. Total creatine reduction in ¹H MRS was consistent with previously published findings. The large reduction in PCr, normal pH and no significant elevation in lactate in CTD all point to domination by oxidative phosphorylation in brain energy metabolism despite the markedly reduced role played by creatine and PCr. The significant presence of UDPG found in patients with CTD here strongly suggests that the glycogenolytic pathway^{47,48} is highly active to support oxidative metabolism while the role of PCr is diminished. Since an effective treatment has not been found for CTD, our results suggest that exploring brain mitochondrial function augmentation by repurposing existing metabolic enhancers may be warranted.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AGAT arginine:glycine amidinotransferase

ATP	adenosine triphosphate
Cho	choline
CTD	creatine transporter deficiency
GAMT	guanidinoacetate methyltransferase
Glu	glutamate
GPC	glycerophosphocholine
GPE	glycerophosphoethanolamine
Lac	lactate
mI	myo-inositol
MP	membrane phospholipids
NAA	N-acetylaspartic acid
NAD	adenine dinucleotide
PC	phosphocholine
PCr	phosphocreatine
PDE	phosphodiester
PE	phosphoethanolamine
P_i^{ex}	extracellular inorganic phosphate
P_iⁱⁿ	intracellular inorganic phosphate
PME	phosphomonoester
PRESS	point resolved spectroscopy
SD	standard deviation
SNR	signal-to-noise
tP_i	total inorganic phosphate (P _i ⁱⁿ + P _i ^{ex})
UDPG	uridine diphosphate glucose

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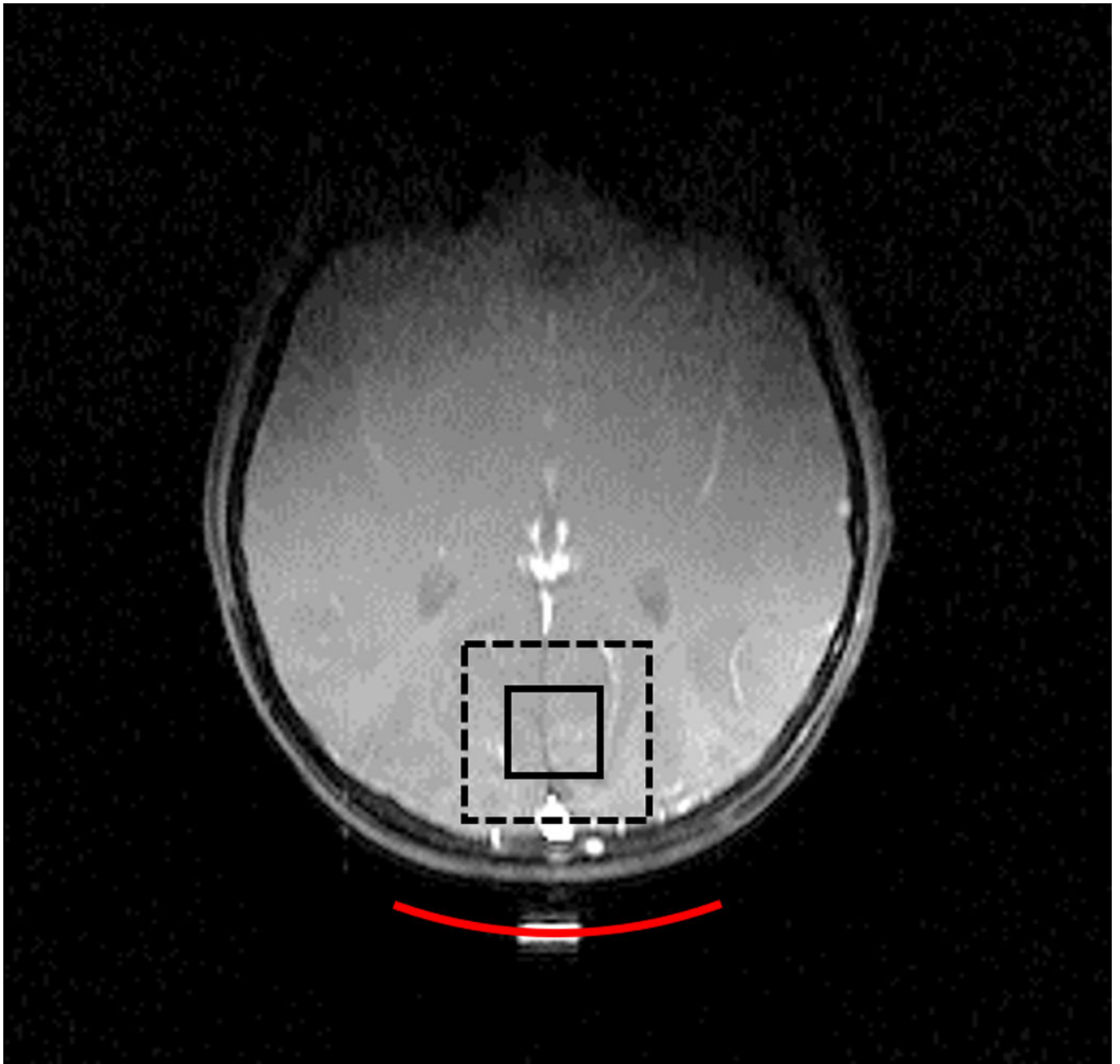


