Seasonal Changes in Visual Field Sensitivity and Intraocular Pressure in the Ocular Hypertension Treatment Study

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Purpose: Longitudinal testing plays a key role in glaucoma management. Variability between visits hampers the ability to monitor progression. It has previously been shown that average intraocular pressure (IOP) exhibits seasonal fluctuations. This study examines whether visual field sensitivity also exhibits seasonal fluctuations and seeks to determine whether such fluctuations are correlated to seasonal IOP effects.

Design: Comparative case series.

Participants: A total of 33,873 visits by 1,636 participants enrolled in the Ocular Hypertension Treatment Study. Participants were split into 6 geographic zones according to the prevailing climate in their location.

Testing: At each visit, standard automated perimetry was conducted on each eye, and IOP was measured.

Main Outcome Measures: Mixed effects regression models were formed to look for sinusoidal periodic effects on the change in perimetric mean deviation since the last visit (ΔMD) and on IOP, both overall and within each zone.

Results: When all the data were included, a significant seasonal effect on ΔMD was found with magnitude 0.06 dB, peaking in February (P < 0.001). Five of the 6 geographic zones exhibited significant seasonal effects on ΔMD, peaking between January and April, with magnitudes ranging from 0.04 dB (P = 0.049) to 0.21 dB (P < 0.001). Zones with greater climactic variation showed larger seasonal effects on ΔMD. All 6 zones exhibited a seasonal effect on IOP, peaking in January or February, with magnitudes ranging from 0.14 to 0.39 mmHg (P ≤ 0.02 in all cases). However, there was no evidence of a significant association between the magnitudes or dates of peaks of the 2 seasonal effects.

Conclusions: The mean deviation was significantly higher in winter than in summer. There is no evidence of an association with seasonal IOP fluctuations. The cause of the seasonal effect on visual field sensitivity is unknown. These findings may help shed light on the glaucomatous disease process and aid efforts to reduce test–retest variability.

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*Group members available online in Appendix 1 (available at http://aaojournal.org).
could then reduce variability with the concomitant benefits outlined earlier. In addition, determination of the causes of any seasonal effects could help elucidate the glaucomatous disease process.

Materials and Methods

The baseline data and design of the OHTS have been described.\textsuperscript{17} All OHTS participants signed a statement of informed consent before study entry after having the risks and benefits of participation explained to them. The institutional review boards at all participating clinical sites approved their respective informed consent statements and procedures, and only deidentified data were used for this analysis.

All participants enrolled in the OHTS were required to have at least 2 reliable achromatic automated VFs (Humphrey Visual Field Analyzer Pattern 30-2, Carl Zeiss Meditec, Inc., Dublin, CA) that were within normal limits during the qualifying period. Reliable fields were defined as having false-positives, false-negatives, and fixation losses all \(<33\%\) when testing was performed using the full threshold algorithm; or false-positives \(<15\%\) and false-negatives and fixation losses \(<33\%\) when testing was performed using the Swedish interactive threshold algorithm (SITA). The OHTS analysis dataset available for this study contained all VF tests, IOP measurements, and end point determinations in the OHTS database as of March 2009. Testing was carried out approximately once every 6 months for each participant. Follow-up VF tests that did not meet the reliability criteria above were excluded.\textsuperscript{18,19}

For each visit, the following information was taken from the database: deidentified patient identification, site identification, month of testing, mean deviation (MD) of each eye, MD since the last visit (ΔMD) for each eye, and IOP for each eye.

