Original Article

Hypertriglyceridemic waist phenotype: association with metabolic abnormalities in adolescents

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Objective: This study aimed to identify the prevalence of hypertriglyceridemic waist (HTW) phenotype, and to evaluate its association with metabolic abnormalities in adolescents of low socioeconomic status.

Method: This was a cross-sectional study with a random sample of 1,076 adolescents between 11 and 17 years, of both genders, from public schools. The participants underwent anthropometric measurements (weight, height, and waist circumference), and levels of total cholesterol, low-density-lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C), high-density-lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C), non-HDL cholesterol, triglyceride (TG), and fasting glucose were measured. Information regarding the socioeconomic status of the participants' families was obtained. The HTW phenotype was defined by the simultaneous presence of increased waist circumference (≥ 90th percentile for age and gender) and serum triglyceride levels (≥ 100 mg/dL). A logistic regression analysis was used to evaluate the associations of interest.

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KEYWORDS
Hypertriglyceridemic waist; Abdominal obesity; Lipids; Adolescent

Abstract
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Results: The prevalence of HTW phenotype was 7.2% among the adolescents, being higher in the presence of obesity (63.4%) and high levels of non-HDL cholesterol (16.6%) and LDL-C (13.7%). The bivariate analysis indicated that, of the metabolic variables, only blood glucose was not associated with the HTW phenotype. Multivariate analysis adjusted for age and gender indicated that the HTW phenotype was positively associated with high non-HDL cholesterol (odds ratio: 7.0; 95% CI: 3.9-12.6) and low HDL-C levels (odds ratio: 2.7; 95% CI: 1.5-4.8).

Conclusions: This study demonstrated that the HTW phenotype was associated with an atherogenic lipid profile, and this phenotype is suggested as a screening tool to identify adolescents with metabolic alterations.

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Introduction

Cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of death in developed and developing countries. In Brazil, they are a leading cause of death in all regions. Excess body weight, especially in the abdominal region, is a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease, and is associated with a set of metabolic abnormalities such as dyslipidemia, hypertension, insulin resistance, hyperinsulinemia, and diabetes.

The hypertriglyceridemic waist (HTW) phenotype is represented by the simultaneous presence of elevated serum triglycerides and increased waist circumference. This phenotype has been proposed as a diagnostic tool and predictor of the atherogenic metabolic triad (hyperinsulinemia, elevated levels of apolipoprotein B, and increased concentrations of patern B subtype of low-density lipoprotein [LDL-C]). It has also been proposed as an alternative to the diagnosis of metabolic syndrome, especially as an indicator of cardiovascular and metabolic risk associated with visceral obesity.

The pioneering study by Lemieux et al. reported that the HTW phenotype had a high correlation with the atherogenic metabolic triad, and was able to predict it. In that study, male subjects with elevated values of waist circumference and triglycerides showed increased risk for coronary artery disease when compared to those with normal levels. It was also observed that men with the HTW phenotype were 3.6 times more likely to have coronary artery disease.

Results from other studies conducted with both genders corroborated their findings.

In Brazil, cardiovascular diseases are the leading cause of morbidity and mortality, and lately they have been shown to affect young individuals, causing a significant reduction of productive life. Thus, early detection of metabolic alterations may contribute to the development of preventive health programs, aiming to preclude young...
people from developing early cardiovascular disease and the associated consequences.

Considering the scarcity of data on the HTW phenotype in the young population, especially in Brazil, this study aimed to identify the prevalence of the HTW phenotype and its association with metabolic abnormalities in adolescents from public schools in a city in Northeastern Brazil.

Method

Study design and population

This was a cross-sectional study, part of a larger study conducted with students aged 11 to 17 years, of both genders, from public schools of the city of Salvador, state of Bahia, Northeastern Brazil. Data from the school census were used, provided by the Education Secretariat of the State of Bahia. The sample size calculation was based on a population of 77,873 students, adopting the two-stage cluster sampling technique, represented by schools and classes.

