

Comparative Physicochemical Analysis of Pulp Stone and Dentin

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Abstract

Introduction: Odontoblasts are responsible for the synthesis of dentin throughout the life of the tooth. Tooth pulp tissue may undergo a pathologic process of mineralization, resulting in formation of pulp stones. Although the prevalence of pulp stones in dental caries is significant, their development and histopathology are poorly understood, and their precise composition has never been established. The aim of the present study was to investigate the physicochemical properties of the mineralized tissues of teeth to elucidate the pathologic origin of pulp stones. **Methods:** Areas of carious and healthy dentin of 8 decayed teeth intended for extraction were analyzed and compared. In addition, 6 pulp stones were recovered from 5 teeth requiring root canal treatment. The samples were embedded in resin, sectioned, and observed by scanning electron microscopy and energy-dispersive spectroscopy. X-ray diffraction was performed to identify phases and crystallinity. X-ray fluorescence provided information on the elemental composition of the samples. **Results:** Pulp stones showed heterogeneous structure and chemical composition. X-ray diffraction revealed partially carbonated apatite. X-ray fluorescence identified P, Ca, Cu, Zn, and Sr within dentin and pulp stones. Zn and Cu concentrations were higher in pulp stones and carious dentin compared with healthy dentin. **Conclusions:** Pulpal cells produce unstructured apatitic mineralizations containing abnormally high Zn and Cu levels. (*J Endod* 2016;42:432-438)

Key Words

Carious dentin, copper, inflammation, pulpal calcification, zinc

Dental pulp and dentin act as a single physiological unit usually named the dentin-pulp complex. At the periphery of the dental pulp, dentinogenesis is the main biological activity of the odontoblasts, which are also mechanosensitive and immunocompetent cells (1). Odontoblasts are postmitotic cells but remain active throughout their lifetime. Odontoblasts secrete primary dentin during early tooth development, and this creates the first pattern of the tooth. When the tooth becomes functional, secondary dentinogenesis replaces primary dentinogenesis as the same odontoblasts secrete dentin at a lower rate (2).

Tertiary dentinogenesis is a third process mediated by odontoblasts and may be categorized into 2 types, reactionary and reparative. Reactionary dentinogenesis is the process whereby dentin is secreted in response to a local stimulus that reactivates the resting odontoblasts (3). Reparative dentinogenesis occurs when odontoblast cells die, thus initiating a complex regenerative process that allows the formation of reparative dentin after recruitment of progenitor cells, their differentiation into odontoblast-like cells, and activation of mineralized tissue secretion. These 2 types of pulp responses are quite well-described (4).

In addition to dentinogenesis in its varied forms, the occurrence of central pulpal calcifications has been reported in several clinical observational studies (5). Pulp stones are usually clinically identified on routine radiographic examination and in close association with deep restorations or repeated mild tooth injury over time. The frequency of occurrence of such calcifications is unclear. Reported rates vary from 4% (6) to 78% (7). It is commonly accepted that at least 50% of all teeth present 1 or more mineralized stones (8). Pulp stones have been observed in the dental pulp in all age groups, albeit with increased frequency in older age groups and insulted pulps (9).

The etiologic factors in pulp calcification formation are not well-understood. Several mechanisms have been proposed (8). Calcifications may develop around an area of damaged pulp tissue (eg, degenerating cells, blood thrombi, or collagen fibrils). Calcium phosphate crystals may also be deposited within the mineralizing cells. Calcifications replace the normal components of the pulp and might generate an inflammatory environment (8).

Different forms of pulp stones can be found: entrapped, adherent, or free within the pulp tissue (10). Their diameters vary from 50 μ m to several millimeters (11). These calcifications may fully seal the pulp chamber volume and thereby complicate endodontic treatment. The calcifications are described as true (resembling dentin), false (composed of localized masses of calcified material), or diffuse (often found

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.joen.2015.11.007>

near blood vessels) (12). Their mineral phase consists of typical carbonated hydroxyapatites (13); however, their precise composition has never been established (14).

More knowledge on the crystallographic structure and physico-chemical composition of pulp stones would contribute to a better understanding of their formation and the pathogenesis of pulp calcifications. In normal and ectopic mineralizations, the accuracy of physicochemical analysis has been demonstrated (15-18). The present study aimed to provide a detailed comparative description of the mineral phase that is in the pulpal calcification. To this end we used x-ray diffraction (XRD) and x-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectrometry and compared the mineral composition of pulp stones with their ultrastructure by using healthy (19, 20) and carious dentin (21) of the same teeth as references.

