Prolonged Asymmetric Smooth-Pursuit Stimulation Leads to Downbeat Nystagmus in Healthy Human Subjects

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PURPOSE. Downbeat nystagmus (DBN) is a typical ocular motor sign in patients with lesions of the vestibulocerebellum. A vertical vestibular tone asymmetry, an upward shift of the eyes’ null position for vertical gaze holding, or an imbalance of vertical smooth-pursuit signals has been proposed as mechanisms of DBN. The purpose of this study was to elaborate a possible link between an imbalance in the vertical smooth-pursuit system and DBN by relying on a healthy human model.

METHODS. Healthy subjects (n = 6) were exposed to continuous asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation over 20 minutes.

RESULTS. Prolonged asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation induced a drift lasting >5 minutes in the direction of the prior pursuit. Upward drift was faster than downward drift and showed eye-position dependence in accordance with Alexander’s law, but no increase of drift velocity with lateral gaze. Upward drift violated Listing’s law in three of four subjects tested.

CONCLUSIONS. An experimentally induced vertical smooth-pursuit imbalance leads to DBN in healthy human subjects. Accordingly, because in patients with cerebellar disease upward smooth-pursuit eye movements are typically better preserved than downward, the resultant sustained imbalance of vertical smooth-pursuit input may play a major role in the generation of DBN. (Invest Ophthalmol Vis Sci. 2005;46:143–149) DOI: 10.1167/iovs.04-0235

Patients with cerebellar atrophy, especially if the flocculus and paraflocculus are involved, often exhibit downbeat nystagmus (DBN), a jerk nystagmus consisting of a slow upward-directed drift and of quick phases beating downward.1 Typically, cerebellar DBN increases with lateral gaze2 and obeys Alexander’s law.3,4 The upward drift is composed of two components: a bias drift that is already present in gaze straight ahead and a gaze-evoked drift.5 The gaze-evoked drift is thought to be caused by leakiness of the vertical neural integrator for gaze-holding6; however, the mechanism of the bias drift remains unclear.

While the gravity-dependent component of the bias drift may represent an overactive oolith-ocular reflex,6 various hypotheses have been proposed to explain the origin of the gravity-independent component. Most investigators favor the theory of a vestibular tone imbalance due to a central7–11 or peripheral12 pathway asymmetry—specifically, a relative predominance of anterior over posterior semicircular canal pathways. Another hypothesis suggests an upward shift of the eyes’ null position for vertical gaze holding, which, in combination with leakiness of the vertical velocity-to-position integrator, leads to upward drift in gaze straight ahead.13 Finally, Zee et al.14 proposed a model based on asymmetric vertical smooth-pursuit signals, in which the overbalance of upward visual velocity commands results in spontaneous upward drift. The assumption of an asymmetry of vertical smooth-pursuit signals was based on the observation of the tracking behavior of patients with cerebellar disease who show relatively smooth upward, but saccadic downward tracking during smooth-pursuit stimulation.2

The role of a vertical smooth-pursuit imbalance in the generation of cerebellar DBN has not been investigated further so far. The purpose of our study was to find a human model for DBN based on an acquired vertical smooth-pursuit asymmetry. We therefore exposed healthy human subjects to asymmetric vertical smooth-pursuit stimulation and measured eye velocity in the dark before and after stimulation. To minimize any contribution of the optokinetic system, for which stimulation of the peripheral retina is essential,2,15 and to guarantee an optimal pursuit response, we applied a small laser stimulus that was moved in otherwise complete darkness.

In human subjects, asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation of 1 to 2 minutes can induce a pursuit afternystagmus in the direction of the prior pursuit that lasts a few seconds.15,16 Our goal, however, was to reproduce in healthy subjects the sustained upward drift seen in patients with cerebellar disease. Therefore, we prolonged the asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation to 20 minutes to explore whether this could induce a long-lasting ocular drift.

METHODS

Subjects

Six healthy subjects (four women, two men; 25–41 years of age) gave their informed consent to participate in this study after the experimental procedure had been explained. The experimental protocol was approved by a local ethics committee at Zurich University Hospital, and adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human subjects. All subjects were free of symptoms, and none of them was taking any medication at the time of the experiments.

