Electroretinogram Changes Following Sequential Panretinal Photocoagulation for Proliferative Diabetic Retinopathy

**Authors** Khojasteh H, Amini Vishte R, Mirzajani A, Khalili Pour E, Bazvand F, Riazi-Esfahani H, Mirghorbani M, Modjtahedi BS

**Received** 7 February 2020

**Accepted for publication** 13 March 2020

**Published** 30 March 2020 Volume 2020:14 Pages 967—975

**DOI** [https://doi.org/10.2147/OPTH.S248678](https://doi.org/10.2147/OPTH.S248678)

**Checked for plagiarism** Yes

**Review by** Single-blind

**Peer reviewer comments** 2

**Editor who approved publication** Dr Scott Fraser

Hassan Khojasteh,1 Rasoul Amini Vishte,2 Ali Mirzajani,2 Elias Khalili Pour,1 Fatemeh Bazvand,1 Hamid Riazi-Esfahani,1 Masoud Mirghorbani,1 Bobeck S Modjtahedi1–5

1Department of Ophthalmology, Farabi Eye Research Center, Farabi Eye Hospital, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran; 2Department of Optometry, School of Rehabilitation Sciences, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran; 3Department of Ophthalmology, Southern California Permanente Medical Group, Baldwin Park, CA, USA; 4Department of Research and Evaluation, Southern California Permanente Medical Group, Pasadena, CA, USA; 5Eye Monitoring Center, Kaiser Permanente Southern California, Baldwin Park, CA, USA

Correspondence: Hassan Khojasteh Email khojaste_hasan@yahoo.com

**Purpose:** To evaluate changes in electroretinogram (ERG) response over the course of multiple sessions of panretinal photocoagulation (PRP) in patients with proliferative diabetic retinopathy (PDR).

**Methods:** A prospective cohort study of 11 patients with PDR who required PRP was conducted. PRP was completed over three sessions. Each patient had five ERGs done: baseline, 1 week after each PRP session, and 6 weeks after the last session of PRP. Dark-adapted 0.01 ERG, Dark-adapted 3 ERG, Dark-adapted 10 ERG, Light-adapted 3 ERG, and Light-adapted 30 Hz flicker ERG were done. The mean change in a- and b-wave amplitudes as well as implicit times compared to baseline was analyzed.

**Results:** A significant reduction in peak amplitudes of both a- and b-waves and delay in latencies were observed in all responses (p < 0.05). The absolute amplitude reduction and delay in latency were higher for scotopic b-waves (p < 0.05). The root mean square (RMS) of Dark-adapted 10.0 ERG (p < 0.05) and total mean amplitude changes of a- and b-waves (p < 0.001) were reduced after each laser session; however, the magnitude of change was not different between the first, second, or third sessions of PRP, and each session showed a similar deterioration rate of ERG parameters comparing to each other (p = 0.4 for RMS and p = 0.2 for total mean amplitude changes). In addition, the results indicated recovery of the amplitude and latency of ERG waves after 6 weeks from the final treatment (p < 0.001) although not to baseline levels.

**Conclusion:** ERG findings following PRP show reduced retinal function after each session which partially recovers by 6 weeks after the completion of therapy. Clinicians should be mindful of these changes when planning the treatment course for patients with PDR.

**Keywords:** diabetic retinopathy, electroretinogram, panretinal photocoagulation, laser

**Introduction**

Proliferative diabetic retinopathy (PDR) is an important cause of vision loss.1 The principle treatments for PDR are panretinal photocoagulation (PRP) and, more recently, intravitreal injections of anti-vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) agents which have both been shown to reduce the risk of vision loss.2 PRP treatment can utilize PRP, anti-VEGF, or both.

