The Effects of Estrogens and Phytoestrogens on the Metabolism
and Oxidation of Plasma Lipoproteins

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List of Figures ..................................................................................... I
List of Tables ..................................................................................... III
Abstract ............................................................................................. IV
Declaration ......................................................................................... VI
Acknowledgements ........................................................................... VII
Abbreviations ..................................................................................... VIII

Introduction .................................................................................... 1

1.1 Cardiovascular Disease and Lipids ............................................. 3
1.2 LDL Metabolism ......................................................................... 5
1.3 The Oxidation Hypothesis of Atherogenesis ................................. 7
  1.3.1 LDL oxidation ...................................................................... 7
  1.3.2 Antioxidants and LDL Oxidation, and their relation to CVD ... 11
1.4 The Pathogenesis of Atherosclerosis ........................................ 14
1.5 Lipoprotein(a) ............................................................................ 16
  1.5.1 Structure of lipoprotein(a) .................................................. 16
  1.5.2 Metabolism of Lp(a) .......................................................... 17
  1.5.3 Evidence for an association between Lp(a) and CVD .......... 18
  1.5.4 The atherogenicity of Lp(a) ............................................... 20
1.6 The Cardioprotective Effects of Estrogen .................................... 23
  1.6.1 Estrogen and Cardiovascular Disease ................................. 23
  1.6.2 Estrogen, lipids and CVD ................................................... 24
  1.6.3 Estrogenic regulation of LDL receptor activity ................... 28
1.6.4 Estrogens and LDL oxidation \textit{in vitro} ........................................ 32
1.6.5 Estrogens and LDL oxidation \textit{ex vivo} ........................................ 35
1.6.6 Other potential cardioprotective effects of estrogen ......................... 38
1.7 Phytoestrogens and their potential as cardioprotectants ....................... 39
1.8 Overall Aims .................................................................................. 42

\textbf{General Methods} ........................................................................ 43

2.1 Materials .................................................................................. 44
2.2 Plasma Isolation ..................................................................... 44
2.3 Lowry Protein Assay ................................................................. 45
2.4 Measurement of Plasma Lipids .................................................. 45
2.5 Lipoprotein (a) ELISA ................................................................. 46
2.6 Isolation of LDL ....................................................................... 47
2.7 LDL Oxidation .......................................................................... 48
2.8 Thiobarbituric acid reactive substances determination in LDL .......... 49
2.9 Cell Culture ............................................................................. 49
2.10 Preparation of LDL-Gold conjugates ....................................... 51
2.11 Cellular LDL-receptor activity .................................................. 52

\textbf{The effect of estrogens and phytoestrogens on regulation of LDL receptor activity \textit{in vitro}} .................................................................................... 53

3.1 Introduction ............................................................................. 54
3.2 Methods .................................................................................. 58
3.2.1 Cell culture ........................................................................... 58
3.2.2 Compounds to be tested ....................................................... 58
3.2.3 Determining the effect of estrogens and phytoestrogens on LDL receptor activity ......................................................... 58
3.2.4 Estimation of antioxidant activity as measured by LDL oxidation................................................. 59
3.2.5 Determination of 17-β-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase activity ................................................. 59
3.2.6 Statistical Analysis ......................................................................................................................... 60
3.3 Results ........................................................................................................................................ 60
3.3.1 Antioxidant regulation of LDL receptor activity ............................................................................. 60
3.3.2 Estrogens and the regulation of HepG2 cell LDL receptor activity............................................. 61
3.3.3 Phytoestrogens and LDL receptor activity .................................................................................. 61
3.3.4 The antioxidant activity of phytoestrogens ................................................................................. 62
3.3.5 17β-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase activity ............................................................................... 62
3.4 Discussion ....................................................................................................................................... 71

The effect of Hormone Replacement Therapy on Plasma Lipids, Lipoproteins and LDL oxidation ................................................................................................................................. 80

4.1 Introduction ....................................................................................................................................... 81
4.2 Methods ........................................................................................................................................ 84
4.2.1 Study Subjects and Design .......................................................................................................... 84
4.2.2 Mononuclear cell sample preparation .......................................................................................... 86
4.2.3 Measurement of Plasma Lipids .................................................................................................... 86
4.2.4 LDL Oxidation and TBARS measurement .................................................................................. 87
4.2.5 Determination of Plasma Antioxidants by HPLC ................................................................. 87
4.2.6 Determination of LDL Particle Size .......................................................................................... 88
4.2.7 Plasma Homocysteine Determination by HPLC ................................................................. 88
The Influence of Dietary Factors on Lipoprotein(a) .................................................................................. 113

