Dietary nitrate, nitric oxide and cardiovascular health

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ABSTRACT

Emerging evidence strongly suggests that dietary nitrate, derived in the diet primarily from vegetables, could contribute to cardiovascular health via effects on nitric oxide (NO) status. NO plays an essential role in cardiovascular health. It is produced via the classical L-arginine-NO-synthase pathway and the recently discovered enterosalivary nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway. The discovery of this alternate pathway has highlighted dietary nitrate as a candidate for the
cardioprotective effect of a diet rich in fruit and vegetables. Clinical trials with dietary nitrate have observed improvements in blood pressure, endothelial function, ischaemia-reperfusion injury, arterial stiffness, platelet function, and exercise performance with a concomitant augmentation of markers of NO status. While these results are indicative of cardiovascular benefits with dietary nitrate intake, there is still a lingering concern about nitrate in relation to methaemoglobinaemia, cancer and cardiovascular disease. It is the purpose of this review to present an overview of NO and its critical role in cardiovascular health; to detail the observed vascular benefits of dietary nitrate intake through effects on NO status as well as to discuss the controversy surrounding the possible toxic effects of nitrate.

**Keywords:** vegetables, nutrition, nutrients, L-arginine-NO-synthase pathway, nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway
INTRODUCTION

“We are what we eat”, Hippocrates’ famous maxim, is now more pertinent than ever. Evidence is mounting that diet is a critical determinant of health status. Epidemiological studies (Bazzano et al., 2003; Ness and Powles, 1997; van't Veer et al., 2000) indicate that increased fruit and vegetable intake reduces the incidence of cardiovascular disease. With cardiovascular disease being the leading cause of death in industrialized countries, there is considerable interest in identifying optimal diets and their exact components that can prevent or reduce its severity.

Since the discovery of nitric oxide (NO) and the fundamental role it plays in endothelial function and cardiovascular health, components of a cardioprotective diet that could mediate their effect through NO pathways have come under the spotlight. One such candidate is dietary nitrate. It is the aim of this review to provide an overview of NO, focusing on the vasculature, and to review the controversial role that dietary nitrate, through effects on NO status, may play in cardiovascular health. We address the evidence that dietary nitrate provides an important contribution to the health benefits of a vegetable-rich diet.

NITRIC OXIDE

Historical Perspective: From NOxious to NOtable

Since its discovery in 1772 as “nitrous air”, the understanding of the importance of NO has undergone a radical shift. What was once considered a noxious environmental pollutant is now regarded a key molecule in biological processes. Science magazine awarded NO the title of “Molecule of the year” in 1992 (Koshland, 1992) and the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine
in 1998 was awarded to the researchers involved in its discovery: Furchgott, Ignarro and Murad. From its non-illustrious beginnings it is now recognised that NO plays a critical role in the biological processes of the heart and blood vessels, neurotransmission and non-specific host defence. Indeed, there is hardly a disease where altered NO homeostasis is not implicated in some way.

**Isoforms of the nitric oxide synthases (NOS)**

NO is produced from the conversion of the amino acid L-arginine to L-citrulline by one of a family of enzymes, the nitric oxide synthases (NOS) (Palmer et al., 1988). Three distinct NOS isoforms have been identified (Alderton et al., 2001) and are officially termed according to the order of their isolation and characterisation. NOS I is more commonly known as neuronal NOS (nNOS), NOS II as inducible NOS (iNOS) and NOS III as endothelial NOS (eNOS). These isoforms have distinct characteristics determined by their site of synthesis, pattern of expression and Ca\(^{2+}\) dependency (Table 1). They share between 50 and 60% sequence homology (Lamas et al., 1992), have similar enzymatic mechanisms which require five cofactors and are all calmodulin dependent (Bredt, 1999). The action of the NO generated by these isoforms is dependent on both its location and its concentration.

**Two pathways to NO**

*L-arginine NO synthase pathway*

The L-arginine NO synthase pathway is well defined and has been extensively reviewed (Alderton et al., 2001; Bredt, 1999, 2003; Jin and Loscalzo, 2010; Liu and Huang, 2008). In the
endothelium, eNOS (NOS III) synthesis is increased in response to biochemical stimuli (thrombin, adenosine diphosphate (ADP), serotonin, acetylcholine and bradykinin) as well as mechanical stimuli such as shear stress and cyclic strain (Figure 1). These stimuli cause the transient release of Ca\(^{2+}\) from intracellular stores. Ca\(^{2+}\) binds to calmodulin to form a Ca\(^{2+}\)-calmodulin complex which activates eNOS (Jin and Loscalzo, 2010). The enzymatic action of eNOS is highly regulated by cofactors such as flavin mononucleotide, flavin adenine dinucleotide, tetrahydrobiopterin (BH\(_4\)), calmodulin and heme (Marletta, 1994). eNOS catalyses the synthesis of NO by the 5-electron oxidation of the terminal guanidine nitrogen atom of L-arginine with L-citrulline produced as a by-product. Nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate (NADPH) and molecular oxygen are cosubstrates. Once synthesised NO, which has a very short half-life, rapidly diffuses across the endothelial cell membrane where it activates guanylate cyclase in vascular smooth muscle cells by binding to its heme moiety, causing a rise in cGMP concentrations. cGMP acts as a second messenger for many important cellular processes, including smooth muscle relaxation. Indeed, cGMP, through its principal mediator PKG, is responsible for many of the biological effects of NO (Munzel et al., 2005). From experiments with L-N monomethyl arginine (LNMMA), an inhibitor of NOS, it is now clear that NO is continually being synthesized in the endothelium (Vallance et al., 1989).

**Nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway**

Since the discovery of the L-arginine NO synthase pathway, an alternate pathway for NO production, involving nitrate and nitrite, has been described (Figure 2) (Govoni et al., 2008; Petersson et al., 2009; Webb et al., 2008). Nitrate and nitrite have an interesting history in the
literature. They were initially considered environmental pollutants, potential carcinogens and endogenous inert end products of nitric oxide metabolism; however it is now apparent that nitrate and nitrite are important molecules in cardiovascular health. Through the endogenous nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway they have the potential to be converted into NO and form a large and abundant storage pool for this molecule in blood and tissues (Larsen et al., 2006; Lundberg and Govoni, 2004).