This investigation was designed to meet several goals. In order to specifically investigate the HTW phenotype, the sampling design was defined based on a prevalence of 6.4% for the HTW phenotype, with 98% confidence and maximum permissible error of 2%, estimating a minimum number of 1,068 adolescents in the sample. This same sample size has 95% power to detect associations between HDL-C and non-HDL-C with HTW phenotype, with a significance level of 5%.

Twenty-three of the 207 public schools in Salvador were randomly selected; three classes were randomly selected per school, totaling 1,216 assessed adolescents. Of these, 1,076 had complete information for this study, exceeding the minimum necessary for the proposed objectives.

Pregnant women, nursing mothers, and adolescents with physical disabilities that prevented anthropometric assessments were excluded. All adolescents had written permission from their parents or legal guardians to participate, and those who showed alterations were referred to a multidisciplinary health care team. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Escola de Nutrição of the Universidade Federal da Bahia (08/09). Data collection was carried out in the school environment, by qualified and previously trained personnel, from July to December of 2009.

Anthropometric assessment

Anthropometric measurements were systematically collected. Weight was measured using a Master® portable digital scale, and height was assessed through a Leicester Height Measure® portable stadiometer, assuming a maximum variation of 100 g and 0.5 cm, respectively, for weight and height. Body mass index (BMI) was used for the diagnosis of anthropometric status, adopting the percentiles for age and gender proposed by the World Health Organization: underweight (< 3rd percentile), appropriate (3rd percentile ≤ BMI ≤ 85th percentile), overweight (85th ≤ BMI ≤ 97th percentile), and obesity (> 97th percentile). For the analysis, the following categories were considered: adequate anthropometric status (underweight and appropriate weight - reference category), overweight, and obesity.

Waist circumference was measured at the midpoint between the iliac crest and the outer surface of the last rib. Measurements were performed in duplicate by two independent examiners, accepting variations of 0.5 cm, and considering the mean between the values. Waist circumference was considered increased when the measured value was ≥ 90th percentile according to age and gender16,17 of the sample population.

Biochemical assessment

After a 12-hour fast, 5 mL of blood was collected from the adolescents, intravenously, in an appropriate environment at school. The samples were properly stored and transported to the Central Laboratory of the Complexo Hospitalar Universitário Professor Edgard Santos, where they were analyzed. Serum levels of total cholesterol (TC), high-density lipoprotein (HDL), and triglycerides were determined by enzymatic methods, LDL-C was calculated using Friedewald’s formula when triglycerides were lower than 400 mg/dL. The following values were considered adequate: total cholesterol < 150 mg/dL, LDL-C < 100 mg/dL, HDL-C ≥ 45 mg/dL, and triglycerides < 100 mg/dL. For the non-HDL cholesterol, adequate values were < 123 mg/dL. Fasting glucose was determined by the enzymatic method, with adequate values < 100 mg/dL.

Hypertriglyceridemic waist phenotype

The HTW phenotype was defined by the simultaneous presence of increased waist circumference (≥ 90th percentile for age and gender of the sample population) and serum triglyceride levels (≥ 100 mg/dL).

Socioeconomic status

Information on the socioeconomic status was provided by the adolescents’ parents or guardians. To characterize the socioeconomic conditions, the Brazilian Economic Classification Criterion was used, which considers the possession of household goods and educational level of the household head, using a rating scale that classifies individuals into categories from A to E, starting with the highest purchasing power. The adolescents were stratified into the categories C, D, and E, and were grouped as better socioeconomic status (categories C and D-reference) and worse socioeconomic status (category E). No individuals were identified in the higher income categories (A and B).

Statistical analysis

The population was characterized through descriptive analysis, using proportion for categorical data and mean (standard deviation) for continuous variables. Logistic regression was used to estimate odds ratios (OR) and their respective 95% confidence interval (95% CI) to evaluate the associations of interest, using two-tailed tests and adopting
a significance level of 5%. Continuous variables were
categorized and included in bivariate and multivariate
models. The associations between the response varia-
tive and exposure variables were initially estimated us-
ing bivariate logistic regression.
Variables with p-value ≤ 0.20 in this analysis were
selected for further multivariate analysis. Only those
variables with p < 0.05 remained in the final explanat-
ory model. Statistical analyses were adjusted for the com-
plex sample design, by using SVY commands of Stata release
10.0.