Materials and Methods

Collection of Samples

Healthy and Carious Dentin. Human freshly extracted permanent molars were obtained from patients requiring extractions after consulting in the emergency department (Hopital de la Pitie Salpetriere). Selected teeth were unrestored but presented carious diseases with either occlusal or proximal active lesions. A carious zone and a healthy zone (free from caries) were isolated from each specimen. Caries involving more than half of the crown dentin (on a periapical radiograph) were excluded from the study. Eight teeth were selected from 8 different patients (3 women and 5 men, aged 20-73 years).

Pulpal Calcifications. Pulp stones were retrieved from teeth scheduled for endodontic treatment. In total, 6 pulpal calcifications had sizes ranging from 1.2 mm to 2.5 mm (mean size, 1.7 mm \pm 0.4 mm). They were obtained from 5 patients (3 women and 2 men, aged 37-68 years).

Human sample collection complied with the Helsinki Declaration. According to French law on human research (Law 2007-1110, article 1211-2), tooth and pulpal sample collection (surgical waste) is allowed unless a patient objects; all patients were informed of the use of the samples and gave their consent.

Preparation of Samples. After collection, specimens were gently cleaned, and exogenous material was removed. Samples were rinsed with a phosphate-buffered saline solution at pH 7.4 (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) and fixed with 4% formaldehyde in the same phosphate-buffered saline buffer (Electron Microscopy Sciences, Hatfield, PA). Samples were then dehydrated in a graded series of ethanol solutions (75% for 2 days, 90% for 2 days, and 100% for 2 more days). Samples were embedded into light-cured acrylate-resin (Technovit 7200 VLC; Heraeus Kulzer, Hanau, Germany) or not (for surface characterization).

Blocks were cut into 150- μ m-thick slices by using a low-speed diamond saw (Isomet Low Speed Cutter; Buehler, Düsseldorf, Germany) under constant water irrigation. Surfaces of samples were polished by using increasing grit polisher disks.

Scanning Electron Microscopy

Each sample was sputter-coated with a 5-nm layer of platinum (SC7640 sputter coater; Quorum Technologies, Guelph, ON, Canada). A SUPRA 40 scanning electron microscope (Carl Zeiss, Oberkochen, Germany) was used to observe the microstructure. This field-effect gun microscope operates at 0.5-30 kV. Observations were made by using an Everhart-Thornley secondary electron (SE) detector at 5 keV. Polished section samples were observed with a backscattering electron (BSE) detector at 15 keV.

Energy-dispersive Spectroscopy

Sputter-coated samples were prepared. Imaging and microanalysis were performed on an SU-70 Hitachi SEM-FEG (Tokyo, Japan) and an X-Max 50 mm² Oxford EDX (Oxford Instruments, Concord, MA) detector.

X-ray Diffraction

Phase identification and crystallinity of the dental mineral part were evaluated by XRD. Experiments were carried out with a molybdenum rotating anode x-ray generator (Rigaku RU-H2R; Rigaku, Tokyo, Japan) coupled with multilayer W/Si optics delivering a focalized and monochromated ($\lambda = 0.711$ Å) x-ray beam of 800 μ m x 1 mm size onto the sample. X-ray images were recorded with a MAR345 (@MAR Research, Hamburg, Germany) detector placed at a distance of 200 mm from the sample. Acquisition time for each measurement was 30 minutes. Diffraction diagrams were obtained by processing radial intensity integration of each image, and then the positions of the diffraction peaks were compared with reference files from the Joint Committee on Powder Diffraction Standards database.

X-ray Fluorescence

XRF allows precise determination of the elemental composition of the sample. Experiments were carried out with a molybdenum rotating anode x-ray generator (Rigaku RU200) coupled with multilayer W/Si optics delivering a focalized and monochromated ($\lambda = 0.711$ Å) x-ray beam of 150 μ m x 150 μ m size. Fluorescence spectra were measured with an energy-dispersive detector (SDD detector @Ketec), with a time acquisition of 1500 seconds each. XRF analysis was performed with PyMca software (22).

Statistical Analysis

Statistical comparisons were made by using the Wilcoxon-Mann-Whitney test (GraphPad Prism, La Jolla, CA). Data are expressed as the mean \pm standard deviation.