Figure 1. Axial image of brain with the $4 \times 4 \times 4 \text{ cm}^3$ shim voxel (dashed box), and the $2 \times 2 \times 2 \text{ cm}^3$ proton MRS voxel (white box). The position of the ^{31}P surface coil was depicted by a red arc.

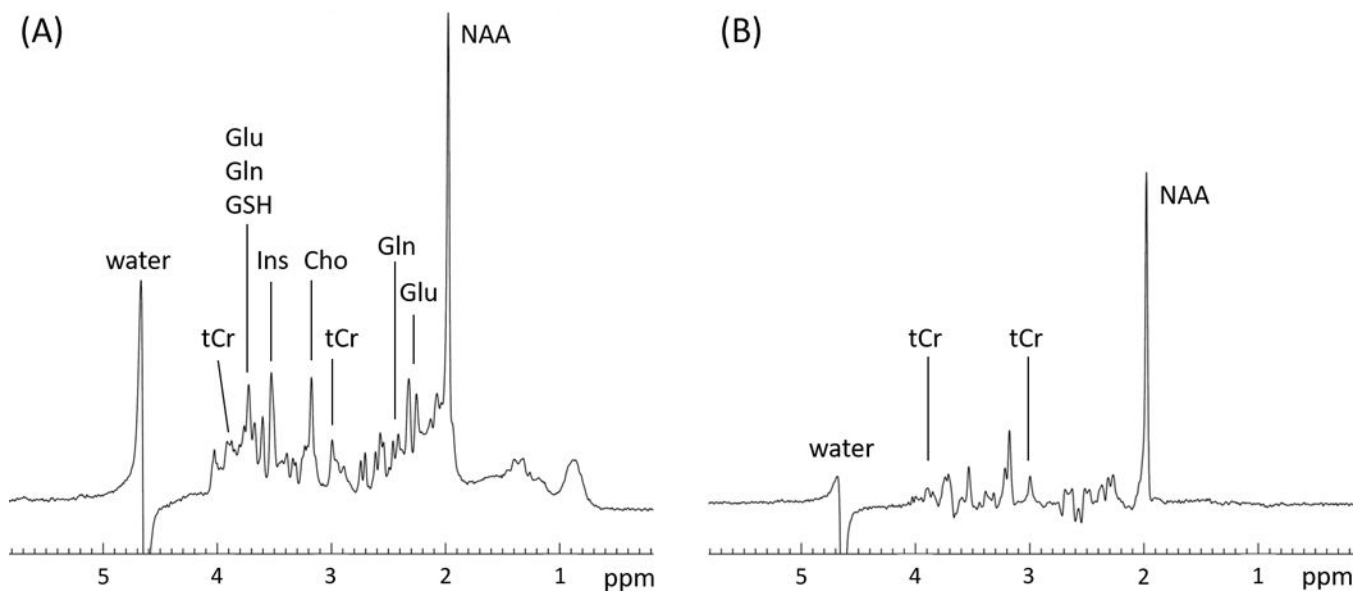


Figure 2. Representative proton spectra obtained from a CTD patient. A, PRESS ^1H spectrum of the CTD patient acquired at $T_E = 30$ ms; and B, PRESS ^1H spectrum at $T_E = 135$ ms. The voxel of $2 \times 2 \times 2$ cm 3 was placed in the occipital lobe. Repetition time (T_R) = 2 s. Number of averages (NA) = 128. Signal of total creatine was significantly reduced. There is no discernible lactate in the spectrum acquired at $T_E = 135$ ms. Gln, glutamine; GSH, glutathione