Results

Most of the students were females (59.7%), with a mean age
of 14.4 (1.5) years. Regarding anthropometric status, the
majority were adequate (75.8%), followed by underweight
(7.9%), overweight (9.8%), and obese (6.5%). Table 1 shows
the waist circumference percentiles for age and gender of
the studied adolescents. The 90th percentile was considered
increased waist circumference.

The prevalence of HTW phenotype was 7.2% among
the adolescents in this study. The prevalence of isolated
components of the HTW phenotype was 11.3% and 42.5% for
increased waist circumference and high serum triglyceride
levels, respectively.

A higher prevalence of HTW phenotype was observed
at age 11 years for both genders (males 15.0%, females
13.1%). In males, a higher prevalence of HTW phenotype
was identified up to 14 years of age. At ages 15 and 16
years, inversions in the prevalence of HTW phenotype were
observed, with higher values found in females.

After 16 years of age, the prevalence of HTW phenotype
decreased in both genders (males 2.7%, females 3.1%). It
is noteworthy that no statistically significant difference
(p > 0.05, Fisher’s exact test) was observed for these
associations (data not shown in table).

The mean values of metabolic parameters are shown
in Table 2. Adolescents with HTW phenotype presented
significantly higher mean values of total cholesterol,
LDL-C, and non-HDL cholesterol, as well as lower mean
HDL-C levels, when compared to those without the HTW
phenotype. There was no significant difference in mean
glucose levels between adolescents with and without the
HTW phenotype.

The prevalence of HTW phenotype was higher among
obese adolescents (63.4%), who presented high levels of total

### Table 1

Percentiles of waist circumference (cm) by age and gender of adolescents (11 to 17 years) from public schools, Salvador, BA, Brazil, 2009-2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (y)</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>50</th>
<th>75</th>
<th>90</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>50</th>
<th>75</th>
<th>90</th>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>66.20</td>
<td>70.38</td>
<td>74.85</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>63.00</td>
<td>67.37</td>
<td>83.65</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>62.35</td>
<td>68.11</td>
<td>77.20</td>
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<td>65.00</td>
<td>69.90</td>
<td>79.75</td>
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<td>75</td>
<td>64.35</td>
<td>70.00</td>
<td>82.24</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>66.00</td>
<td>71.60</td>
<td>80.46</td>
</tr>
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<td>14</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>67.00</td>
<td>72.15</td>
<td>81.96</td>
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<td>67.05</td>
<td>70.98</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>69.55</td>
<td>75.50</td>
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<td>79</td>
<td>68.20</td>
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<td>75.50</td>
<td>82.52</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>70.50</td>
<td>75.00</td>
<td>85.89</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>71.70</td>
<td>75.45</td>
<td>78.60</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>68.20</td>
<td>76.00</td>
<td>84.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

Metabolic characteristics according to the hypertriglyceridemic waist (HTW) phenotype of adolescents (11 to 17 years) from public schools, Salvador, BA, Brazil, 2009-2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metabolic variables</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean levels (SD)*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total cholesterol (mg/dL)</td>
<td>1.076</td>
<td>158.6 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDL-C (mg/dL)</td>
<td>1.074</td>
<td>89.4 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDL-C (mg/dL)</td>
<td>1.076</td>
<td>48.4 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-HDL cholesterol (mg/dL)</td>
<td>1.076</td>
<td>110.1 (1.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triglycerides (mg/dL)</td>
<td>1.076</td>
<td>102.4 (1.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glycemia (mg/dL)</td>
<td>1.076</td>
<td>90.2 (0.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HDL-C, high-density lipoprotein cholesterol; HTW(−), absent hypertriglyceridemic waist phenotype; HTW(+), present hypertriglyceridemic waist phenotype; LDL-C, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol; non-HDL, non-high density lipoprotein; SD, standard deviation.