Results

Representative scanning electron microscopy (SEM) images of the samples are shown in Figure 1, which were obtained by using the SE (Fig. 1A and B) and BSE modes (Fig. 1C-F). Pulp stones displayed a heterogeneous structure with smooth and regular surfaces (Fig. 1A). At high magnification, spherical calcifications of various sizes were identified on the surface, which could be elementary structures capable of aggregating and forming a stone core (Fig. 1B). In sections, the chemical structure was highly heterogeneous, showing alternating dark and light areas (Fig. 1C). The higher electron backscattering coefficient of the light areas indicates they are either composed of heavier chemical elements or more mineralized than the darker areas. Tubular areas were evident in regions sparse in pulp stones, suggesting the existence of tubular dentin-like matter (high magnification of blue box) (Fig. 1D). In other areas, concentric structures were formed by successive layers of material of different electron densities (Fig. 1E), showing a disorganized matrix pattern (high magnification of red box) (Fig. 1B). Localization of heavy elements was also performed by using energy-dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) (Fig. 1G and H). Zn (at energy of 8.63 keV) was detected in the core of pulp stones. The light areas previously mentioned did not show any significant signal of trace elements (eg, points 2, 3, and 6). The Pt peaks were induced by sputter-coating.

Two-dimensional XRD patterns for healthy dentin (Fig. 2A), carious dentin (Fig. 2B), and pulp stone (Fig. 2C) are illustrated in

Energy (keV)

Figure 1. SEM images (4 and B, SE; C-G, BSE). (4) Pulp stone (scale bar = 500 μm); (B) higher magnification of pulp stone surface (scale bar = 50 μm); (C) pulp stone section (scale bar = 500 μm); (D-F) higher magnifications of section detail: tubular structures in blue boxed area (D) (scale bar = 5 μm); concentric structures (E) (scale bar = 500 μm) and red boxed area (F) (scale bar = 10 μm); (G) pulp stone section (scale bar = 1 mm) with measured points by EDS; (//) EDS spectra of points of interest. Only points 1-4-5 provide significant Zn peak at 8.63 keV. Peaks at 8.40 keV and 9-45 keV are attributed to Pt (La-M) and Pt L_I, respectively.

Figure 2. Diffraction diagrams of the 3 samples showed similar Debye ring patterns. Phase identification was performed by comparison with reference data (Joint Committee on Powder Diffraction Standards 9-432) and led to the identification of partially carbonated apatite. XRD diagrams (Fig. W) were similar in the healthy dentin, carious dentin, and pulp stone samples, with only some minor differences in peak intensities and width. No texture could be noted, which indicates that no

preferential crystalline orientation exists in these samples. However, the shoulder marked with an asterisk (at $2\text{-}\theta = 26.78^\circ$) in the pulp stone sample suggests a modified crystallite morphology and variation along (202) the crystallographic direction. Each ring was quite intense and thin, indicative of high crystallinity. Diffuse halos at small angles can be seen, but they were not considered further because they are presumed to have been caused by diffusion of the acrylate resin.

Figure 2. Two-dimensional XRD patterns. (A) Healthy dentin, (B) carious dentin, (C) pulp stone. (D) Diffraction diagram obtained by radial intensity integration of the diffraction image of (A), (B), and (C). Shoulder (*asterisk*) is attributed to the (202) crystallographic direction.

XRF spectra identified P, Ca, Cu, Zn, and Sr within dentin and pulp stones (Fig. 3). The presence of Ca and P further supports that the mineral phase is a calcium phosphate, in accordance with the XRD results shown in Figure 2. As observed here, Sr is also commonly found in biological apatite as a substitute for Ca (23). Contributions of Zn and Cu (Fig. 3, inset) varied depending on the dentin site and status; they were higher in pulp stones and carious dentin than in healthy dentin.

Comparisons of mineral composition between samples were performed by calculating their respective elemental ratios (Fig. 4). The XRD experiments showed that the mineral phase in each sample was apatite. Ca was used as an internal reference element to compare the composition of the trace elements Cu and Zn. Each XRF spectrum was analyzed with PyMCA software to obtain the area under the fluorescence peak curve (AUC) of each identified element. AUCs of each element of interest were divided by the AUC value of Ca. Mean values of each ratio for all samples are shown with the standard deviation in Figure 4. Significantly higher levels of Zn were found in pulp stones and carious dentin compared with healthy dentin ($P < .01$). Moreover, the Zn level was significantly higher in pulp stones compared with carious dentin ($P < .01$). Whereas Cu was almost undetectable in healthy dentin ($6.7 \times 10^{-5} \pm 0.7 \times 10^{-5}$, limit of detectability), it

was significantly increased in both carious dentin and pulp stones ($P < .001$, $1.7 \times 10^{-3} \pm 2.6 \times 10^{-4}$ for carious dentin and $3.0 \times 10^{-3} \pm 1.7 \times 10^{-4}$ for pulp stone).