There are two major sources of nitrate and nitrite in the body: end products of the L-arginine-NO synthase pathway and the diet. Vegetable consumption accounts for 80% of dietary nitrate (Hord et al., 2009) and while there is some nitrite intake from the diet, the majority is derived from endogenous biochemical pathways. Endogenously nitrate could be reduced to nitrite via the entero-salivary circulation of nitrate (Govoni et al., 2008; Petersen and Stoltze, 1999; Webb et al., 2008) or, to a lesser extent, by the action of mammalian nitrate reductases such as xanthine oxidase (Jansson et al., 2008). The entero-salivary circulation of nitrate involves the active uptake of nitrate from blood, about 25% of plasma nitrate, by salivary glands. Nitrate is concentrated and secreted in the saliva where a portion of it is reduced to nitrite by oral facultative anaerobic nitrate reducing bacteria found in the deep clefts on the dorsal surface of the tongue (Gladwin et al., 2005). These bacteria use nitrate as an alternative terminal electron receptor to oxygen, producing nitrite as a by-product. This step is inhibited by use of antibacterial mouthwash (Webb et al., 2008) but not antibacterial toothpaste (Bondonno et al., 2012a). Once swallowed, nitrite can be converted to NO in the acidic environment of the stomach where it reduces gastrointestinal infection (Dykhuizen et al., 1996), increases mucous barrier thickness (Bjorne et al., 2004) and stimulates gastric blood flow (Petersson et al., 2007).
The remaining nitrite is absorbed into the blood stream (Lundberg and Govoni, 2004). Together with the nitrite produced as an end product of the L-arginine-NO synthase pathway, or by action of the mammalian nitrate reductases (Jansson et al., 2008), this nitrite is rapidly distributed throughout the body becoming a source of vasodilatory NO or acting as a signalling molecule in its own right (Bryan et al., 2005).

The exact mechanism by which nitrite is converted to NO is still uncertain. It could occur through the intermediate formation of S-nitrosothiols and other nitrogen oxides (Bryan et al., 2004; Gladwin et al., 2000) or by a number of substances and enzymes identified to have nitrite reducing potential such as xanthine oxidase (Zhang et al., 1997), haemoglobin (Cosby et al., 2003), myoglobin (Shiva et al., 2007a), neuroglobin (Petersen et al., 2008), respiratory chain enzymes (Kozlov et al., 1999), cytochrome P 450 (Kozlov et al., 2003), aldehyde oxidase (Li et al., 2008), carbonic anhydrase (Aamand et al., 2009) and NO synthase (Vanin et al., 2007). We recently observed a dose-related increase in nitrate reduction in the mouth and NO status with increasing nitrate intake (Bondonno et al., 2012a). Although the exact mechanisms still need to be clarified it is clear that through the nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway, dietary nitrate and nitrite could be a source of NO, supplementing NO generation from L-arginine by the nitric oxide synthase (NOS) enzymes. This is particularly evident when oxygen tension falls rendering the L-arginine-NOS pathway inactive (Feelisch et al., 2008). The nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway is not oxygen dependent and could therefore be a backup system when oxygen is depleted. The discovery of this alternate pathway for NO production could account for the observation in epidemiological studies that green leafy vegetables (high in nitrate) protect against cardiovascular disease (Hu
and Willett, 2002; Hung et al., 2004; Joshipura et al., 1999). The sources, half-lives and basal plasma concentrations of nitrate, nitrite and NO are summarised in Table 2.

**Metabolic fate of NO**

Once generated in the endothelium, NO has a number of potential effects which are largely determined by the availability and concentration of surrounding bioreactants (Table 3). These effects could be direct or indirect depending on whether NO itself, reacts with target molecules (direct) or whether, by its conversion to nitrite or the S-nitrosothiol (RNOS) derivatives of plasma proteins, its effects are directed at distant targets (indirect) (Wink et al., 1996).

NO has a half-life of only a few milliseconds when in close contact with other bioreactants (Thomas et al., 2001). However, in the red blood cell free zone close to the endothelial surface of a blood vessel, the biochemical lifetime of NO could be as much as 100-500 s (Ford et al., 1993). NO is uncharged and lipophilic allowing it to diffuse freely across biological membranes. The majority of NO that does not diffuse across biological membranes to activate cGMP will react with both oxy- and deoxyhaemoglobin (Liu et al., 1998). NO is oxidised by oxyhaemoglobin to form nitrate and methaemoglobin. NO’s reaction with deoxyhaemoglobin results in the formation of iron-nitrosyl haemoglobin. NO also reacts rapidly with superoxide to form peroxynitrite, a reaction thought to be the reason for the pathological effects associated with NO (Beckman, 2009). The small amount of NO that escapes inactivation by molecules such as haemoglobin and superoxide, approximately 20%, is either oxidised to nitrite, reacts with thiol groups on proteins to form RSNOs or reacts with lipids to from nitrated lipids (MacArthur et al., 2007b).
It is now recognised that nitrate, nitrite and RSNOs are not only end products of NO metabolism but are important in preserving NO from local inactivation, in the long-distance transport of NO and in forming a storage pool of NO. These molecules have the potential to be converted back to NO when required and may explain some of the systemic effects of NO that occur after its administration by inhalation or infusion (Barbotin-Larrieu et al., 1996; Cannon et al., 2001; Fox-Robichaud et al., 1998; Takahashi et al., 1998; Troncy et al., 1997). An example of this was presented by Rassaf et al (Rassaf et al., 2002) who demonstrated that when NO is administered intravenously, the systemic effects observed are mediated by the conversion of NO to RSNOs.

**Measurement of NO status**

With the understanding that NO plays a critical role in health and that its levels are disturbed in disease states, has come the need to accurately detect and quantify this extremely labile molecule. NO’s short half-life, gaseous nature and free radical structure makes direct measurement of NO an analytical challenge (Hausladen et al., 2007; Rogers et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2006). Since nitrate, nitrite and RSNOs are end products of NO metabolism and act as a storage pool for NO, the focus has been on quantifying these molecules as indicators of NO status. However this is not without difficulty and controversy (Giustarini et al., 2007; Gow et al., 2007; MacArthur et al., 2007a). These molecules are found in extremely low concentrations in complex biological matrices (Bryan and Grisham, 2007; Tsikas, 2000). Variations in sample collection and preservation procedures, the large number of different analytical approaches used as well as nitrite contamination has resulted in big disparities in reported values. For example,
the range of basal RSNO has been reported from undetectable up to micromolar values which is over 3 orders of magnitude (MacArthur et al., 2007b).