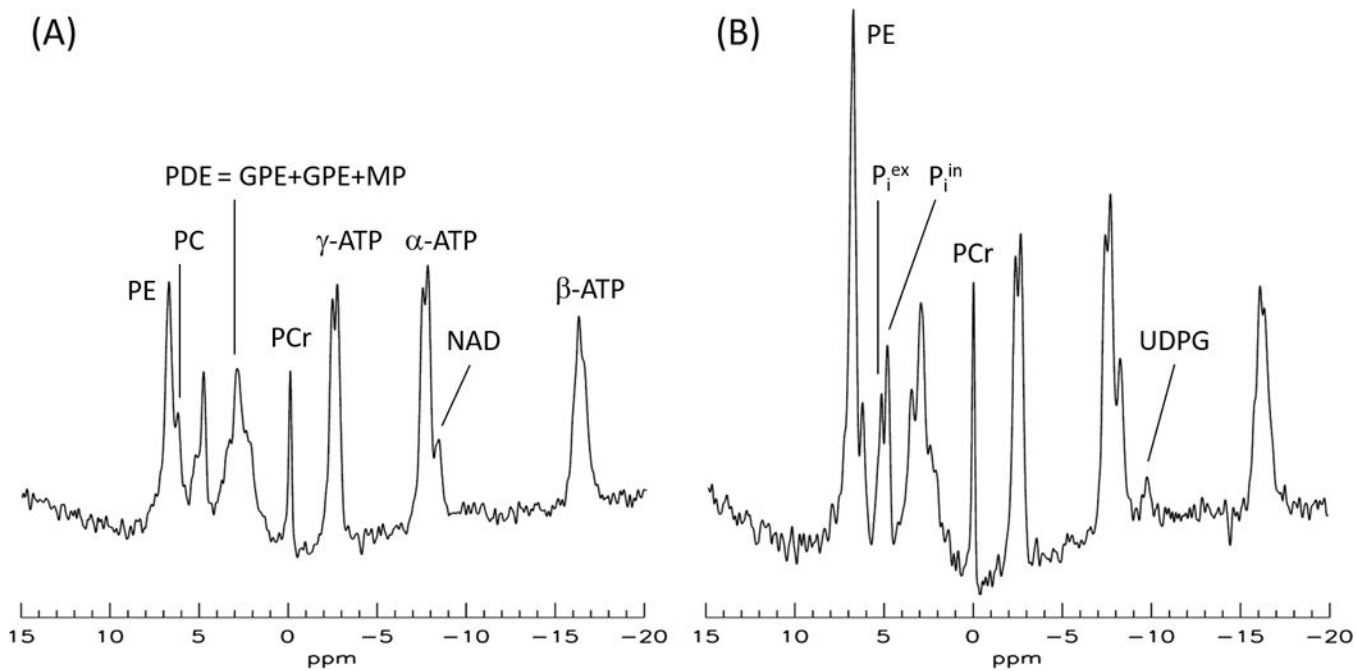


Figure 3. Representative ^{31}P spectra of CTD acquired at $T_R = 2$ s and $\text{NA} = 128$ (A), and $T_R = 25$ s and $\text{NA} = 64$ (B). PCr signal was substantially reduced. For the spectrum at $T_R = 25$ s, most of the signals were substantially increased as compared with that at $T_R = 2$ s. The UDPG P_β signal, which is known to reside at -9.83 ppm was also detected.

