Standardization of Pre-Analytical Variables for Salivary Biomarker Studies in Alzheimer's Disease: A Comprehensive Review

Summary of the Publication: *Guidelines for the Standardization of Pre-Analytical Variables for Salivary Biomarker Studies in Alzheimer's Disease Research*

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Authors: Ted K.S. Ng, Chinedu Udeh-Momoh, Mei-Ann Lim, Helena Sophia Gleerup, Wayne Leifert, Catherine Ajalo, Nicholas Ashton, Henrik Zetterberg, Robert A. Rissman, Charisse N. Winston, Sid O' Bryant, Robert Jenkins, Eva Carro, Gorka Orive, Stefano Tamburin, Marcos Olvera-Rojas, Patricio Solis-Urra, Irene Esteban-Cornejo, Gustavo Alves Andrade Dos Santos, Kumar B. Rajan, David Koh, Anja Hviid Simonsen and Paul D. Slowey

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder characterized by cognitive decline and memory impairment, which impacts millions of people worldwide. With the growing global prevalence of AD, there is an urgent need for early diagnostic biomarkers that can help detect the disease at its onset and facilitate the development of therapeutic interventions. Salivary biomarkers have emerged as a promising tool for AD diagnosis due to their non-invasive nature, ease of collection, and potential for detecting disease-related changes in the oral cavity, however, the successful implementation of salivary biomarkers in AD research requires overcoming a major challenge: standardizing the pre-analytical variables (PAVs) that may influence the accuracy and reproducibility of results. The paper *"Guidelines for the Standardization of Pre-Analytical Variables for Salivary Biomarker Studies in Alzheimer's Disease Research"* provides an updated consensus on this critical issue.

The Importance of Pre-Analytical Variables in Salivary Biomarker Studies

Salivary biomarkers have significant potential in the early detection of Alzheimer's disease (AD), offering advantages such as non-invasive sampling, ease of collection, and the possibility of repeated measurements, however, the variability in salivary biomarker levels due to pre-analytical factors has been a major obstacle in the standardization of salivary diagnostic tests. Pre-analytical variables refer to the conditions and procedures that affect sample collection, storage, processing, and transportation before the final analysis. These factors can significantly influence the reliability of salivary biomarker measurements and introduce biases, leading to inconsistent or erroneous results, therefore, it is essential to establish standardized guidelines that ensure reproducibility and accuracy in salivary biomarker studies.

The Salivary Biomarkers for Dementia Research Working Group (SBDRWG), an ISTAART Professional Interest Area [PIA] under the umbrella of the Alzheimer's Association, conducted an updated review and provided consensus recommendations on how to standardize the pre-analytical conditions for salivary biomarker studies in AD research. The guidelines cover several aspects of the pre-analytical process, including sample collection protocols, storage conditions, sample processing, and the effects of individual factors on saliva composition.

Key Pre-Analytical Variables in Salivary Biomarker Studies

One of the primary challenges in salivary biomarker research is the variability introduced by factors such as the timing of saliva collection, the individual's diet, oral health, and circadian rhythms. Each of these factors can impact the concentration of biomarkers in saliva and may introduce confounding effects, making it difficult to draw meaningful conclusions from biomarker data. The guidelines put forth by the SBDRWG address these factors in detail and offer specific recommendations for their standardization.

1. **Timing of Sample Collection**: The timing of saliva collection is crucial as the concentration of certain biomarkers in saliva may fluctuate throughout the day due to circadian rhythms. For instance, cortisol and amyloid-beta (Aβ) levels in saliva have been shown to exhibit diurnal variations. The guidelines suggest that to minimize variability, saliva samples should be collected at the same time of day for all participants within a study, preferably in the morning, before any food or beverage intake. This standardization ensures that variations in biomarkers due to circadian changes are minimized.

2. **Dietary and Oral Health Factors**: The intake of food and beverages prior to saliva collection can significantly influence biomarker levels. Certain foods, such as coffee, alcohol, or spicy foods, can alter the chemical composition of saliva and introduce unwanted variability. Additionally, poor oral hygiene or oral infections may lead to the presence of bacteria or other contaminants that could skew results. To address this, the guidelines recommend that participants refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, or brushing their teeth at least one hour before the collection of saliva samples. Furthermore, it is advised that participants undergo an oral health screening to ensure that any oral conditions are identified and controlled.

3. **Saliva Collection Methods**: Different methods of saliva collection, such as passive drool, swabs, or suction devices, can lead to variations in biomarker concentration. The SBDRWG emphasizes the importance of selecting a consistent collection method across all study participants. Passive drool, where participants spit into a collection tube, is widely used because it is simple and non-invasive. However, specific protocols for handling saliva samples immediately after collection (e.g., cooling, centrifugation) are necessary to ensure that biomarkers are preserved without degradation. New collection methods using absorbent pad based materials can help standardize results and eliminate the need for separation of impurities from the specimen by other methods.

4. **Storage and Transport Conditions**: After saliva samples are collected, proper storage and transport conditions are vital to prevent biomarker degradation or changes due to temperature fluctuations. Biomarkers in saliva, such as proteins and RNA, can degrade if not stored at the appropriate temperature or processed promptly. The guidelines recommend that saliva samples be stored at -80°C if they are not immediately analyzed. If immediate analysis is not possible, samples should be stored on ice or at -20°C and processed as soon as possible to maintain biomarker stability.

5. **Gender, Age, and Health Factors**: The guidelines also highlight the importance of considering individual differences that may influence salivary biomarkers. Factors such as age, sex, genetic predispositions, and the presence of comorbidities (e.g., hypertension, diabetes) can all affect saliva composition. To control for these factors, the guidelines advocate for the collection of detailed demographic and clinical information from all study participants. Additionally, the inclusion of control groups with similar

characteristics is recommended to allow for more accurate comparisons between AD patients and healthy individuals.

Moving Towards Standardization

The standardization of pre-analytical variables is essential to ensure that salivary biomarkers can be reliably used in Alzheimer's disease research. Without standardization, biomarker data could be unreliable and lead to inconsistent conclusions, hindering the progress of AD diagnostics and therapeutics. The SBDRWG guidelines provide a clear roadmap for researchers to follow in order to minimize the effects of pre-analytical variables and increase the reproducibility and reliability of salivary biomarker studies.

However, while these guidelines are a significant step forward, ongoing efforts are needed to refine and optimize the protocols for different biomarker types and populations. Researchers are encouraged to conduct validation studies to assess the impact of various pre-analytical factors on different biomarkers, which will further inform the development of standardized guidelines.

Conclusion

The development of reliable, non-invasive biomarkers for Alzheimer's disease is essential for the early detection, diagnosis, and monitoring of the disease. Salivary biomarkers hold immense potential in this regard, but the success of these biomarkers depends heavily on controlling the pre-analytical variables that can influence their measurement. The guidelines provided by the Salivary Biomarkers for Dementia Research Working Group represent a significant advancement in the standardization of saliva-based biomarker research in AD. By following these guidelines, researchers can minimize variability, enhance reproducibility, and ensure that salivary biomarkers can be effectively used in clinical and research settings to improve Alzheimer's disease diagnosis and treatment.