Efficacy of A1C Reduction Using Internet Intervention in Patients with Type 2 Diabetes Treated with Insulin

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE: To assess the effect of an Internet-based glucose monitoring system (IBGMS) on glycated hemoglobin (A1C) levels in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus treated with insulin.

METHODS: Fifty patients were randomly assigned to receive conventional care alone (control) or additional follow-up via IBGMS for 6 months. Patients randomized to the IBGMS group uploaded blood glucose readings to a secure website every 2 weeks to receive feedback from their endocrinologist. After 6 months, all patients returned to conventional care. A1C and laboratory test results were collected at 0, 3, 6 and 12 months.

RESULTS: Baseline parameters were not significantly different. After a 6-month follow-up, A1C dropped from 8.8% to 7.6% (p<0.001) in the IBGMS group vs. the control group, which showed no significant change (8.5% to 8.4%, p=0.51). Both groups then returned to conventional care, and after 12 months, the A1C differences in the IBGMS and control groups were not sustained (8.2% vs. 8.5%, p=0.35).

CONCLUSION: IBGMS significantly improved A1C levels in patients with type 2 diabetes treated with insulin, but this effect was lost with cessation of the intervention.

KEYWORDS: Internet-based blood glucose monitoring, remote monitoring, type 2 diabetes

RÉSUMÉ

OBJECTIF : Évaluer l’effet d’un système de surveillance de la glycémie par Internet (SSGPI) sur les taux d’hémoglobine glycosylée (HbA1c) chez des patients insulinothérapiés atteints de diabète de type 2.

MÉTHODES : Cinquante patients ont été répartis au hasard pour recevoir les soins classiques seuls (groupe témoin) ou en association au SSGPI pendant six mois. Les patients du groupe SSGPI ont téléchargé leurs glycémies vers un site Web sécurisé toutes les deux semaines et reçus des commentaires de leur endocrinologue. Après six mois, les patients de ce groupe ont cessé d’utiliser le SSGPI. Les taux d’HbA1c et d’autres paramètres de laboratoire ont été déterminés au départ et après trois, six et douze mois.

RÉSULTATS : Il n’y avait pas de différences significatives entre les groupes pour ce qui est des paramètres initiaux. Après six mois, le taux d’HbA1c avait baissé : il était de 7,6 % (par rapport à 8,8 % au départ; p < 0,001) dans le groupe SSGPI et de 8,4 % (par rapport à 8,5 % au départ; p = 0,51) dans le groupe témoin. L’utilisation du SSGPI a été abandonnée et, après douze mois, il n’y avait plus de différence entre le groupe SSGPI et le groupe témoin pour ce qui est du taux d’HbA1c (8,2 % et 8,5 %; p = 0,35).

CONCLUSION : Le SSGPI a significativement amélioré les taux d’HbA1c chez les patients insulinothérapie atteints de diabète de type 2, mais cet effet a disparu après la fin de l’intervention.

MOTS CLÉS : surveillance de la glycémie par Internet, surveillance à distance, diabète de type 2

INTRODUCTION

In the management of diabetes mellitus, self-monitoring of blood glucose (SMBG) is performed as an adjunct to glycated hemoglobin (A1C) measurements in order to assess and modify treatment (1-3); however, it often requires healthcare professionals to help interpret these results to refine treatment (4-6). The Internet provides a readily accessible platform for communication and remote health monitoring (7). In this study, we evaluated whether the use of an Internet-based glucose monitoring system (IBGMS)
would improve the outcome of care for patients with type 2 diabetes compared to conventional care alone.

METHODS

We enrolled 50 patients with type 2 diabetes treated with insulin, either alone or in combination with oral antihyperglycemic agents. Inclusion criteria included a recent A1C >7.0%, Internet access and prior training in SMBG. Patients were randomly assigned to IBGMS or a control group for 6 months using a computer random number generator. All patients were provided with a blood glucose meter and test strips for testing at least 3-times daily, and were asked to perform a laboratory blood test and visit their endocrinologist at 3 and 6 months. All patients met with the same endocrinologist and were provided with standard office-based care.

Patients randomized to the control group were asked to keep a diary of SMBG to bring to their endocrinologist. Patients randomized to the IBGMS group were asked to upload their SMBG readings every 2 weeks to a secure, commercially available website (ALR Technologies Inc, Atlanta, Georgia). The preliminary results of this intervention are documented elsewhere (8), and more details of the web-based care can be found at www.alrt.com. Data were presented in table and graph formats according to time of day, and automatic calculations were done to show the mean, standard deviation and range for specific time periods. The system allowed patients to input medications, set alarms, view summaries of readings and contact their endocrinologist, who viewed the readings and sent feedback through the ALR messaging system. Patients randomized to the control group were given the option of calling the endocrinologist when they needed assistance. Neither group was taught how to interpret SMBG results, although as part of the inclusion criteria, all patients had completed prior training in SMBG. The endocrinologist’s recommendations included changes in insulin dosage, suggestions on testing frequency or giving compliments. A1C values were measured in both groups at 0, 3, 6 and 12 months.