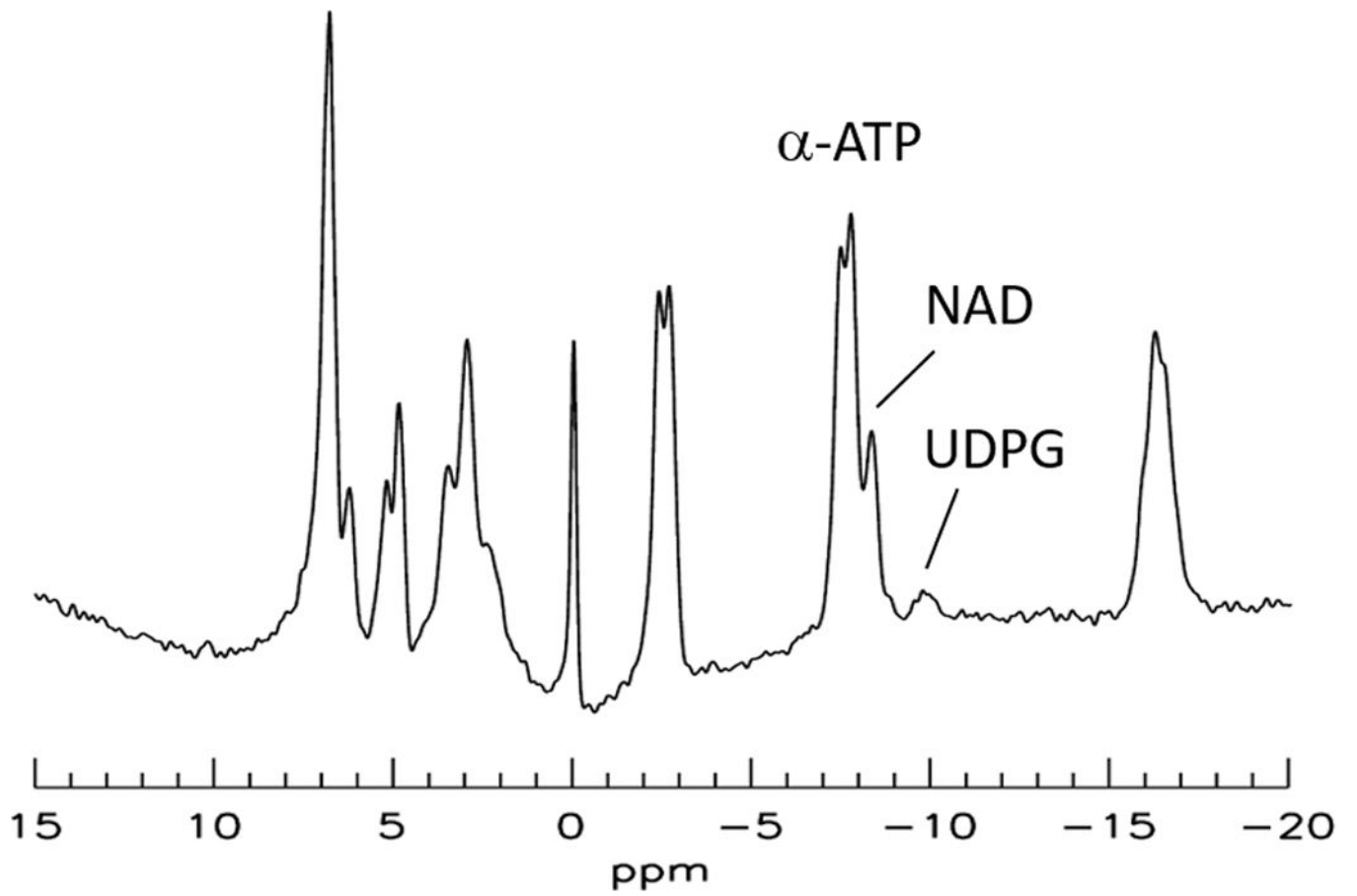


Figure 4.
Summed spectrum from seven patients with CTD ($T_R = 25$ s).

Table 1.Metabolite ratios of patients with CTD measured by ^1H MRS.

Metabolite ratios	Patients with CTD (n = 14)		Healthy subject results from literature	
	Mean	SD	Range	References
tCr/NAA ^a	0.12	0.02	0.65–0.81	19 – 23
Glu/NAA ^a	0.92	0.14	0.75–1.04	19 – 23
Cho/NAA ^a	0.10	0.01	0.08–0.13	19 – 23
mI/NAA ^a	0.51	0.05	0.40–0.57	19 – 23
Lac/NAA ^a	0.042	0.007	0.05–0.07	19, 22, 23
Lac/NAA ^b	0.025	0.014		

^a measured at $T_E = 30$ ms^b measured at $T_E = 135$ ms.

SD, standard deviation; tCr, total creatine; Lac, lactate.

Table 2.Metabolite ratios of patients with CTD measured by ^{31}P MRS

Metabolite ratios	T_R (s)	Patients with CTD		Healthy subject results from literature	
		n	Mean, SD	Range	References
PCr/ γ -ATP	2	14	0.22, 0.03	1.02–1.48	24 – 26 ^a
	25	7	0.26, 0.03	1.12–1.46	27 – 30 ^b
tP _i / γ -ATP	2	14	0.58, 0.07	0.36–0.52	24 – 26 ^a
	25	7	0.70, 0.13	0.35–0.54	27 – 30 ^b
tP _i /PCr	2	14	2.7, 0.5	0.35–0.36	24 – 26 ^a
	25	7	2.8, 0.4	0.26–0.4448	27 – 30 ^b
NAD/ γ -ATP	2	14	0.15, 0.02		
	25	7	0.25, 0.02	0.093–0.31	28 – 30 ^b
UDPG/ γ -ATP	25	7	0.13, 0.04		
UDPG/NAD	25	7	0.51, 0.16	0.28–0.88	30 ^b , 32 ^b , 28 ^b 31 ^b

^aMeasurements with T_R from 1.5 s to 2 s^bmeasurements with T_R from 12 s to 30 s.