A wide variety of techniques have been used to measure NO status including photolysis chemiluminescence (Hausladen et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2006), spectrophotometry (Grisham et al., 1996), HPLC (Bryan and Grisham, 2007), GC-MS (Tsikas, 2000), electron paramagnetic resonance spectroscopy (Rocks et al., 2005), electrochemistry (Rafikova et al., 2004), immunological (Jaffrey et al., 2001) and fluorescent based methods (Bryan and Grisham, 2007). Of these techniques, gas-phase ozone based chemiluminescence has emerged as one of the most reliable assays for NO metabolites (Wang et al., 2006). The basal RSNO levels reported using this method are typically at a nanomolar level and therefore lower than those reported using other methods. Our lab has since validated a procedure that measures RSNO, nitrite and nitrate in biological matrixes and we report values that are consistent with the low levels reported using ozone based chemiluminescence (Yang et al., 2013).

Nitrate levels in the plasma are now considered to be an unreliable marker of eNOS activity. Nitrate levels are influenced by dietary nitrate intake, bacterial synthesis of nitrate within the gastrointestinal tract, denitrifying liver enzymes, saliva formation and renal function. In addition, nitrate is present in plasma in the micromolar range and is produced in the nanomolar amounts by the L-arginine NOS pathway. This makes measurement of any changes due to eNOS activity difficult (Kelm, 1999).

CARDIOVASCULAR HEALTH AND VASCULAR FUNCTION
Overview and importance

Cardiovascular disease is one of the leading causes of death and morbidity as well as imposing a huge economic burden at both country and household level (Fuster et al., 2011; Lloyd-Jones et al., 2010). A healthy endothelium plays a pivotal role in cardiovascular health and indeed endothelial dysfunction is associated with the development of atherosclerosis, hypertension and heart failure (Vallance and Chan, 2001).

Endothelial structure and function

The healthy endothelium is a monolayer of cells that is strategically placed between the lumen and vascular smooth muscle cells. Originally viewed as a simple semi permeable barrier between blood and interstitium, it is now recognised as a multifunctional key regulator of vascular homeostasis (Widlansky et al., 2003). Endothelial cells respond to both physical and chemical stimuli by synthesis or release of a wide range of molecules that regulate vascular tone (influencing arterial stiffness and blood pressure), inflammation, permeability and growth as well as blood fluidity and coagulation (Widlansky et al., 2003). An alteration in endothelial function, endothelial dysfunction, is considered to be the initial (and reversible) stage in the development of cardiovascular disease (Endemann and Schiffrin, 2004; Vanhoutte, 2009). Endothelial dysfunction is an impairment of endothelium-dependent relaxation, with a tendency towards a proinflammatory and prothrombotic state (Herrmann and Lerman, 2008). It is strongly associated with cardiovascular risk factors including obesity, smoking, aging, hypercholesterolaemia, hypertension, hyperglycaemia, systemic infection and a family history of early atherosclerotic disease (Widlansky et al., 2003). These risk factors are also associated with arterial stiffness
which is an independent predictor of cardiovascular risk (Benetos et al., 1993; Mahmud and Feely, 2003; O Rourke and Hashimoto, 2007; Tanaka et al., 1998; Wilkinson et al., 2002a).
While the pathophysiology of endothelial dysfunction is complex, it is now recognised that the central element is an attenuation of NO production and/or bioavailability.

Vascular effects of NO

NO is a key regulator of vascular homeostasis and integrity. Decreased production and/or bioavailability of NO and impairment of endothelial function is implicated in a number of cardiovascular disorders including hypertension, atherosclerosis and ischaemic disease. Whether reduced NO bioavailability is the cause or result of endothelial dysfunction is not yet understood. However, the importance of NO in maintaining vascular tone, vasodilation, as well as its antithrombotic, antiatherogenic and antiproliferative properties are now accepted (Jin and Loscalzo, 2010). This has been demonstrated experimentally by inhibiting its synthesis. In addition, mice lacking eNOS have endothelial dysfunction, are hypertensive and show a more severe outcome in response to vascular injury, stroke, cerebral ischemia and diet induced atherosclerosis (Liu and Huang, 2008).

Vascular tone and vasodilation

NO is important in vascular homeostasis playing a key role in maintaining basal vascular tone through its continual low level release from endothelial cells (Vallance et al., 1989). These low levels maintain vasorelaxation through the cGMP mediated relaxation of vascular smooth muscle cells described above. The NO produced is in balance with endothelial derived vasoconstrictors
and the sympathetic nervous system (Vallance and Chan, 2001). NO and other vasoactive mediators have functional effects on endothelial cells and smooth muscle cells. Both functional and structural characteristics of the arterial wall play an important role in arterial stiffness. Indeed, inhibition of NO synthesis results in an increase in local arterial stiffness (Schmitt et al., 2005; Wilkinson et al., 2002b). Endothelial derived NO is a potent vasodilator. Its synthesis is increased in response to both biochemical stimuli (thrombin, ADP, serotonin, acetylcholine and bradykinin) as well as mechanical stimuli (shear stress and cyclic strain) (Jin and Loscalzo, 2010).

**Antithrombotic, antiatherogenic and antiproliferative properties**

NO maintains vascular integrity by exerting antithrombotic, antiatherogenic and antiproliferative properties. Platelets play an important role in wound healing and hemostatic plug formation. However, modulation of their activity is required to prevent vascular thrombosis and its clinical vascular outcomes (Loscalzo, 2001). NO is one of 3 biochemical systems that suppress platelet activity. NO exerts this effect principally via cGMP production with a resultant decrease in intracellular platelet Ca\(^{2+}\) levels. Increases in Ca\(^{2+}\) concentration within platelets causes a number of structural changes which leads to platelet aggregation (Jin and Loscalzo, 2010). NO also plays an important role in the vasculature by suppressing leucocyte migration and cellular adhesion to the endothelium, as well as preventing smooth muscle cell proliferation and migration (Vallance and Chan, 2001).