For the primary analysis, ΔMD (the change in sensitivity since the participant’s visit \(~6\) months previously) was analyzed instead of MD. This removes the confounding effect that some participants had greater amounts of damage than others. Note that although the reliability criteria for full threshold and SITA testing differed, it was assumed that MD values from the 2 algorithms (SITA and full threshold) were equivalent.\textsuperscript{18}

The study sites were split into 6 geographic zones of the United States according to prevailing climate: Atlantic seaboard (including the region from New York to Washington, DC), central (the southern portion of the Midwest), north (the northern portion of the Midwest, including the Great Lakes region), Pacific Northwest (Oregon and Washington states), southeast (extending from Florida to Texas), and west (including California). Within each of these zones, random effects models were formed to look for seasonal effects on each of ΔMD and IOP, assuming a sinusoidal pattern through the year. Specifically, the model used was as follows: $\Delta$MD = intercept + $\alpha$ * cos($2 \pi$ * (month-offset)/12) + $e$, where month was coded as 1 (representing January) to 12 (representing December). The residuals $e$ were minimized to determine the optimal values of offset (giving the month at which any seasonal trend in $\Delta$MD reaches its maximum) and $\alpha$ (giving the magnitude of any seasonal effect). A finding that $\alpha$ was significantly different from zero was taken as evidence for a seasonal effect on $\Delta$MD. Similar models were created for IOP.

Because this is a large retrospective analysis, the dataset is by nature heterogeneous. It contains participants with various confounding conditions, such as systemic diseases and medications, differing refractive status, and differing lens transparencies. To ensure that these factors did not affect the conclusions, the main analysis was repeated and restricted to participants aged younger than 60 years at study entry because these should comprise a more homogeneous cohort with fewer confounding pathologies.

Results

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the dataset within each geographic zone. In total, there were 1636 participants. Some participants moved to a different location during the study period and so are included in the datasets for more than 1 zone. However, each zone was analyzed separately, including only those visits that took place when the participant was within that zone, and so any movement of participants during the study should not affect the zonal results.

When all the data were included, a significant seasonal effect on $\Delta$MD was found. This had magnitude 0.06 dB (given in the equation shown in the “Materials and Methods” section), peaking in February, with $P < 0.001$. Table 2 shows the magnitude of seasonal effect on $\Delta$MD for each zone, its peak (the date at which

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zone</th>
<th>Magnitude of Seasonal Effect (dB)</th>
<th>Date of Peak</th>
<th>Statistical Significance of Magnitude (P)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atlantic</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>February 18</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>March 12</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>February 1</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Northwest</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>April 29</td>
<td>0.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>July 10</td>
<td>0.364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>February 4</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$dB$ = decibels.
it reaches its maximum, from offset in the equation in the "Materials and Methods" section, and its significance level. A significant seasonal effect was found for ΔMD for all zones except the southeast, reaching a peak sometime between January and April. The seasonal effect was most pronounced in the north zone, where MDs in the winter were 0.21 dB higher than the same participant’s MD at their previous visit. Figure 1 shows the mean ΔMD in each month, together with the 95% confidence interval for this mean, and the fitted sinusoidal seasonal effect whenever this was significant with $P < 0.05$. Note that the difference between the maximum and minimum values of these fitted sinusoidal curves will be double the amplitudes reported in Table 2. When the analysis was performed using MD instead of ΔMD as the outcome variable, the results were almost identical (not shown).

In this study, ΔMD was used as the outcome variable, rather than MD. This removes one source of variability and thus makes the seasonal effect more apparent because it removes artefactual differences in the populations tested each month. For example, the participants tested in August in the Pacific Northwest zone had an average MD of 0.25 dB, higher than those tested in July (0.01 dB) or September (−0.13 dB). Significant seasonal effects were still found in the same 5 zones when using MD as the outcome variable. A further alternative analysis was performed that adjusted for disease progression, adjusting ΔMD by the amount of change that would be expected over that time period on the basis of the trend of MD over time. Again, this did not appreciably change the results; the magnitude of the seasonal effect was within 0.03 dB per year of the values reported in Table 2 in all cases.

To ensure that heterogeneity of the dataset did not materially affect the results, the analysis was repeated using MD as the outcome variable, but restricting the analysis to the 940 participants aged younger than 60 years at study entry. As seen in Table 3, the seasonal effect was essentially unchanged in this subset of the dataset.