Experimental Setup

Subjects were seated upright with the head restrained by an individually molded thermoplastic mask (Sinned BV, Reeuwijk, The Netherlands). By way of two computer-controlled mirror-galvanometers, a laser dot (diameter: 0.1°) was projected onto a sphere with a radius of 1.4 m from the center of the head.
Eye Movement Recordings

Eye movements were recorded monocularly using dual search coils (Skalar Instruments, Delft, The Netherlands). The coil frame (side length: 0.5 m) generated three orthogonal digitally synchronized magnetic wave field signals of 80, 96, and 120 Hz. A digital signal processor computed a fast Fourier transform in real time on the digitized search coil signal to determine the voltage induced on the coil by each magnetic field (system by Primelec, Regensdorf, Switzerland). Coil orientation could be determined with an error of <7% over a range of ±30° and with a noise level of <0.05° (root mean square deviation). Search coil annuli were calibrated17 and then placed around the cornea of the right eye after local anesthesia with oxybuprocaine 0.4%. Eye-position signals were digitized at 1000 Hz per channel with 16-bit resolution.

Experimental Paradigms

Figure 1 depicts position traces of the target (top row) and of the right eye (bottom row) during continuous vertical smooth-pursuit stimulation in a typical example (subject SM). For stimulation, the laser dot was sinusoidally moved in the vertical or horizontal direction with a positional amplitude of 20° (40° peak-to-peak) and a peak velocity of 25.1 deg/s at a frequency of 0.2 Hz. Asymmetric vertical smooth-pursuit stimulation (first and second column) consisted of consecutive half sines, between which the target jumped from one eccentric quasistationary position to the opposite side. This jump elicited a 40° saccade. The laser was always extinguished for 200 ms before reappearing on the opposite side, allowing time for refixation. Symmetric vertical stimulation consisted of uninterrupted sinusoidal stimulation (third column). The same stimulus pattern was also applied in the horizontal direction, by using a left-to-right and a symmetric paradigm (not shown).

All subjects performed each of the five paradigms (down-to-up, up-to-down, symmetric vertical, left-to-right, and symmetric horizontal) twice: once for 2 minutes (short trials) and once for 20 minutes (long trials). Before each trial and every 5 minutes during the long trials, ocular drift velocity was measured during attempted consecutive fixations in gaze 20° up, straight ahead, and 20° down for the vertical paradigms and in gaze 20° left, straight ahead, and 20° right for the horizontal paradigms. To prevent suppression of ocular drift by these fixations, the laser dot appeared for only 20 ms every 2 seconds in otherwise complete darkness. Instantaneously (with time 0 seconds) after both long and short trials, ocular drift was recorded at the three gaze positions over several minutes until eye velocity was close to zero. In another set of experiments, in four of the six subjects, ocular drift before and after long trials was measured during fixation on the flashing laser dot that was presented straight ahead and on a ±20° square.

Data Analysis

Calibrated eye position from the right eye was processed with interactive programs (written in MatLab; The Math Works, Natick, MA). The slow-phase velocity of nystagmus was determined by computing the median velocity for consecutive sections of 400 ms. Such a procedure implicitly desaccades eye-movement signals, because of the short duration of saccades.18 Analyzed sections were interactively discarded, if the slow phase velocity was inconstant (i.e. changed by more than approximately 20% over the whole 400-ms period). To characterize ocular drift in the dark during attempted fixations on the flashing laser dot, eye velocity was plotted versus eye position for the three gaze directions (target at −20°, 0°, and 20°) along the vertical or horizontal meridians. Slope and bias drift (i.e. offset) were computed by fitting first-order regression lines through these scatterplots. Slope was set to zero, if R² < 0.5. Note that bias drift is equivalent to the intercept of the linear regression.

Direction-specific smooth-pursuit gain during tracking of the sinusoidally moving laser dot was computed by dividing eye velocity by target velocity at the moments of maximum target velocity in one direction. Data recorded over a period of 2 minutes were averaged.

To analyze whether ocular drift obeys Listing’s law, we fitted three-dimensional eye positions and their temporal derivatives (component eye velocities, which are not the same as angular velocities19) of nystagmus slow phases, to the equation15,20

$$\bar{r} = T \cdot \bar{v} + \bar{r}_c$$

with the free parameters $\bar{r}_c$ and T. T is a $3 \times 3$ matrix describing the dependence of the ocular drift on eye position. A significant ($P < 0.05$)
torsional drift velocity as a function of eye position or a significant torsional offset velocity represented violations of Listing’s law.

Statistical Analysis
Parameters measured from all subjects in different experimental paradigms were statistically compared by paired $t$-tests. The significance of linear regressions was computed by F statistics.