**DIETARY NITRATE AND VASCULAR FUNCTION**
Dietary nitrate was highlighted as a potential candidate for the cardioprotective effect of a fruit and vegetable-rich diet (Lundberg et al., 2006) with a landmark population study by Joshipura et al. This study provided evidence that vegetables generally and green leafy vegetables specifically afforded the greatest protection from cardiovascular disease (Joshipura et al., 1999; Joshipura et al., 2001). Whether this effect can be attributed to the high nitrate content of green leafy vegetables has not been determined from epidemiological studies due to inherent study limitations. Vegetables contain several factors which could contribute to cardiovascular health. These include vitamins such as vitamin C, minerals such as potassium, dietary fibre, polyphenols and carotenoids.

The cardiovascular benefits of nitrate intake have been observed in clinical studies. Studies have demonstrated lowering of blood pressure, improvement of endothelial function, protection against ischaemia reperfusion injury, reduction in platelet aggregation and improvement of exercise performance with nitrate intake. Research indicates that these effects could occur as a result of enhanced NO production through the nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway, as described above. This pathway could be an important back-up for the L-arginine NO pathway.

**Dietary sources**

The two main sources of nitrate in the diet are vegetables and drinking water. Since nitrate is absorbed effectively with a bioavailability of 100% (van Velzen et al., 2008), total nitrate consumption is largely dependent on the nitrate content of vegetables, quantity of vegetable intake as well as the level of nitrate in local drinking water (Jean A.T, 1998). Certain vegetables, especially beetroot, lettuce, rocket and spinach (Figure 3) are naturally rich in nitrate while other...
vegetables, such as peas, potato and tomato, contain nitrate at lower concentrations (Santamaria, 2006). The level of nitrate in vegetables also varies according to soil conditions, time of year, nitrate content of fertilizers, growing conditions (e.g. plants grown in low light have higher nitrate concentrations), the storage and transport environment as well as cooking procedures (Anjana and Abrol, 2007; Pennington, 1998; Petersen and Stoltze, 1999; Ysart et al., 1999). The nitrate content of drinking water, which is regulated in most countries due to health concerns, fluctuates and is dependent on bacterial nitrogen fixation, decay of organic matter in the soils, manure from large-scale livestock production and fertilizer use (Addiscott, 2005).

Nitrate intake varies greatly between individuals and populations. Mean daily intakes are estimated to be between 0.4 to 2.6 mg/kg or 31 to 185 mg (Gangolli et al., 1994), and actual individual daily nitrate intakes ranging from less than 20 mg to greater than 400 mg (Petersen and Stoltze, 1999; Ysart et al., 1999). Indeed, individuals who follow the Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension (DASH) diet may consume as much as 1000 mg/d. The European Food Safety Authority has set the Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) for nitrate at 3.7 mg/kg (approximately 260 mg for a 70 kg adult). The consumption of a diet rich in high-nitrate vegetables could markedly exceed the ADI. It seems unlikely that this would be related to detrimental health effects. Although the consumption of green leafy vegetables is widely promoted, the diets of many populations are low in these vegetables, and as a result low in nitrate with intakes often less than 100 mg/d. There is, however, concern among some researchers about the toxicity associated with intake of nitrate and nitrite, particularly in relation to methaemoglobinemia, colorectal cancer and cardiovascular disease. Nevertheless, due to the health benefits observed and the uncertainty surrounding the toxic effects, a number of
researchers are calling for a re-evaluation of the guidelines for the acceptable levels of nitrate in water and intake from food (Hord et al., 2009; Kapil et al., 2010b).

**Beneficial effects on vascular health**

_Epidemiological evidence and biomarkers of nitrate intake_

The Seven Countries Study was the first to identify an association between the Mediterranean Diet and a very low incidence of cardiovascular disease. People eating a Mediterranean Diet have a high intake of fruit and vegetables, eat low levels of red meat, consume a large amount of fish and white meat as well as have a moderate intake of red wine (Keys, 1995). There is current speculation that the cardioprotective effect of the Mediterranean Diet is partially due to the high nitrate/nitrite content (Hord et al., 2009; Lundberg et al., 2006). Indeed, a Mediterranean Diet may contain as much as 20 times the nitrate/nitrite present in a typical Western Diet (Bryan and Hord, 2010). While clinical trials with nitrate provide support for this hypothesis, no epidemiological study has investigated nitrate consumption and cardiovascular disease. This is possibly due to a number of difficulties linking nitrate intake specifically with cardiovascular disease risk. Nitrate intake is closely linked to vegetable intake and as such is highly correlated with other nutrients particularly fibre, carotenoids and folate (Lajous and Willett, 2011). Additionally, accurate estimates of nitrate exposure are complicated due to large within-foods variations as well as geographical differences in drinking water nitrate concentration. Another difficulty is the lack of a good biomarker of nitrate intake. Plasma and urinary nitrate/nitrite
levels may not be a good indication of long-term nitrate and nitrite exposure as they are affected by both dietary nitrate intake and the L-arginine-NO synthase pathway. Removal of nitrate from the diet results in reduced tissue levels of nitrite but little changes in plasma nitrite (Feelisch et al., 2008; Lundberg et al., 2009). Other considerations are the short half-lives of nitrate (5-8 h) and nitrite (20-45 min) and their variability related to other factors such as exercise (Rassaf et al., 2007).

**Blood pressure**

Recent studies have shown that a diet rich in fruit and vegetables lowers blood pressure (Appel et al., 1997; Rouse et al., 1983) with the greatest protective effect from consumption of green leafy and cruciferous vegetables with high nitrate content (Joshipura et al., 1999; Joshipura et al., 2001). While the exact compounds responsible for this blood pressure lowering effect are not known, the possibility that nitrate is a key molecule was highlighted with the discovery of the enterosalivary pathway of nitrate (Benjamin et al., 1994; Lundberg et al., 1994; Zweier et al., 1995) and the evidence of decreased NO production in hypertension (Giansante and Fiotti, 2006). Indeed, this has been translated into the clinical setting with a number of studies showing a reduction in blood pressure after an acute or chronic dose of nitrate whether in the form of beetroot juice, high green leafy vegetable diet, or the nitrate salts (Table 4). These effects were observed with a concomitant rise in plasma nitrate and nitrite concentrations (Bailey et al., 2009; Kapil et al., 2010a; Larsen et al., 2006; Larsen et al., 2007; Webb et al., 2008). Govoni et al demonstrated the rise in plasma nitrite and reduction in blood pressure after a nitrate dose can be
prevented by interrupting the enterosalivary circulation of nitrate by use of antibacterial mouthwash (Govoni et al., 2008).