A significant seasonal effect on IOP was found when using all participants and the change in mean deviation since the previous visit, restricted to participants aged younger than 60 years at study entry. As seen in Table 3, the seasonal effect was essentially unchanged in this subset of the dataset. It is shown by a red line whenever a significant seasonal effect was found for all 6 zones, reaching a peak in January or February. However, there was no evidence of any causal relation between the seasonal peaks in IOP and VF sensitivity. Between the different geographic zones, a greater amplitude of the seasonal effect on IOP did not correlate with a greater amplitude of the effect on ΔMD; the Spearman correlation among these 6 pairs of amplitudes was −0.31, not significant with $P = 0.564$. The correlation between the dates of their peaks (under the assumption that all the peaks fall within a single calendar year) was 0.14, also not significant with $P = 0.803$. When IOP was used as an additional predictor of ΔMD in the random effects model, the seasonal effect was still significant in all 5 of the zones for which a significant effect had previously been detected: $P = 0.038$ for the Atlantic zone; $P = 0.001$ for the Pacific Northwest zone; and $P < 0.001$ for each of the central, north, and west zones.

As shown in Table 5, regional differences in the magnitude of the seasonal effect on sensitivity correspond to some extent with regional differences in the magnitude of climatic seasonal variations. The northern zone has the largest climatic variations through the year, with mean temperatures ranging from approximately 30°C in summer to below freezing in winter and from approximately 10 hours of sunlight per day in summer to less than 4 hours per day in winter. This is also the zone that showed the largest seasonal effect on VF sensitivity. By contrast, the southeast zone has less extreme climatic variation throughout the year and showed smaller seasonal effects on sensitivity.

**Discussion**

These results agree with previous studies that found a seasonal effect on IOP. As in those studies, we found that IOP was higher during the northern winter than the summer, reaching a peak in January or February. The magnitude of February ($P < 0.001$). Table 4 and Figure 2 show the seasonal effects for IOP within each geographic zone. A significant seasonal effect was found for all 6 zones, reaching a peak in January or February. However, there was no evidence of any causal relation between the seasonal peaks in IOP and VF sensitivity. Between the different geographic zones, a greater amplitude of the seasonal effect on IOP did not correlate with a greater amplitude of the effect on ΔMD; the Spearman correlation among these 6 pairs of amplitudes was −0.31, not significant with $P = 0.564$. The correlation between the dates of their peaks (under the assumption that all the peaks fall within a single calendar year) was 0.14, also not significant with $P = 0.803$. When IOP was used as an additional predictor of ΔMD in the random effects model, the seasonal effect was still significant in all 5 of the zones for which a significant effect had previously been detected: $P = 0.038$ for the Atlantic zone; $P = 0.001$ for the Pacific Northwest zone; and $P < 0.001$ for each of the central, north, and west zones.

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Indeed, when only data from the observation period for the entire study period (for those participants) secreted by the pituitary gland, resulting in an increase in the secretion of progesterone and estrogen, which have been hypothesized to affect the pineal gland, which is affected by the daily total amount of light entering the eyes. Melatonin (or one of the other similar substances) secreted by the pineal gland affects the anterior pituitary gland, resulting in an increase in the secretion of progesterone and estrogen, which have been reported to reduce IOP values by increasing outflow. By this hypothesis, during the summer months increased light levels reduce the amount secreted from the pineal gland, causing IOP to be reduced.