RESULTS
Figure 2 shows typical eye-position traces (subject SM) evoked by continuous asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation in the upward direction over 20 minutes (long down-to-up paradigm). Representative sections of 1.5 seconds are depicted in gaze up (top row), straight ahead (middle row), and down (bottom row). In each subpanel, the median upward drift velocity of the whole section is indicated. Eye velocity was measured in the dark before the stimulation started (0 Min.), immediately after the stimulation stopped (20 Min.), and every 5 minutes during the stimulation (5, 10, and 15 Min.). Note that the pursuit stimulus was turned off during the recording of ocular drift, and the subject had to fix on the flashing (20 ms every 2 seconds) laser dot at three positions ($-20^\circ$, $0^\circ$, and $20^\circ$) along the vertical meridian in otherwise complete darkness.

There was no drift. After only 5 minutes of continuous upward smooth-pursuit stimulation, downbeat nystagmus (DBN) appeared in gaze down and straight ahead, whereas, in gaze up, the vertical drift velocity stayed close to zero. This dependence of drift velocity on eye position is known as Alexander’s law.3,4 Further stimulation led to a small additional increase of vertical drift velocity in both down and straight ahead gaze positions, but drift velocity in gaze up became negative (at 10 and 15 minutes) or was close to zero (at 20 minutes).

After 20 minutes of continuous upward smooth-pursuit stimulation, subjects ($n = 4$) fixed on a flashing laser dot in nine cardinal gaze positions (see the Methods section). Figure 3 depicts average gaze positions (open circles) and associated drift velocities (arrows) in two typical subjects (Fig. 3A, same subject as in Figs. 1 and 2; Fig. 3B, subject with the
The purpose of the study was to investigate whether asymmetric vertical smooth-pursuit signals can lead to DBN, a hypo-
esis first proposed by Zee et al.,14 especially for DBN of cerebellar origin. As shown by clinical observations2,14 and quantitative measurements (Glasauer S, personal communication, 2004), in patients with cerebellar disease, upward smooth-pursuit eye movements are typically better preserved than downward. The model by Zee et al.14 was based on the assumption that a defect within the vertical smooth-pursuit system leads to an overbalance of upward visual velocity commands and therefore results in spontaneous upward drift. To test this hypothesis, we exposed healthy human subjects to continuous asymmetric vertical smooth-pursuit stimulation. Although 2 minutes of stimulation only induced short-pursuit afternystagmus, 20 minutes of asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation elicited a strong and enduring ocular drift that outlasted the visual stimulation for several minutes in the dark. The evoked drift was stronger in the upward than in the downward direction, a finding that cannot be explained by a higher gain of smooth-pursuit stimulation in the down-to-up direction than in the up-to-down direction, because the gains of upward and downward smooth pursuit at maximum target velocity were similar. An increase of ocular drift velocity when gaze moved in the direction of the nystagmus quick phases (i.e., an eye-position dependence according to Alexander’s law3,4) was found only for drift evoked in the upward direction.

We conjecture that an imbalance in the vertical smooth-pursuit system is the basis of upward drift in both healthy subjects and patients with cerebellar disease. In healthy subjects, a sustained overbalance of vertical smooth-pursuit signals in one direction was induced experimentally and led to a bias drift in the dominant direction, probably by activating an adaptive mechanism, which we shall call the pursuit-adaptation mechanism. In patients with cerebellar disease, vertical smooth pursuit is asymmetrically impaired, predominantly in the downward direction. The resultant imbalance of vertical smooth pursuit may be at least partly responsible for the spontaneous upward drift in cerebellar DBN.

The direction and speed of elicited smooth-pursuit eye movements are based on combined cell activity such as vector averaging.26,27 A directionally selective or asymmetric smooth-pursuit input, as induced by our paradigms, leads to an imbalance of firing rates and shifts the pooled response away from zero in the direction of the asymmetric input signal. If the increase of combined cell activity in one direction is transitory, the evoked drift declines rapidly toward zero, with a time constant similar to that in vestibular velocity storage.28,29 However, with an ongoing asymmetric smooth-pursuit input, drift velocity is increasingly stored in an adaptive mechanism with a longer time constant, apart from velocity storage. This pursuit-adaptation mechanism, then, could induce a bias drift velocity in the direction of asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation. Probably through efference copy or sensors in the eye muscles, the ocular motor system may be provided with an eye drift signal that is used to shorten the time constant of the velocity-to-position integrator, such that the drift velocity decreases when the eyes look in the direction of the drift in accordance with Alexander’s law. We found this law to be valid for upward drift after down-to-up stimulation.