The effects on blood pressure are not consistent, however, with some studies showing a reduction in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure while others show a decrease in either systolic or diastolic blood pressure. In a recent study by Kapil et al, suppression of the oral microflora by a chlorhexidine based mouthwash for 7 days resulted in a 25% decrease in plasma nitrite and a concomitant increase in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure (Kapil et al., 2013). This raises the possibility that the enterosalivary nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway plays an important role in maintaining plasma nitrite levels with follow on effects on blood pressure. Additionally, this study demonstrates that, even in the absence of dietary nitrate intake, endogenous nitrate derived from the L-arginine NOS pathway contributes to physiological modulation of blood flow. The blood pressure lowering effect of sunlight has been attributed the conversion of nitrate in sweat to nitrite by commensal bacteria on the surface of the skin (Gilchrist et al., 2011).

**Endothelial function**

Endothelial dysfunction with attenuated NO production is central to the pathogenesis of cardiovascular disorders. Dietary nitrate could improve endothelial function by serving as an alternate source of vasoactive NO through the nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway. Flow-mediated vasodilation (FMD) of the brachial artery is currently the gold standard for non-invasive measurement of conduit artery endothelial function (Celermajer et al., 1992). There is evidence to suggest the size of FMD response is prognostic not only for the occurrence of a cardiovascular
event in high and low risk individuals (Modena et al., 2002; Shimbo et al., 2007; Witte et al., 2005) but also the severity of the disease (Neunteufl et al., 1997). Brachial artery diameter is assessed by high resolution ultrasound before and after a period of transient (5 min) ischaemia induced by inflation of a blood pressure cuff placed on the distal or proximal part of the arm. The increase in blood flow after cuff deflation generates a sheer stress stimulus which results in vasodilation (Figure 4). FMD, when performed according to published protocols provides a measure of in vivo endothelium-derived NO bioavailability (Green, 2005). We recently observed a small but significant improvement in FMD in healthy volunteers following ingestion of 200 mg spinach (182 mg nitrate) (Bondonno et al., 2012b). Heiss et al also demonstrated a significant improvement in FMD post 12.7 mg/kg (approximately 1g) sodium nitrate (Heiss et al., 2012). Bahra et al (Bahra et al., 2012), however, found no significant effect on FMD in healthy volunteers post 8 mmol (500 mg) potassium nitrate intake.

Ischemia reperfusion injury

Ischaemia reperfusion injury is the tissue damage that occurs on restoration of circulation after a period of ischaemia or lack of oxygen. The consequences of ischaemia reperfusion injury can be mild, resulting in reversible cell dysfunction, or severe, with multiple organ failure and death. Particularly in the heart and brain, ischaemia reperfusion injury is a major cause of death and morbidity (Murray and Lopez, 1997). Currently, it is the subject of intense research with several approaches and procedures being studied or trialled in order to prevent or limit the damage.

One approach receiving attention is the protection mediated by nitrite through its conversion to NO. This is enhanced in hypoxia when oxygen tension and pH falls rendering the L-arginine-
NOS pathway inactive. In animal models administration of nitrite protects against ischemia-reperfusion injury in liver (Duransi et al., 2005; Lu et al., 2005), heart (Baker et al., 2007; Duransi et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2004), brain (Jung et al., 2006), kidney (Tripatara et al., 2007) and chronic hind-limb ischemia (Kumar et al., 2008). This protection was not observed in renal ischemia reperfusion injury (Basireddy et al., 2006) indicating that nitrite protection may be tissue specific. Plasma nitrite levels decrease with increasing cardiovascular risk (Kleinbongard et al., 2006) and this may be reflected in tissues such as the heart (Bryan et al., 2007). Increasing plasma and tissue nitrite levels, therefore, would enlarge the storage pool of NO and could prevent or limit damage caused by ischemia-reperfusion injury. This could possibly be of therapeutic value in human diseases such as myocardial infarction, stroke, organ transplantation and cardiopulmonary arrest.

The mechanism of action of nitrite, in exerting its protective effect, has not been fully elucidated. However, nitrite is equally effective when it is delivered by oral or systemic administration either before, during or after ischemia (Shiva et al., 2007b). While most of these studies have investigated the administration of nitrite, it is assumed that nitrate, through the nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway, would have a similar effect. Indeed, Webb et al (Webb et al., 2008) demonstrated a prevention of ischemia-induced endothelial dysfunction, as measured by flow mediated dilatation (FMD) of the brachial artery after 20 min occlusion of blood flow, 2 hours after healthy volunteers ingested 1400 mg nitrate in the form of beetroot juice. This improvement coincided with an increase in plasma nitrite levels. Confirmation of this finding was provided by Kapil et al (Kapil et al., 2010a) in a study with healthy volunteers after ingestion of beetroot juice (350 mg nitrate) or potassium nitrate (1488 mg nitrate). Bryan et al (Bryan et al., 2007)
demonstrated that 7 days pretreatment with dietary nitrite or nitrate decreased infarct size in mice after myocardial ischaemia reperfusion injury. Mice fed on a low nitrite diet for 7 days had a reduced plasma and myocardial nitrite level and a subsequent larger infarct size after ischaemia reperfusion injury compared to mice fed a normal diet. This difference was not observed with provision of nitrite in the drinking water. Recently, Hendgen-Cotta et al (Hendgen-Cotta et al., 2012) observed an improvement in ischaemia reperfusion recovery and revascularization in nitrate fed mice compared to controls. This effect was not observed in nitrate fed mice whose nitrate-reducing bacteria on the oral cavity had been eradicated with antiseptic mouthwash.