A similar seasonal effect on sensitivity was recently described by Junoy Montolio et al. Their study relied on less frequent testing and a smaller sample size, with all subjects being from a single clinic in Groningen in The Netherlands. Our study goes further than theirs. The size of the OHTS dataset allows us to give a better characterization of the seasonal effect on a monthly basis, whereas their split test dates into 1 of 4 seasons. Our study is also enhanced by the regularity of testing within the OHTS. Subjects in their study were initially tested annually, which would not allow a seasonal effect to become apparent. More frequent testing occurred only if requested by their physician, normally because of suspected progression. In addition, the different test sites used in the OHTS revealed geographic differences in the magnitude of the seasonal effect (which was not possible in their study). It is certainly interesting to see that Junoy Montolio et al found a seasonal effect similar to that in our study, with a peak occurring at the same time of year and of similar magnitude (they found that sensitivities were 0.2 dB lower in summer than in the winter/spring).

Accounting for this seasonal effect could reduce variability, resulting in earlier and more accurate detection of progression. The maximum amplitude of the seasonal effect on sensitivity was seen in the north region, where an MD measured in January would be, on average, 0.21 dB higher than the same patient’s MD in July (the amplitude of the sinusoidal effect shown in Table 2). A total of 10 000 simulated patients were created with a rate of change of MD of −0.26 dB/year (the mean for participants reaching a primary open-angle glaucoma end point in this dataset), undergoing twice annual testing as in the OHTS, with the MD starting at 0 dB and having a standard deviation of 0.32 dB (based on the pointwise variability having a standard deviation of 2.32 dB when the sensitivity is 30 dB). To detect progression (using a criterion of the rate of change <−0.1 dB/year and significant at the P < 5% level) took on average 7.5 simulated fields. Adding a seasonal effect equal to that observed in the north region increased this time to detect change to 8.0 simulated fields, a significant increase with P < 0.001 (Wilcoxon matched-pairs nonparametric test). The seasonal effect increased the time to detect change by at least 1 field (i.e., by at least 6 months) in 4021 of the 10 000 simulated series. This simulation represents a worst-case scenario, using the maximum seasonal effect, and so it is likely that accounting for seasonal effects would make a smaller clinical difference than this. However, it is indicative of the potential benefits, and even a smaller effect than this could significantly affect clinical trials.

The effect sizes reported are small (although it could be hypothesized that the higher IOPs observed in winter would cause more rapid deterioration in MD, and so the magnitude of the true seasonal effect on MD is being underestimated because of this confound). Therefore, the long-term significance of these findings will depend on the underlying cause. This cause is presently unknown, and suggestions are speculative. Plausible causes fall into 2 broad categories: a characteristic of perimetry and the testing process or a characteristic of glaucomatous progression. The former category could be considered as a factor contributing to perimetric variability. One example of a seasonal difference that could, in theory, affect sensitivity would be changes in mood. However, it would be expected...
that a better mood would generally occur in the summer months in most regions of the United States, causing the participant to be more alert and thus causing the measured sensitivity to be higher, which is the opposite of the effect found in this study. The level of ambient light outside could affect the level of light adaptation, reducing sensitivity in the summer months when the eye is adapted to a higher light intensity. However, adaptation levels are assumed to have stabilized within a short time of entering the clinical site or testing room, in which case this would only affect sensitivity if testing were performed within a few minutes of entering the building (on the assumption that light levels inside the building are approximately constant year-round). It is also possible that sensitivity is decreased by increased recent exposure to light during the summer, as has been suggested for scotopic sensitivity. Whatever the exact cause, if the seasonal effect is indeed solely a characteristic of the testing, taking account of it could help reduce variability in longitudinal series of VFs, aiding both clinical care and clinical trials.

It is possible that this study could have even more important consequences by revealing important information about the disease process. Our results are consistent with glaucoma progressing more rapidly during the summer months, even though IOP is lower. It has been suggested that increased light levels could increase apoptosis of retinal ganglion cells, especially when those cells are already stressed (as in ocular hypertension/glaucoma). Even though the total amount of time spent in light will be similar throughout the year, sunlight is considerably more intense than artificial lighting. Therefore, light of higher intensity enters the eyes during the summer, potentially increasing the likelihood of apoptosis, resulting in more rapid progression. As a alternative, a mechanism could be proposed in which the increased temperature during the summer months causes more rapid progression in damaged retinal ganglion cells, although this seems unlikely because core body temperature remains approximately constant year-round.