**FIGURE 5.** Time course of ocular drift velocities elicited after 2 (short trials) and 20 (long trials) minutes of continuous asymmetric vertical (top and middle row) and horizontal (bottom row) smooth-pursuit stimulation. Immediately after stimulation stopped, subjects had to fix on the flashing laser dot at three positions (−20°, 0°, and 20°) along the vertical or horizontal meridians in otherwise complete darkness. The sequence of the three target locations was repeated continuously. (▼) Median drift velocities before pursuit adaptation; (●) median drift velocities after pursuits adaptation; solid bold lines: connected corresponding averages (n = 6). Abscissa: elapsed time after the stop of pursuit adaptation.
Stimulation of the pursuit system occurs constantly in daily life either by moving targets or visual suppression of the vestibulo-ocular reflex. Assuming that the pursuit adaptation mechanism may still operate in patients with cerebellar disease, as it does for podokinetic stimulation, the overbalance of upward visual velocity commands, resulting from the relatively better preserved upward smooth pursuit, may be at least partly responsible for this adaptive mechanism and may finally lead to spontaneous upward drift. In the light, healthy subjects quickly suppress the upward drift by the intact smooth-pursuit system. Patients with cerebellar disease, on the other hand, are unable to suppress their ongoing upward drift in the light, since smooth pursuit in the downward direction is deficient and hence not able to counteract the upward retinal slip.

Our results do not rule out another possible mechanism that causes the bias drift (drift in gaze straight ahead) in patients with cerebellar disease, which was recently proposed by Glassauer et al. They assumed that a lesion of pathways from the cerebellum to the neural integrator in the brain stem affects both the intrinsic coordinate system of the integrator and its time constant. In other words, the bias drift could also be the result of an upward shift of the null position for vertical gaze holding, in combination with leaky velocity-to-position integration. We cannot exclude the possibility that continuous asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation may directly affect the null position of the neural integrator.

Smooth-Pursuit Adaptation Versus Pursuit or Optokinetic Afternystagmus

Earlier studies on short asymmetric horizontal and vertical pursuit stimulation demonstrated a so-called pursuit affermstagma in the direction of prior pursuit. In these studies, asymmetric pursuit stimulation was applied for 1 to 2 minutes (stimulus velocities: 7.5–50 deg/s). The elicited drift decayed toward zero velocity within 15 seconds. Asymmetric pursuit stimulation was more effective upward than downward. Because of similar decay time constants, pursuit affermstagma was thought to be induced by a common velocity storage mechanism shared with the vestibular and optokinetic systems. Our results suggest otherwise. The long time constants (3–10 minutes) after 20 minutes of asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation cannot be explained on the basis of the velocity storage mechanism alone. In fact, earlier studies on horizontal and vertical optokinetic affermstagma reported time constants not exceeding 50 seconds in humans. In addition, the visual target in our experiments (diameter of laser spot: 0.1°), although a strong stimulus for the smooth-pursuit system, is a poor stimulus for optokinetic nystagmus (OKN). The signal from the neural integrator.

Pursuit-Induced Upward Drift in Violation of Listing's Law

Listing’s law states that rotation vectors describing eye positions lie in a plane—the so-called Listing’s plane. Downbeat nystagmus in patients with cerebellar disease violates Listing’s law, while pursuit eye movements remain in Listing’s plane. Three of the four subjects, in whom we were able to measure the induced ocular drift at horizontal and vertical gaze eccentricities, showed significant violations of Listing’s law. The fact that the drift after continuous upward smooth-pursuit stimulation was not in Listing’s plane, although smooth-pursuit eye movements elicited during visual stimulation obeyed Listing’s law, is noteworthy. The signal from the adaptation mechanism that stores unidirectional smooth-pursuit velocity does not seem to be kinematically processed with eye-position signals to conform with Listing’s law.

CONCLUSION

We have demonstrated in healthy human subjects that continuous asymmetric smooth-pursuit stimulation evokes a long-lasting ocular drift. Our healthy human model offers an explanation of how asymmetrically impaired vertical smooth pursuit (upward pursuit better preserved than downward pursuit), as it exists in cerebellar ocular motor syndrome, can lead to DBN. Of course, additional ocular motor signs typically associated with cerebellar DBN, such as the increase of drift with lateral gaze and the additional horizontal and torsional eye-position dependent drift, as well as gravity-dependence, involve other mechanisms and are not explained by the pursuit hypothesis alone. Finally, our experiments show that pursuit adaptation represents a useful technique by which strong and enduring vertical nystagmus can be generated in healthy human subjects.

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References