*Arterial stiffness*

Arterial stiffness, a decreased capacity of expansion and contraction in response to change in pressure, is increasingly recognised as an important assessment of cardiovascular risk. NO influences vascular tone, and therefore arterial stiffness, through effects on smooth muscle relaxation. A number of non-invasive methods for measuring arterial stiffness have been developed which are generally derived from pulse wave velocity (PWV), peripheral arterial waveforms or arterial distensibility measures. PWV is considered the gold-standard measurement of arterial stiffness and is independently predictive of cardiovascular events (Willum Hansen et al., 2006). PWV is derived from the time taken for a pulse pressure to travel between two points (generally the carotid and femoral artery) a measured distance apart. Inhibition of NO alters PWV through effects on mean arterial pressure (Stewart et al., 2003). Improving NO status via the enterosalivary nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway could potentially improve arterial stiffness. Bahra et al (Bahra et al., 2012) found a significant decrease in both aortic PWV
and systolic blood pressure 3 hours after ingestion of 500 mg nitrate although no change in FMD was observed. It is possible that the decrease in PWV is related to the decrease in blood pressure observed. Additional studies are required to assess the effect of dietary nitrate intake on measures of arterial stiffness.

Platelet function

Platelet aggregation is a key event in the pathogenesis of atherosclerosis and the development of acute thrombotic events, including myocardial infarction and unstable angina (Davi and Patrono, 2007). Anti-platelet therapy, such as aspirin, highlights the importance of platelet aggregation in these disorders by reducing cardiovascular risk (Awtry and Loscalzo, 2000). The aggregation and adherence of platelets to the endothelium is normally prevented by the production of endogenous antiplatelet agents, including NO (Alheid et al., 1987; Radomski et al., 1987). This NO is produced by the vascular endothelium or within the platelet itself (Radomski et al., 1990). An effect of nitrate, through the nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway, to reduce platelet activity could have a large impact on cardiovascular disease. Indeed, this has been demonstrated after dietary supplementation with beetroot juice and potassium nitrate. Webb et al demonstrated an inhibition of *ex vivo* platelet aggregation, in response to collagen and ADP, 2.5 hours after healthy volunteers ingested beetroot juice containing 1400 mg nitrate (Webb et al., 2008). Intake of potassium nitrate also had a significant effect on platelet aggregation in response to collagen up to 2 hours post ingestion (Richardson et al., 2002).

*Improvement of exercise performance*
Exercise is cardioprotective with a number of cardiovascular disease risk factors reduced with regular exercise (Cornelissen and Fagard, 2005). In addition, exercise confers protection following a heart attack in humans (Hull Jr et al., 1994). While the exact mechanisms behind the cardioprotective effects of exercise are unknown, enhanced eNOS expression and elevated NO in response to shear stress during exercise could play a role (Hambrecht et al., 2003; Sessa et al., 1994).

NO plays an important role in the physiological adaptation to exercise by enhancing muscle blood flow, altering glucose uptake and metabolism, calcium homeostasis and modulating muscle contraction (Stamler and Meissner, 2001). In addition it controls cellular respiration through its interactions with mitochondrial respiratory chain enzymes (Moncada and Erusalimsky, 2002). Because NO production is increased in the vascular endothelium by exercise, it has been suggested that plasma nitrite levels post exercise are a good predictor of exercise capacity (Rassaf et al., 2007). Whether the increase in systemic nitrite after administration of dietary or inorganic nitrite would have an effect on oxygen consumption during exercise was recently investigated in humans. Bailey et al (Bailey et al., 2010; Bailey et al., 2009) found that 4-6 days of dietary nitrate supplementation in the form of beetroot juice not only reduced blood pressure but also significantly reduced the O2 cost of low and moderate intensity exercise while the time to exhaustion during high intensity exercise was significantly increased. These results were not expected. It was previously thought that the O2 cost of submaximal exercise was fixed. Larson et al found that 3 days supplementation with sodium nitrate resulted in a reduction in oxygen consumption during submaximal and maximal exercise.
(Larsen et al., 2007; Larsen et al., 2010). This occurred with no concomitant increase in plasma lactate suggesting that energy production was more efficient.

The exact mechanisms involved still need to be determined but there is some evidence to suggest that it involves the mitochondrion (Clerc et al., 2007; Larsen et al., 2011; Lundberg et al., 2011) and/or an increase in blood flow to the muscles with an improved balance between blood flow and oxygen uptake. While beetroot juice is high in nitrate, the physiological and cardiovascular effects observed after ingestion could be due to the presence of other bioactive compounds such as betaine and polyphenols. Lansley et al developed a placebo nitrate-depleted beetroot juice. Blood pressure reductions and improved O₂ cost of low, moderate and high intensity exercise were observed after acute and chronic nitrate-rich beetroot juice intake compared to the low nitrate placebo beetroot juice (Lansley et al., 2011a; Lansley et al., 2011b). These findings could be beneficial not only for athletes but also for people with diseases that have reduced oxygen availability such as heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

**POTENTIAL FOR DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS OF HIGH NITRATE INTAKE**

There are conflicting opinions in the literature about the toxicity of nitrate and nitrite in food and water. In the last decade numerous health benefits have been ascribed to nitrate and nitrite as detailed above, but there is lingering concern among some researchers about their potential toxicity. One recent report stated “the presence of nitrate in vegetables, as in water and generally in other foods, is a serious threat to man’s health” (Santamaria, 2006). This concern arises from evidence of methaemoglobinemia, cancer and cardiovascular disease in relation to nitrate and nitrite consumption.
Methaemoglobinaemia (or blue baby syndrome) can result from the reaction between nitrite and haemoglobin rendering the haemoglobin incapable of carrying oxygen (Knobeloch et al., 2000). While levels of methaemoglobin less than 1% of normal haemoglobin levels are normal, levels greater than 10% can cause cyanosis through to asphyxia, which is potentially fatal (Santamaria, 2006). Concern about nitrate in relation to methaemoglobinaemia was first raised in the 1940’s when methaemoglobinaemia and cyanosis was observed in infants fed formula made with well water that had a high nitrate content (Comly, 1945). The high nitrate content of the water was due to faecal contamination. In contrast, infants fed formula made from well water with a low nitrate level rarely developed methaemoglobinaemia (Walton, 1951). It has since been argued that nitrate per se was not the cause but rather faecal bacteria present in the well water (Avery, 1999). Intestinal infection with faecal bacteria causes an increase in NO production in the gastrointestinal system and NO has the ability to convert haemoglobin to methaemoglobin (Addiscott, 2005). Indeed, in a study in 1948 infants and older adults given a dose of 50 or 100 mg nitrate/kg/d nitrate did not develop methaemoglobinaemia (Cornblath and Hartmann, 1948). Nitrite exposure studies in adults have since confirmed this finding (Dejam et al., 2007). A high nitrate level in drinking water may therefore be a marker of contamination rather than being toxic itself. Nevertheless, in Western countries millions of dollars are spent lowering the nitrate content of drinking water to levels established by the World Health Organisation in 1970 and reviewed in 2004. Whether the recommended level of nitrate in drinking water should be increased is a controversial issue (Powlson et al., 2008).

