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In vivo photoacoustic chorioretinal vascular imaging in albino mouse

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Photoacoustic ophthalmoscopy (PAOM) is a novel imaging modality, which is capable of non-invasively detecting optical absorption properties in the retina. We visualize the microvasculature in retina and choroid in albino mouse using PAOM guided by spectral-domain optical coherence tomography. Since albino mouse characterizes by lacking melanin in retinal pigment epithelium (RPE), PAOM illumination laser can penetrate through the RPE onto choroid, and consequently provides volumetric visualization of chorioretinal vasculatures as a result of strong hemoglobin optical absorption. The high-quality chorioretinal microvascular imaging acquired by PAOM implies its great potential in understanding pathological mechanisms and developing therapeutic strategies for major chorioretinal diseases that correlate with vascular disorders.

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Mouse models are critical laboratory animal models for investigating many ocular disorders because it has well-characterized genomes with many genetically defined strains and well-developed genetic manipulation approaches, which are not yet available in other mammals\cite{1,2}. The development of mouse models with various visual system abnormalities greatly benefits the understanding and treatment of major ocular diseases\cite{3-5}. Although retinal morphology can be characterized quantitatively by histologic examination in terminal experiments, non-invasive imaging method is preferred because it permits longitudinal evaluation of disease progression in individual animal subjects. Existing imaging modalities, including fundus photography, fluorescence/autofluorescence imaging, confocal scanning-laser ophthalmoscopy (cSLO), and optical coherence tomography (OCT), contribute significantly in monitoring retinal disease onset and progression, as well as therapeutic response\cite{6-8}. However, they are predominantly dependent on the back-reflected photons or emitted fluorescent light from the retina; therefore, the retinal pathophysiology information, which is specifically associated with tissue optical absorption properties, might be inaccessible by these traditional imaging technologies.

Photoacoustic (PA) imaging is capable of mapping optical energy deposition in biological tissue through detecting the thermo-elastically induced acoustic waves as a result of strong optical absorption by endogenous biomolecules or exogenous contrast agents\cite{9-12}. Recently, photoacoustic microscopy (PAM) is introduced in ophthalmologic imaging for rodent eyes, which offers optical-absorption-based anatomic and functional information that is complementary to the conventional imaging modalities\cite{13-17}. As an extension of optical-resolution PAM, newly-developed photoacoustic ophthalmoscopy (PAOM) takes advantage of laser-scanning pattern and unfocused ultrasonic detection, and thus enables the in vivo structural imaging for the posterior segment of rodent eyes, including retinal/choroidal vessels (RV/CV) and melanin in retinal pigmented epithelium (RPE)\cite{14-17}. PAOM has multiple advantages including label free, high scanning speed, volumetric capability, and physiologically-specific optical-absorption contrast. Moreover, PAOM is readily compatible with the well-established clinical ophthalmological imaging techniques (i.e., OCT, and SLO, etc.) for providing comprehensive evaluation of physiological and pathological status in the retina\cite{15-17}.

Among mouse models, albino mouse eye is increasingly utilized to investigate the pathological mechanisms of human blinding diseases due to its lack of pigmentation\cite{3-5}. In this work, we report on in vivo imaging of albino mouse eyes through an integrated PAOM and spectrum-domain OCT (SD-OCT) system. Guided by SD-OCT, PAOM acquires volumetric visualization of the retina and choroid microvascular networks.

Figure 1 shows the schematic diagram of the in vivo multimodal mouse retinal imaging system, which is described in detail previously\cite{17}. In brief, a 532-nm frequency-doubled Nd:YAG laser (SPOT-10-100, ElforLight Ltd, UK) with 2-ns pulse duration was used as the PAOM excitation source, and a broadband superluminescent diode (SLD, IPSDD0804, InPhenix, USA; 840-nm center wavelength; 50-nm bandwidth) was employed as the SD-OCT source. The PAOM illumination laser and the SD-OCT probing light were combined by a hot mirror (HM, FM02, Thorlabs, USA), which were then scanned by a galvanometer (GM, QS-7, Nutfield Technology, USA) and delivered into the eye posterior with a telescope configuration (L1 and L2). The laser-induced PA waves from the animal retina were detected by an unfocused needle ultrasonic transducer.
(40-MHz central frequency, 16-MHz bandwidth), which was gently placed in contact with the animal eyelid through ultrasound coupling gel. The amplified PA signals were digitized by a data acquisition board (200-MS/s sampling rate, CS14200, Gage Applied, Canada) triggered by signal of a photodiode (PD, DET10A, Thorlabs, USA). In the SD-OCT sub-system, the reflected photons from the reference arm and mouse retina were recorded using a home-built spectrometer. In the PAOM sub-system, we introduced an iris to adjust the laser beam diameter onto the animal pupil plane for a proper effective numerical aperture.

PAOM excitation laser energy was \( \sim 40 \text{ nJ per pulse} \), and SD-OCT probing light power was 0.8 mW, both of which were shown to be within the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) laser safety limit\(^{14}\). An analogue output board (PCI-6731, National Instruments, USA) was used to synchronize the PAOM and OCT sub-system. Also, it triggered both the PAOM laser firing and OCT signal acquisition, and controlled the galvanometer scanning. The present system has an A-line rate of 24 kHz, which takes only 2.7 s for simultaneously acquiring the PAOM and SD-OCT images (consisting of 256 B-scans with 256 A-lines per B-scan).