Discussion

Pulp stones arise as a pulp response to mild injury (9). The etiology of pulp calcifications has been attributed to longstanding local irritants such as caries, wasting diseases, pulp-capping procedures, healed fractures, tooth injury restorations, periodontal conditions, and orthodontic tooth movements. In young adults, pulp stone has been significantly associated with carious and/or restored teeth, suggesting that chronic pulp irritation might lead to pulp stone formation (24). The other reported causes include idiopathic factors, fluoride supplements, hypervitaminosis D, or a possible genetic predisposition (dentinogenesis imperfecta and dentinal dysplasia, which may be seen even in unerupted teeth, and aging) (25). With aging, the pulp decreases in size because of the deposition of secondary/tertiary dentin; this results in favorable conditions for development of pulpal calcifications (14). Nevertheless, the correlation between aging and pulpal calcifications remains unclear and is still under discussion (11). Of note, in the present study no direct relationship between aging and

Figure 3. XRF spectra of carious dentin, pulp stone, and sound dentin. Contributions of P (Ka = 2.013 keV), atmospheric Ar (Ka = 2.958 keV), Ca (Ka = 3.691 keV, K/5 = 4.012 keV), Cu (Ka = 8.047 keV), Zn (Ka = 8.638 keV, K/5 = 9.572 keV), and Sr (Ka = 14.165 keV). Note: peaks at 16.534 keV and 17.479 keV are Compton scattering and irradiation, respectively. *Inset*, a zoom between 7.5 keV and 10 keV, in logarithmic units.

pulp stone size and composition was noticed; however, further investigation is needed to answer this question.

Although epidemiologic studies have highlighted their high prevalence (7,9), basic knowledge of the reactionary process that gives rise to pulp stones is still missing. By using peripheral healthy and carious dentin as reference material, we undertook a physicochemical study of pulp stones to explore the clinical hypothesis that they are composed of a dentin-like substance secreted in response to repeated mild inflammation of the pulp.

Our XRD data indicate that apatitic structures are shared by pulp stones, carious dentin, and healthy dentin. The general shapes of the diffractograms prove the absence of significant crystallographic differences, as previously reported for dentin (19, 20). Some minor differences in width and intensity that we observed suggest morphologic differences consistent with the known subtle modifications of stoichiometry in imperfect bioapatites (18). Only ap-

atites of rather good crystallinity were present in pulp stones. This is different from ectopic calcifications, which contain additional mineral phases (16) and apatites of altered crystallinity (17). The shape and absence of texture of the Debye ring patterns we observed for pulp stones are similar to those of dentin and bone (20).

Our SEM investigations underlined the heterogeneity of pulpal mineralization. Whereas the organization of pulp stones and dentin was similar in restricted areas, supporting the previously proposed dentin-like nature of some pulp stones (10), more encompassing observations at lower magnification highlighted a true difference at the ultrastructural level. SEM imaging evidenced globules of various sizes, which were formed by fused concentric layers of variable composition. This observation suggests the occurrence of several sites for globule initiation, followed by their progressive enlargement and ending with their fusion and entrapment of dentin-like regions within large pulp stone territories. The concentric layers we observed by SEM-BSE are supposed to be related to mineral density and heterogeneity. EDS analysis on the brighter areas at the periphery of pulp stones showed no evidence of trace elements, thus supporting a higher mineral density in restricted regions of pulp stone instead of substitution of Ca by heavy elements. Detection of Zn by EDS in the darker zones led us to investigate its distribution in more detail. On XRF examination, both Zn and Cu were detected specifically in pulp stones and carious dentin. In this respect, whereas Zn presence has already been described in dentin (19, 20, 26) and bone (27), the combined presence of Zn and Cu is a new finding (21). Our XRF data, in line with the results of Harris et al (21) on caries, confirm the presence of Zn and Cu in decayed dentin and reveal for the first time an increase in the concentration of these elements into pulp stones compared with physiological dentin.