Cancer in relation to nitrate and nitrite consumption has been a concern among researchers since the 1970’s when it was demonstrated that dietary nitrate had the potential to form carcinogenic
$N$-nitrosoamines (Spiegelhalder et al., 1976; Tannenbaum et al., 1976). $N$-nitrosoamines, which react with nucleic acids, are highly carcinogenic in laboratory animals (Gangolli et al., 1994) and could also be associated with human cancer (Bartsch and Montesano, 1984; Craddock, 1983). A report published in 1979 that dietary nitrite caused lymphomas in rats (Newberne, 1979) triggered extensive animal and epidemiological studies to determine if there was a link between dietary nitrate consumption and cancer. While some epidemiological studies reported a weak link, a review of all studies in 2003 by the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) found no evidence of an increased risk of cancer with dietary nitrate consumption (Speijers and Brandt, 2003). Indeed, a diet rich fruit and vegetables, which far exceeds the WHO acceptable daily intake of nitrate, is not associated with an increase in deaths from cancer (Hung et al., 2004). Since both nitrate and nitrite are formed endogenously, it seems unlikely that exogenous sources would be toxic. Additionally, vegetables rich in nitrate also contain high levels of antioxidants, such as vitamins C and E, which could prevent $N$-nitrosoamine formation. One study, however, raises the possibility that certain sub groups of the population may be at risk. Winter et al (Winter et al., 2007) demonstrated increased formation of $N$-nitrosoamines within the oesophagus of patients with Barrets oesophagus, a condition with severe gastro-oesophageal reflux and a higher incidence of gastric cancer.

There is good evidence of increased risk of cardiovascular disease with consumption of processed meats. A recent meta-analysis of 20 studies found that processed meat intake but not red meat was associated with higher incidence of cardiovascular disease and diabetes mellitus (Micha et al., 2010). Nitrate is added to meat as an antioxidant, to maintain the red colour and enhance flavour. Sodium nitrite is added to processed meat as an antimicrobial agent, flavour
enhancer and colourant. Whether the increased risk in cardiovascular disease is related to the presence nitrate, nitrite and the potential formation of nitrosamines is controversial. There is little evidence for this link.

CONCLUSION

Clearly NO is a critical molecule in cardiovascular health. Cardiovascular disease is associated with decreased production and/or bioavailability of NO which is produced mainly via the classical L-arginine NO synthase pathway. The discovery of an alternate pathway of NO production, the enterosalivary nitrate-nitrite-NO pathway, has resulted in a change of perspective of the role of dietary nitrate in cardiovascular health. Dietary nitrate is now highlighted as a potential candidate for the cardioprotective effect of a diet rich in vegetables. Indeed, improvements in blood pressure, endothelial function, ischaemia-reperfusion injury, arterial stiffness, platelet function and exercise performance with concomitant augmentation of NO status, have been observed in clinical trials with nitrate. These important findings are not without controversy. There is still concern about nitrate in relation to methaemoglobinaemia and cancer. Good evidence from epidemiological studies, however, is lacking due to inherent difficulties in linking nitrate intake with health or disease outcomes. Nevertheless, results from clinical trials to date suggest that increasing dietary nitrate intake may be an effective strategy in the prevention of cardiovascular disease. Future studies are still required to determine if dietary nitrate is a potential new therapy for people at risk for cardiovascular disease such as those with hypertension or impaired vascular function.
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Table 1: Isoforms of nitric oxide synthases (NOS), their site of synthesis, characteristics and action of NO derived. (Bredt, 1999; Hill et al., 2010; Jin and Loscalzo, 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isoform</th>
<th>Site of synthesis</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Action of NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOS I / nNOS</td>
<td>Neurons</td>
<td>Constitutively expressed Ca&lt;sup&gt;2+&lt;/sup&gt; dependent Specificity and highly regulated at transcriptional and post-translational levels Moderate production range (nM to µM)</td>
<td>Messenger molecule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS II / iNOS</td>
<td>Macrophages, neutrophils, platelets, vascular smooth muscle cells and other nonvascular cells</td>
<td>Ca&lt;sup&gt;2+&lt;/sup&gt; independent Regulated transcriptionally High production range (µM)</td>
<td>Cytotoxic effect in large amounts produced as part of a rapid response to pathogens by the immune system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOS III/ eNOS</td>
<td>Endothelial cells</td>
<td>Constitutively expressed Ca&lt;sup&gt;2+&lt;/sup&gt; dependent Specifically and highly regulated at transcriptional and post-translational levels Low production range (pM to nM)</td>
<td>Vasodilation Anti-thrombotic effect Anti-inflammatory effect Anti-proliferative effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Sources, half-lives and basal plasma concentrations of nitrate, nitrite and NO

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Half-life</th>
<th>Fasting plasma level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nitrate</td>
<td>1. Diet</td>
<td>5-8 h(^1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. L-arginine-NO synthase pathway</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitrite</td>
<td>1. Diet</td>
<td>1-5 min (ex vivo)(^1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. L-arginine-NO synthase pathway</td>
<td>20-45 min (in vivo)(^3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Enterosalivary pathway of nitrate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Mammalian nitrate reductases(^4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitric oxide</td>
<td>1. L-arginine-NO synthase pathway</td>
<td>1-2 ms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Endogenous nitrite and S-nitrosothiols</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)(Lundberg et al., 2008)  
\(^2\)(Lundberg et al., 2008)  
\(^3\)(Dejam et al., 2007)  
\(^4\)(Jansson et al., 2008)  
\(^5\)(Lundberg and Weitzberg, 2005)
Table 3. Fate of NO once produced, effect and subsequent action