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Materials and Methods

This prospective cohort study was conducted after attaining Institutional Review Board approval from the Farabi Eye Hospital, Tehran University of Medical Sciences. The study adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained from all the patients. Patients with a history of unilateral high-risk PDR demonstrated on fluorescein angiography, were included. Eyes with PDR had a diabetic retinopathy severity scale (DRSS) of 61–71 and a DRSS of 47–53 in the fellow eye. Patients with greater severity scores that might require additional interventions and patients with significant symmetry in DRSS between their two eyes were excluded from the analysis. Furthermore, patients with a prior history of intravitreal injections, retinal lasers, significant media opacity, ocular abnormality that might impact ERG measurements (including more than 3 diopters of myopia), prior history of retinal detachment, center involving diabetic macular edema (that may require imminent treatment), or prior history of vitrectomy were excluded from this study.

The purpose of the study was to attempt to isolate the effect of PRP on ERG measures. The fellow, non-PDR, eye was used as a control since diabetic retinopathy can impact ERG measures and there can be a high degree intra-subject variability.

Patients received three sessions of PRP separated by 1-week intervals. PRP was conducted at the slit lamp using the Ellex Integre Duo Photocoagulator (Mawson Lakes, SA, Australia) and a wide field contact lens (Volk SuperQuad 160 Panfundus lens, Volk Co., Mentor, OH, USA). Scatter PRP was done with the following settings: 532 nm green wavelength, spot size of 500 μm, duration of 0.1 s, and power of 250 to 400 mW (titrating to achieve a grey-white burn). Patients received 350–400 spots with each session. Inferior-inferior/temporal retinal was treated at the first session followed by nasal and superior-superior/temporal quadrant.

ERG was performed using the MonPack3 system (Metrovision, Pérenchies, France). ERGs were done at baseline (pre-treatment), 1 week after each PRP session, and 6 weeks after the last PRP treatment. Dark-adapted 0.01 ERG, Dark-adapted 3 ERG, Dark-adapted 10 ERG, Light-adapted 3 ERG, and Light-adapted 30 Hz flicker ERG were recorded. ERGs were done in accordance with International Society for Clinical Electrophysiology of Vision (ISCEV) standard in an electrically shielded room to avoid additional sound and noise. All ERG tests were performed by an experienced examiner and the peaks of the wave amplitude were selected. To quantify the overall response waveform, root mean square (RMS) was calculated which was defined as the area under the curve [amplitude (nV)] in Dark-adapted 10 ERG.

Statistical Analysis

All statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows software version 21.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). The mean value of a-wave and b-wave amplitude, as well as latency, were calculated and compared between the first and second PRP session, the first and third PRP sessions, and the second and third PRP sessions using paired t-test. In addition, the mean changes in the amplitude and latency of the three different laser sessions were compared with the pre-treatment and 6 weeks post-treatment sessions using the paired t-test.

Results

Eleven eyes with PDR were included in this study. Nine subjects were female (82%) and the average age was 57.6± 10.3 years old. Tables 1 and 2 provide summaries of the mean value and percentage of change in a- and b-waves amplitudes and latencies following PRP. Seven comparisons were conducted for each ERG parameter: after first session versus pre-treatment baseline, after second session versus pre-treatment baseline, after third session versus pre-treatment baseline, after first session versus after second session, after second session versus after third session, after third session versus 6 weeks after third session, and 6 weeks after third session versus pre-treatment baseline. Of note, no significant changes in ERG parameters of control contralateral eyes were seen during the study.
There was a reduction in a- and b-wave amplitude 1 week after each PRP session on Dark-adapted 3.0, Light-adapted 3.0 and Dark-adapted 10 responses when compared to baseline ERG and the immediately preceding PRP treatment (P<0.005). There was a statistically significant increase in a- and b-wave amplitude 6 weeks after the last PRP session when compared to the ERG taken 1 week after the last PRP session (P<0.005); however, the amplitudes remained lower than baseline ERG values (P<0.05). Similarly, a- and b-wave latencies increased 1 week after each treatment session. Although the latency difference between the last session of PRP and 6 weeks follow-up ERG, they still remained lower than baseline ERG values.

A similar pattern was observed on 30 Hz flicker amplitude and latencies with evidence of reduced function 1 week after each PRP session with some recovery noted 6 weeks after the final PRP treatment that did not reach baseline values.