Zn and Cu are essential trace elements for living organisms; they take part in many aspects of metabolism.

The higher concentration of elements in mineralized tissues is usually attributed to their presence in 3 “compartments.” Zn may be found as a free element in solution (19, 20), it may be inserted within the

□ Sound dentin
○ Carious dentin
Pulp stone

Figure 4. Mean values of the area ratio of fluorescence peaks of Zn and Cu versus Ca for 6 samples. Areas were obtained by fitting with MyPCA software. Each ratio shows the relative proportion of trace element (normalized by Ca). Data are presented as the mean \pm standard deviation, ns, non-significant. **P< .01, ***P< .001.

apatite structure, or it may be coordinately bound to several organic molecules. Because our samples were dried before observation, the liquid phase was no longer present. Zn can substitute for no more than 5% of Ca in apatite crystal without inducing significant modifications to the lattice parameters (28), and its integration into apatite has been documented in various physiological or ectopic mineralization processes (26, 29, 30). Previous studies have described the presence of Zn bound to metalloenzymes in bone (27) and in dentin (19, 20, 26). In fine with those previous results, the occurrence of Zn and Cu in pulp stones might be secondary to the presence of various organic components such as metalloenzymes. Among the metalloenzymes potentially present in this tissue, the concomitant increase in both trace elements Cu and Zn could account for the presence of a Cu/Zn superoxide dismutase (SOD) in an inflammatory context.

Dental caries is a multifactorial infectious disease. It is a localized, destructive, and progressive infection of dentin. When bacteria reach the dentin, they penetrate into the tubules and invade the odontoblastic cell process by diffusion (31). The pulp-healing response to carious disease has been extensively investigated and is quite well-understood. However, pulpal responses that are not related to caries, but to additional chemical or mechanical aggression, require a new perspective. The odontoblasts are the first line of defense and are involved in the initiation, development, and maintenance of the pulp immune and inflammatory responses to dentin-invading pathogens (32).

Inflammation of the dental pulp is associated with the release of a wide variety of highly oxidative molecules known as reactive oxygen species (ROS) (33, 34). Host cells release these molecules during inflammatory processes (35). Excess production of ROS contributes to the pathogenesis of many diseases involving inflammation (36) and renders tissue susceptible to oxidative damage (37). To avoid excessive oxidative tissue damage caused by the cumulative load of ROS, their concentrations are controlled by various cellular defense mechanisms including antioxidant enzymes such as catalase, glutathione peroxidase, and SOD (35). More specifically, previous studies demonstrated an increase in the enzymatic activity of Cu/Zn SODs in inflamed pulp when compared with healthy pulp (33). Therefore, we hypothesize that the increased concentration of Cu and Zn we observed in the present study within the carious dentin and the pulp calcifications might reflect the increased antioxidative action of Cu/Zn SOD, which was probably secreted by odontoblasts or other local cells to control the oxidative state in the inflamed area.

We propose the following model of the pulpal mineralization mechanism. We suppose that pulp cells have the ability to mineralize at a basic level, but under physiological conditions this property would be inhibited. However, in an oxidative state promoted by repeated mild injury, odontoblasts (or other local cells) secrete Cu/Zn SOD and transmit a signal to the pulpal cells. In this context, pathophysiological interactions between odontoblasts and pulpal cells would release the inhibition of mineralization, resulting in calcification of pulp tissue.

Conclusion

In this study we characterized the ultrastructure of pulp stones, identified the apatite phase, and demonstrated the presence of heavy chemical elements in the mineralized tissue. Challenged pulpal cells produce unstructured, mineralized matrices evidenced by abnormally high levels of Zn and Cu. We hypothesize that the presence of high concentrations of Cu and Zn in pulp stones, which are not observed in physiological dentin, may be related to increased SOD enzyme activity, and that pulp stones appear in an inflammatory context. Under these conditions of oxidative stress, inhibition of

mineralization in pulp cells would be lifted, leading to calcification of the pulp.

Acknowledgments

Fleur Beres is financially supported with a CIFRE national grant (2014-0428). The SU-70 Hitachi SEM-FEG instrumentation was provided by the IMPCFR2482 (Institut des Matériaux de Paris Centre) and financially supported by the C'Nano projects of the Region Ile-de-France.

The authors deny any conflicts of interest related to this study.

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Basic Research—Biology

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