5.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 114

5.2 Methods .................................................................................................................................... 117

5.2.1 Study subjects and design .................................................................................................... 117

5.3.2 Measurement of Lipoprotein(a) levels ............................................................................... 118

5.3.3 Isolation of Lipoprotein(a) for determination of apo(a) size ........................................ 118

5.2.4 Preparation of Apolipoprotein(a) size standards ............................................................ 119

5.2.5 Direct Determination of Apolipoprotein(a) size from plasma ...................................... 120

5.2.6 Measurement of urinary lignan excretion ........................................................................ 120

5.2.7 Statistical Analysis ............................................................................................................... 121

5.3 Results ...................................................................................................................................... 122

5.3.1 The effect of flaxseed supplementation ................................................................................ 122

5.3.2 The effect of n-3 fatty acid supplementation on Lp(a) levels ........................................ 122

5.3.3 The effect of dietary fatty acid composition on Lp(a) ..................................................... 123

5.4 Discussion .................................................................................................................................. 130
The effect of isoflavonoid phytoestrogens on plasma lipoproteins and LDL oxidation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.1</td>
<td>Study designs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.2</td>
<td>Laboratory Measurements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2.3</td>
<td>Statistical Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Results</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.1</td>
<td>Study A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3.2</td>
<td>Study B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Discussion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**General Discussion**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Estrogens, Phytoestrogens and LDL cholesterol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>Estrogens, Phytoestrogens and LDL oxidation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>Estrogens, Phytoestrogens and Lp(a)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix | 170 |
Bibliography | 172 |
Abstract

The aim of this thesis was to examine the effects of estrogens and phytoestrogens, on plasma lipoprotein levels and other risk factors for cardiovascular disease, including the oxidisability of low density lipoprotein (LDL).

Hepatic LDL receptor activity plays an important role in the regulation of plasma LDL levels. *In vitro* studies presented here in the human hepatoma cell line HepG2 revealed that of the three major human estrogens, only estradiol was able to upregulate LDL receptor activity at 50μM. The phytoestrogens, daidzein, biochanin A, formononetin and coumestrol were all able to upregulate LDL receptor activity *in vitro*. Comparison of the effects of the two lignan phytoestrogens suggested that estrogenicity is an important determinant of their LDL receptor activity regulation.

In an *in vivo* study of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in postmenopausal women, it was found that estrogen and progestin did not cause significant upregulation of mononuclear cell LDL receptor activity, despite there being noted a reduction in plasma LDL cholesterol. A reduction in the level of the atherogenic lipoprotein(a) was found following three months of HRT, however there was no significant effect of HRT on the parameters of *ex vivo* LDL oxidation.

Ground flaxseed (10g/d), which is rich in phytoestrogenic lignans and α-linolenic acid, was found to increase the levels of Lp(a) in men, while there was no effect noted in
women. This appears unlikely to be due to the fatty acid component of the flaxseed as we found no effect of either n-3 fatty acids or a high polyunsaturated fat diet on Lp(a) in other studies. While statistically significant, the reduction in Lp(a) was small and is unlikely to provide significant cardiovascular benefit. Further dose response studies are required to clarify the role of flaxseed in this reduction and to determine whether the Lp(a) lowering effect is maintained with longer-term supplementation. Further in vivo studies with isoflavonoid phytoestrogens found no effect of these compounds on Lp(a).

Despite the previously demonstrated ability of daidzein and genistein to protect LDL from oxidation in vitro, we found no effect of isoflavone supplementation on ex vivo LDL oxidation. Isolated soy-derived isoflavones did not elicit a cholesterol-lowering effect in post-menopausal women, at either moderate (75mg isoflavones/d) or high doses (150mg isoflavones/d). As whole soy protein consumption has been reported to have a cholesterol lowering effect at lower isoflavone levels, this suggests that there may be an additional component of soy which facilitates this effect.

Thus, while estrogen was shown to upregulate LDL receptor activity in vitro, it was not possible to demonstrate this effect in vivo, suggesting that postmenopausal hormone replacement may be affecting LDL receptor independent catabolism of LDL.

Phytoestrogens can upregulate in vitro LDL receptor activity, but when isolated soy isoflavones were given to postmenopausal women, no LDL cholesterol-lowering effect was noted. While animal studies suggest phytoestrogenic isoflavones play a role in the cholesterol-lowering effect of soy diets, it appears this effect is not independently mediated by the phytoestrogens.