Variations in the mean RMS of amplitude in Dark-Adapted 10 ERG are shown in Figure 1. Each laser session resulted in reduction of amplitude RMS (p<0.001) 1 week after treatment and a relative improvement was seen 6 weeks after the third treatment session (p<0.05); however, comparing inter-sessions RMS change, the reduction in magnitude was not different among these three sessions (p=0.4).

**Figure 1** Retinal functional changes in D.A 10 ERG test during laser treatment sessions Shown in Root Mean Square (RMS).

ERG changes in scotopic and photopic values are outlined in Table 2. Both a- and b-wave amplitudes decreased 1 week after each PRP session but demonstrated recovery at the final follow-up visit 6 weeks after the last PRP treatment. Latencies for both a- and b-waves increased 1 week after each PRP session but decreased at the final ERG measurement. Although there was some recovery in amplitudes and latencies between the last PRP session and the last ERG 6 weeks post-treatment, these values did not return to baseline. These variations were significantly higher for absolute values of b-wave compared to the a-wave (P<0.05).

The percentage change in a- and b-wave amplitudes at each post-PRP visit when compared to baseline pre-treatment ERG is outlined in Table 3. When the total mean changes in percentage were compared, a-wave amplitude reduction was found to be higher than the b-wave amplitude reduction. The amplitude changes in Table 3 represent cumulative measurements since retinal tissue changes with preceding treatments. It should be noted that the difference between sessions involves the summation of prior retinal tissue loss (resulting in reduced amplitude) with the possible post-treatment recovery in amplitudes which may be beginning by the second post-treatment week.

**Table 3** The Overall Amplitude Changes in Percentage After Each Laser Session and 1.5 Months After Final Treatment Compared to Pretreatment Values

**Discussion**

PRP is a well-established treatment for PDR and has been shown to reduce the risk of severe vision loss in patients with high-risk PDR by 50%. During PRP light energy is absorbed by the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) and then converted to heat energy, which increases the temperature of the tissue. This energy destroys the tissue and leads to the death of retinal cells. The destruction of ischemic extra-macular retina destroys the VEGF drive within the retina, thereby limiting the stimulus for neovascularization. Although ultimately beneficial in reducing vision loss from progressively beneficial PRP does result in retinal tissue damage. Functioning, albeit ischemic, retina is sacrificed to reduce the risk of more significant harm from progressive diabetic retinopathy. The risk of post-PRP macular edema reduced peripheral vision, and reduced night vision defects remain concerns.

ERGs provide an objective and quantifiable measure of retinal function: a-waves are derived from the cone and rod cells of the outer photoreceptor layers whereas the b-waves are generated from the inner retina, predominantly the Muller and ON-bipolar cells.

Prior studies have demonstrated loss of ERG amplitude following PRP, with conflicting results in the relative changes of a- and b-waves. Liang et al and Han et al found a greater reduction in b-wave absolute amplitudes than a wave, with Perlman et al demonstrating proportional changes in the absolute amplitudes of both waves. Gjotterberg et al demonstrated a greater reduction in the percentage change of a-wave amplitudes. The results outlined herein demonstrated a greater absolute change in b-wave amplitude, although there was a greater percentage change in a-wave amplitude.

In conclusion, changes in b-wave amplitudes after PRP vary considerably. Frank et al reported an average a-wave amplitude of 70% in their 24 patients 6 weeks after PRP while also finding the largest decrease in the outer retina was destroyed by RAs in the present study, the average reduction of amplitude at 6 weeks post-treatment was 21.4% for a-waves and 14.5% for b-waves. Oden et al recorded ERGs of 14 patients treated with PRP before and 7 weeks after PRP and found a wide range of variations in post-treatment ERG values. Liang et al examined differences in ENG responses 6 months following a single session of PRP treatment. You treated one eye with PRP and treated the other eye with xenon arc laser. There was a similar reduction in ERG parameters between eyes treated with either laser unless the burnout retinal area treated with xenon arc laser was more than twice the size compared to the area treated with argon laser in the contralateral eye. Liang et al also found a reduction of b-wave, and to a less extent, a-wave amplitudes regardless of laser type indicating damage to both the outer and inner retinal layers following ERG. John and Dev performed PRP on 53 diabetic patients with ERGs taken pre-treatment, 1
month post-treatment, and 3 months post-treatment. The authors reported a global loss of retinal function which was variable and was reflected in the statistically significant reduction in amplitudes of the ERG without a significant change in latencies which contrasts to the findings of the present study which shows reduced a- and b-wave amplitudes as well as prolonged latencies after PRP. The average reduction of amplitude at 3 months was 27.2% for a-waves and 14.4% for b-waves in John and Devi’s study, while the changes to the implicit time were not significant.