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fate of NO</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Binds with haeme moiety on sGC</td>
<td>Direct</td>
<td>Increases cGMP levels in underlying smooth muscle cells and platelets (Ignarro, 1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binds with haeme moiety on haemoglobin</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Originally thought to be inactivated by haemoglobin but now, controversially, it is thought that a small proportion is converted to nitrite and possibly S-nitrosated derivative of oxyhaemoglobin (SNOHb) (Jia et al., 1996).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Binds with cytochrome c oxidase</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Modulation of mitochondrial respiration (Giuffre et al., 1998)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reacts with superoxide anion to form peroxynitrite anion</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Major mediator of pathological effects associated with NO such as inflammation. Peroxynitrite decomposes to nitrate and nitrite or can react further to oxidise and nitrosate other substrates (Beckman, 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxidised to nitrite in presence of oxygen</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Preserves NO from local inactivation and allows its effects to be transferred to distant targets. (Shiva et al., 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reacts with thiol groups on proteins to form nitrosothiol compounds</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Preserves NO from local inactivation and allows its effects to be transferred to distant targets. (Stamler et al., 1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reacts with lipid peroxyl radicals</td>
<td>Indirect</td>
<td>Vascular protection (O'Donnell and Freeman, 2001)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4: Summary of intervention studies investigating the effect of nitrate on blood pressure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nitrate Source</th>
<th>Nitrate Dose</th>
<th>Acute/Chronic</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>BP Effect</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beetroot juice</td>
<td>1400 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=14)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP, MAP ↓</td>
<td>(Webb et al., 2008)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>385 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=9)</td>
<td>SBP ↓</td>
<td>(Lansley et al., 2011a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>350 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=14)</td>
<td>SBP ↓</td>
<td>(Kapil et al., 2010a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>322 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=8)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP, MAP ↓</td>
<td>(Vanhatalo et al., 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>560 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>PAD M &amp; F (n=8)</td>
<td>DBP ↓</td>
<td>(Kenjale et al., 2011)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>340 mg</td>
<td>Chronic (6 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=8)</td>
<td>SBP ↓</td>
<td>(Bailey et al., 2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>316 mg</td>
<td>Chronic (6 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=7)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP, MAP ↓</td>
<td>(Bailey et al., 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>385 mg</td>
<td>Chronic (6 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=9)</td>
<td>SBP ↓</td>
<td>(Lansley et al., 2011b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>322 mg</td>
<td>Chronic (15 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=8)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP, MAP ↓</td>
<td>(Vanhatalo et al., 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>465 mg</td>
<td>Chronic (14 d)</td>
<td>T2DM M &amp; F (n=27)</td>
<td>No effect</td>
<td>(Gilchrist et al., 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>595 mg</td>
<td>Chronic (3 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=12)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP ↓</td>
<td>(Kelly et al., 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beetroot juice (dose response)</td>
<td>143 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=4)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP ↓</td>
<td>(Hobbs et al., 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>353 mg</td>
<td></td>
<td>Healthy M (n=4)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP ↓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>707 mg</td>
<td></td>
<td>Healthy M (n=4)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP ↓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red beetroot enriched bread</td>
<td>112 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=5)</td>
<td>SBP ↓</td>
<td>(Hobbs et al., 2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White beetroot enriched bread</td>
<td>99 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=5)</td>
<td>No effect</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spinach</td>
<td>182 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=30)</td>
<td>SBP ↓</td>
<td>(Bondonno et al., 2012b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japanese traditional diet</td>
<td>18.8 mg/kg</td>
<td>Chronic (10 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=25)</td>
<td>DBP ↓</td>
<td>(Sobko et al., 2010)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(±1200 mg)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nitrates</td>
<td>Dose</td>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Species</td>
<td>Effect</td>
<td>Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sodium nitrate</td>
<td>6.2 mg/kg (±400 mg)</td>
<td>Chronic (3 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=17)</td>
<td>DBP, MAP ↓</td>
<td>(Larsen et al., 2006)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6.2 mg/kg (±400 mg)</td>
<td>Chronic (3 d)</td>
<td>Healthy M (n=9)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP ↓</td>
<td>(Larsen et al., 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potassium nitrate</td>
<td>1488 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=21)</td>
<td>SBP, DBP ↓</td>
<td>(Kapil et al., 2010a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>500 mg</td>
<td>Acute</td>
<td>Healthy M &amp; F (n=21)</td>
<td>SBP ↓</td>
<td>(Bahra et al., 2012)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Figure 1: The L-arginine nitric oxide synthase (NOS) pathway.** Endothelial cells lining the lumen of blood vessels produce endothelial NOS (eNOS) in response to biochemical and mechanical stimuli. Nitric oxide (NO) diffuses into the underlying smooth vascular cells where it activates soluble guanylate cyclase (sGC) resulting in a rise of cyclic guanosine monophosphate (cGMP) mediating smooth muscle relaxation. ADP: adenosine diphosphate, Ca: calcium, CaM: calmodulin, O₂: oxygen, NADPH: nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate, NAD: nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide, FMN: flavin mononucleotide, FAD: flavin adenine dinucleotide, BH₄: tetrahydrobiopterin, GTP: guanosine triphosphate, PKG: protein kinase G.
Figure 2: The nitrate-nitrite-nitric oxide (NO) pathway. After ingestion nitrate is absorbed in the small intestine (1) from where it enters the circulation (2). Approximately 75% of nitrate is excreted via the kidneys. There is an active uptake of the remaining nitrate by the salivary glands (3). In the oral cavity the nitrate is reduced to nitrite by nitrate reducing bacteria found predominantly on the dorsal surface of the tongue (4). Some of this nitrite is reduced to NO in
the acidic environment of the stomach (5). The remaining nitrite is absorbed in the small intestine (6) from where it enters the circulation (7). In the circulation, nitrite can be reduced to NO (8). Nitrate and nitrite can be formed by systemic NO metabolism. Nitrate thus formed could enter the cycle together with ingested nitrate (9).
Figure 3: Dietary sources of nitrate arranged according to nitrate content.
Figure 4: Flow mediated dilatation (FMD) of the brachial artery. A. Ultrasound probe set up. B. Ultrasound image of the brachial artery. C. A representation of time course percentage change in vessel diameter during cuff inflation and deflation.