We performed in vivo retinal imaging in Swiss Webster albino mice (Harlan Laboratories, USA). The mice were anesthetized by intraperitoneal injection of a mixture of ketamine (87 mg/kg body weight) and xylazine (13 mg/kg body weight). Afterwards, we applied 0.5% tetracaine hydrochloride ophthalmic solution to paralyze the iris sphincter muscle, and 1% tropicamide ophthalmic solution to dilate the pupil. During imaging, commercial artificial tears were applied to the animal’s eye every other minute to prevent the cornea dehydration and cataract formation.

All experiments were performed in compliance with the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO) Statement for the Use of Animals in Ophthalmic and Vision Research, as well as the laboratory animal protocol approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee of Northwestern University. For eye safety concern, we set the whole imaging duration less than 5 min, including OCT alignment, the transducer orientation adjustment, and data acquisition. Follow-up examinations using OCT showed no noticeable retinal damages in imaged animals.

In this work, we initially identified the region of interest through the guidance of the real-time SD-OCT B-scan display while blocking the PAOM illumination. Afterwards, both imaging modalities were activated simultaneously to acquire three-dimensional (3D) dataset. Figure 2 shows the fundus images of SD-OCT and PAOM from an albino mouse eye. In order to exhibit the choroidal vasculatures clearly, we intentionally placed the optic disc off-center within the field of view where the density is low. In addition, the PAOM laser focus was carefully adjusted beneath the RV for imaging both retinal and choroidal vasculatures.

In the OCT en face image (Fig. 2(a)), the RV appear dark because few probing photons can be back-scattered due to the optical absorption of hemoglobin. In addition, they display a blurred appearance, which may be associated with the deteriorated optical focus caused by the severe mouse eye aberration\(^{18}\). In comparison, PAOM demonstrates a better contrast for imaging the RV and CV (in Fig. 2(b)) due to the dominating absorber of hemoglobin at the 532-nm illumination wavelength. In albino eyes, the concentration of melanin is minimal in RPE. As a result, PAOM excitation light can penetrate through the RPE layer, and generate high-amplitude PA signals from CV. This is different from the images from normal mouse eyes\(^{17}\), where PAOM cannot visualize choroid due to high-concentration RPE melanin absorbing the excitation laser. The fundus images from both PAOM and OCT modalities registered naturally because they have same laser scanning and delivery mechanisms, and the synchronized data acquisition.

Figures 2(c) and (d) illustrate the simultaneously acquired B-scan images of SD-OCT and PAOM, respectively. The dashed-line in Fig. 2(a) indicates their corresponding retinal location. In PAOM B-scan image (Fig. 2(d)), we observe the upper RV, which primarily perfuse the inner retina, and the CV locating behind the retina, which is responsible for supplying the RPE cells and photoreceptors\(^{19}\). Abnormalities in the retinal and choroidal circulations may result in several blinding diseases, such as diabetic retinopathy and macular degeneration\(^{19,20}\). Unlike PAOM, OCT cross-section retinal image (Fig. 2(c)) offers much more anatomic information, including the retinal nerve fiber layer (RNFL), the photoreceptor inner and outer segment junction (IS/OS), and the complex of RPE and choroid (RPE+C), because the individual layer has different optical scattering coefficients and refractive indexes. The difference between the two imaging modalities mainly comes from their different imaging contrast mechanisms. Since the optical absorption coefficients of these multiple retinal layers are very low\(^{21}\), their PA signals are undetectable in PAOM. On the other hand, PAOM has much worse axial resolution than OCT (23 and 6 µm, respectively), and thus it cannot resolve the fine layers.

Figure 3 demonstrates the volumetric imaging capability of PAOM. To show the RV and CV independently, the PAOM 3D raw dataset is manually segmented taking
mouse models is desired because the genetic manipula-
tion, mouse has stronger eye aberration, making the retinal imaging quality may be deteriorated from the retina. The cataract in mouse eye leads to the signal-to-noise ratio due to less back-reflected photons from the retina. The laser delivery alignment becomes harder owing to the very small pupils and rapid cataract formation. As a result, it is insufficient to reconstruct the CV image. On the other hand, high-amplitude PA waves are produced due to high optical absorption coefficient of RPE melanin. In our early work (Figs. 2(b) and 2(c) in Ref. [17]), PAOM provides a clear visualization of RPE melanin in addition to the RV in normal mouse eyes, while no signal is detected from CV. A potential solution is to administer indocyanine green (ICG) as contrast agent and to simultaneously tune PAOM excitation light to near-infrared (NIR) spectral range. Because ICG characterizes by moderate fluorescent quantum yield (∼10%) and excitation wavelength at NIR spectrum range, the high-amplitude PA signals can be produced from deeper vasculatures perfused by ICG solution[23]. In the future, we aim to develop ICG-based PAOM for imaging the choroidal vasculatures that are behind the melanin-packed RPE in pigmented eyes.

In conclusion, we demonstrate the capability of in vivo imaging choroidal vasculature in albino mouse eyes using PAOM guided by SD-OCT. Although both strong eye aberration and much smaller vessels make the retinal imaging difficult, PAOM provides well-resolved microvascular anatomy based on its optical-absorption imaging mechanism.

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