Regional differences in the seasonal effect could provide clues as to the cause of the phenomenon. As shown in Table 5, larger seasonal effects on sensitivity were observed in the geographic zones with larger climactic seasonal variation. In particular, the northern zone has a continental climate, being further from the ocean than the other testing sites, with very cold winters and warm summers. Correspondingly, sites in this zone showed the largest seasonal effect on \( \Delta \text{MD} \). By contrast, the southeast zone has a subtropical climate, without the harsh winters experienced further north. Here, outdoor activities in the summer are limited by heat and humidity, and so there may be less seasonal difference in the number of hours per day spent in sunshine. Correspondingly, this is the sole geographic zone for which a significant seasonal effect on sensitivity was not detected. It can also be seen from Tables 2 and 4 that the peak of sensitivity in the Pacific Northwest zone occurred later in the year than in any of the other 4 zones where a significant seasonal effect was detected. This corresponds with the climate in the Pacific Northwest, where the warmest and sunniest weather typically occurs from the start of July to the end of September (with cloudier weather the rest of the year), whereas most of the rest of the United States has its warmest weather from June to August.

Only the month of testing was available in the dataset used for this analysis, rather than the exact date, in line with accepted methods for deidentifying data. Therefore, the analysis assumed that all testing happened at the halfway point of the month (e.g., January 16). This means that the dates shown for the peak of the sinusoidal seasonal effect in Tables 2 and 4 are given to a greater precision than is justified by the input data. Although this greater precision is informative with regard to comparisons between zones, the exact dates should be treated with caution.

To properly assess the magnitude of the seasonal effect, some parameterization of that effect is necessary. The fits presented in Figures 1 and 2 and summarized in Tables 2 to 4, assume that the seasonal effect is sinusoidal. However, there is no evidence that this functional form is optimal. The fact that a significant effect can still be detected using a potentially nonoptimal parameterization could be considered evidence of the robustness of the main conclusions. Without assuming such a parameterization, a small seasonal effect is still apparent. The average MD was higher in the first 3 months of the year than in the months July to September in all 6 geographic zones, although this was only significant in the northern region (difference 0.19 dB; \( P = 0.006 \) using a \( t \) test).

Because this analysis was purely retrospective, data collection was not optimal for assessing the presence of a seasonal effect. Subjects were tested twice annually and so were generally tested every autumn and spring or every summer and winter, rather than in all 4 seasons. The subjects varied in many factors that affect sensitivity measures by VF testing and so could affect the magnitude of a seasonal effect. These factors include age, ethnic origin, systemic diseases and medications, refractive status, lens transparency, and topical medication (approximately half of the subjects commenced IOP-lowering treatment during the study). These factors should not vary consistently and periodically between different times of year, and so they are not causing the seasonal effect but may affect its magnitude. With all these sources of intersubject variability in mind, it is impressive that a significant seasonal effect was still detectable and that it is relatively consistent (in terms of the timing of the peak) across different geographically based subsets of the dataset. A prospective study designed specifically to examine the issue of seasonality, using more regular testing, could be desirable to obtain improved estimates of the magnitude of the seasonal effect in different subpopulations and so provide useful information regarding factors (e.g., disease severity) that affect this magnitude.

In conclusion, visual field sensitivity was found to be significantly higher in winter than in summer. The magnitude of this effect on sensitivity was greater in regions of the United States where seasonal variations in climate were greater. Although IOP also exhibits seasonal variations, there was no evidence of a causal relation between the two. The cause of this seasonal effect on VF sensitivity requires further investigation because it may provide a means to reduce variability or learn more about the pathophysiology of glaucoma.


Footnotes and Financial Disclosures

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