Baseline demographic data were collected from patient charts. A1C values were measured using the ADVIA Centaur Immunoassay System (Siemens, Tarrytown, New York). Data were analyzed using a computer database (Excel, Microsoft Inc., Redmond, Washington) and SAS statistical software (SAS Institute Inc., Cary, North Carolina). Paired sample and independent Student’s t-tests were used to compare within- and between-group changes, respectively. The primary outcome was difference in A1C between the IBGMS and control groups at 12 months. Differences between A1C levels were evaluated by performing analysis of covariance that tested between-group changes from the start to the end of the study while adjusting for baseline values. Analysis of variance was performed to see whether changes in A1C correlated with upload compliance on the IBGMS. For all analyses, statistical significance was established at p<0.05.

RESULTS

Key demographic and baseline clinical characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Four patients (2 from each group) were excluded because they were nonadherent. Differences between the 2 groups at 6 months post-intervention was statistically significant only for A1C (8).

The IBGMS group showed a statistically significant decrease in A1C from baseline (8.8±1.3%) to 3 months (8.2±0.9%, p=0.053) and 6 months (7.6±0.8%, p<0.001). The control group, on the other hand, had A1C levels that were statistically equivalent (Table 2). The baseline A1C-adjusted differences in 6 month A1C were –1.3% and –0.1% for the IBGMS and control groups, respectively (p<0.05). However, 6 months after both groups had returned to conventional care (12 months from baseline), A1C in the IBGMS group returned to baseline levels.
The IBGMS group had the option to upload their data 12-times within the 6-month period. On average, patients in the IBGMS group uploaded 71.9% (range 28%–94%) of the time, with an average of 9.4 uploads. The percentage of uploads on the IBGMS was not correlated with change in A1C (p=0.51) after 6 months. Two patients from the IBGMS group were excluded from the above analyses because they were nonadherent.

DISCUSSION

Patients with diabetes treated with insulin are often concerned about the risk of hypoglycemia and/or hyperglycemia. To avoid these situations, frequent SMBG testing is required. However, a significant number of patients require communication with their physician to interpret these results and modify insulin dosage to achieve glucose targets. We used and tested an IBGMS to test whether communication over the Internet was sufficient enough to improve glycemic control.

In our study, patients randomized to the IBGMS group had significant A1C improvement after 6 months. Both study groups were provided with resources for testing blood glucose levels and met with an endocrinologist at 3 and 6 months. The only difference was that the IBGMS group was asked to upload their blood glucose levels onto an Internet platform. Almost all study patients in the IBGMS group, except 2 who were nonadherent and excluded from analysis, uploaded their data regularly, as they were frequently reminded to test and upload their data through the ALR messaging system. This ongoing communication allowed the endocrinologist to recommend changes in insulin dosage and regimen, and/or patterns of testing as needed to direct redistribution of the insulin regimen. At 12 months, both groups returned to pre-study A1C levels after resuming conventional care for 6 months. Our results demonstrate that the improvement during the study was not sustained after discontinuation of the IBGMS intervention, indicating that constant communication is required for optimal care. It should be noted that all patients attend a comprehensive 4-day education course when diagnosed with diabetes. As such, they have already been taught blood glucose goals and insulin adjustment. Despite this standardized education, further improvement was seen in the IBGMS group. This improvement reversed to baseline when the intervention was withdrawn.

There are several limitations to this study. We monitored only glycemic control, and thus some factors that were not measured may have confounded the results. In the 6 months of conventional care following IBGMS, we did not monitor the number of blood glucose tests being used and did not supply patients with test strips. Therefore, changes in A1C levels could result from a lower number of SMBG tests performed by the IBGMS group. However, the control group did not have access to these resources either, and their A1C levels stayed the same. Furthermore, all patients were testing regularly, because they were administering insulin and were seen by an endocrinologist within 3 to 6 months. The period of conventional care also mimics the real world, where patients are seen every 3 or 6 months, with no recurrent follow-ups in between.

The advantages of using an IBGMS include automatic uploading, eliminating the need for patients to keep a written diary. In addition, the uploaded data can be analyzed and displayed in table and graph formats, giving a sense of glucose trends and monitoring frequency. This can save time for the physician and increase the accuracy of data interpretation (9). Limitations of the system include patient’s unwillingness or lack of desire to use the Internet and the absence of a payment model to reimburse out-of-office consultations.

Previously published studies have also shown improvements in A1C levels in patients with type 2 diabetes who used an IBGMS system compared to controls (10-12). However, these studies involved nurses, dietitians or an electronic medical records system, while our study was limited to the patient’s endocrinologist monitoring and making recommendations based on an IBGMS. While this was not a substitute for the patient–physician interaction in a clinical setting; however, it significantly improved A1C and, over time, we observed better glycemic control and patient satisfaction. This method of follow-up can reduce the inconvenience of booking appointments solely for giving recommendations on changes in insulin dosage and may be a more cost-effective method of follow-up, especially for rural patients where access to a diabetes specialist is limited. In summary, the continuous use of an IBGMS is an effective method of improving glucose control compared to standard care.

AUTHOR DISCLOSURES

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

HT designed the study; developed the protocol; collected and interpreted data; and wrote, reviewed and edited the manuscript. AM contributed to protocol development; collected, analyzed and interpreted data; and wrote, reviewed and edited the manuscript. JC analyzed and interpreted
data; and wrote, reviewed and edited the manuscript. SR contributed to the study design and protocol development; interpreted data; and reviewed and edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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