Imai and Iijima\textsuperscript{15,20} reported a dramatic reduction in the amplitude and a delay in the implicit time of rabbit eyes 1 day after PRP with a partial recovery of amplitude 4 weeks after treatment. The present study demonstrated partial recovery of the amplitudes and the latencies 6 weeks after the final treatment. Capoferri et al\textsuperscript{18} performed ERGs in 16 patients with PDR prior to PRP, in the interval between laser sessions, within 36 hrs of the final session and 4 months later. The analysis of the results showed a significant decrease in the peak amplitudes of both a- and b-waves in photopic and dark-adapted conditions that occurred as early as between treatment sessions and remained depressed at 4-month follow-up. The lack of recovery in Capoferri et al’s study\textsuperscript{4} presented with the present findings which demonstrated partial recovery of retinal function 6 weeks after completion of PRP. Considering pathophysiology of the PRP, not only functional tissue loss would be occurring, but also the burning RPE and retina is associated with cytokine release and subsequent inflammation cascades. Hence, inflammation and retinal tissue loss are two main components of treatment-related ERG drops. Retinal tissue loss is an irreversible process; however, the inflammation would be resolved over the time which results in improved ERG parameters 6 weeks (in this study) after completion of PRP. It must be noted that glycemic control may affect the ERG parameters; in this study, glycemic status variable was controlled indirectly, by consideration of the stage of diabetic retinopathy through DRSS. One possible explanation for lack of recovery in Capoferri et al’s study\textsuperscript{2} may be uncontrolled glycemic status and/or post-laser inflammation which might affect ERG changes after the completion of PRP.

There were several limitations to this study including its small sample size, which was a result of the strict inclusion criteria. Indeed, considering the small sample size and the nature of variability in ERG recordings and interpretations, the study may not be too strong. Also, future studies may utilize ultrawide field imaging to better quantify the amount of ablation delivered during PRP treatments and its correlation to ERG changes.

Comparisons between studies that explore post-PRP ERG changes are complicated by differences in PRP treatment and ERG testing protocols, including type of ERG machine, as well as differences in follow-up intervals. Anti-VEGF therapy is increasingly employed as a treatment option, either as monotherapy or, more commonly, as an adjunct to PRP. PRP remains popular because the treatment effect is longer than anti-VEGF and because anti-VEGF therapy requires a high degree of patience compliance for frequent injections.\textsuperscript{21} Combination treatment with PRP and anti-VEGF is a popular treatment option that allows for more rapid regression of neovascularization via anti-VEGF with more long-term protection against recurrent neovascularization via PRP. Combination PRP and intravitreal ranibizumab treatment showed less adverse effects on retinal functions than PRP alone, possibly because less intense PRP treatment was required.\textsuperscript{22} PRP is typically titrated to ensure regression or stabilization of neovascularization, and the ideal amount of treatment is unknown. In this study, alternations in retinal function after PRP were demonstrated. These findings help quantify the degree of ERG loss after each session of 350–400 spots of PRP treatment. A better understanding of the degree of retinal damage following PRP may be helpful in determining the ideal amount of laser treatment that balances regression of retinal neovascularization while minimizing reductions in retinal function.

**Ethics and Consent Statement**

This research follows the principles of the Helsinki Declaration. After explaining to the patients the aim of the study and the probable outcome, informed consent was obtained from all the patients before the intervention.

**Disclosure**

Dr. Modjtabahdi receives research support from Genetech. None of the remaining authors had conflicts of interests. No funding was received for this research.

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