HTW phenotype was defined by the simultaneous presence of increased waist circumference (≥ 90th percentile for age and gender) and high levels of triglycerides (≥ 100 mg/dL).

*Student’s t-test.
cholesterol (10.5%), high LDL-C (13.7%), low HDL-C (11.3%), and high non-HDL cholesterol levels (16.6%) (Table 3).

The results of the bivariate analysis indicated that the HTW phenotype was associated with high non-HDL cholesterol (OR = 6.6, 95% CI: 3.8-11.7), LDL-C (OR = 4.0, 95% CI: 2.3-7.0), total cholesterol (OR = 3.5, 95% CI: 1.9-6.4), and low HDL-C (OR = 2.5, 95% CI: 1.4-4.4). Among the metabolic variables, only fasting glucose was not associated with HTW phenotype. The result of the multivariate analysis, adjusted for gender and age, indicated that the HTW phenotype was positively associated with high non-HDL cholesterol (OR = 7.0, 95% CI: 3.9-12.6) and low HDL-C levels (OR = 2.7, 95% CI: 1.5-4.8) (Table 4).

**Discussion**

This study represents the first study in Brazil that used a representative sample of adolescents of both genders, who attended public schools in a state capital in Northeastern Brazil. In this study, the prevalence of HTW phenotype was 7.2%, indicating that it is an important clinical event among the studied adolescents. It is also noteworthy the higher occurrence of the HTW phenotype among adolescents with high levels of non-HDL cholesterol and low levels of HDL-C, when compared with those with adequate levels of these markers of cardiovascular risk.
The prevalence of HTW phenotype in adolescents in this study was similar to those identified in adolescents from Tehran, Iran (6.4%), and in children and adolescents in Iran (8.5%). The only study on HTW phenotype in adolescents in Brazil was performed by Pereira in Viçosa, state of Minas Gerais, and found a prevalence of 2.6% for HTW phenotype in female adolescents aged 14 to 19 years. This differs from the present findings, which identified a higher prevalence for the same gender and age range (7.3%).

It is possible that the differences in the prevalence of HTW phenotype in the studies performed in Brazil and in other regions of the world are due to the cutoffs used, as reference values for waist circumference and triglyceride levels may differ depending on ethnicity and lifestyles, which alters the accumulation of abdominal fat. Another aspect to be considered regarding the waist circumference measurement is the variation, observed in several studies, in the anatomical location used for this measurement. Thus, the lack of standardization for worldwide use of serum triglycerides levels are considered an independent risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

Data from this study indicate a positive and significant association between the HTW phenotype and an atherogenic lipid profile, with no association with fasting glucose. These results corroborate those by Esmailzadeh et al., who showed that HTW phenotype was positively associated with high blood pressure, total cholesterol, LDL-C, and low HDL-C levels, but not with fasting glycemia. The study by Alavian et al. also indicated that the prevalence of alterations in the lipid profile was higher among Iranian adolescents with HTW phenotype, a result similar to that observed among Brazilian adolescents. Conversely, the present study showed no association between HTW phenotype and fasting glucose, as observed in Iranian children and adolescents, although the prevalence of hyperglycemia was high (13.8%).

Studies performed in adolescents from different regions of Brazil have identified a hyperglycemia prevalence ranging from 0.5% to 24.3%. This fact deserves attention, as glycemia is related to obesity and cardiovascular diseases, showing late alterations.

The HTW phenotype may represent a marker of excess visceral fat, the most common cause of insulin resistance.
which is considered an important etiopathogenic factor for the development of glucose intolerance and hyperinsulinemia. It is noteworthy that individuals with visceral obesity also tend to have hypertriglyceridemia and low HDL-C, as well as elevated small, dense particles of LDL-C and elevated apolipoprotein B concentrations, characterizing an atherogenic lipid profile, although many times serum concentrations of LDL-C are normal. Another variable related to the atherogenic lipid profile is high non-HDL cholesterol levels, which includes all cholesterol that have triglyceride-rich lipoproteins in their composition, potentially atherogenic. The results of Bos et al. showed that non-HDL cholesterol increased the risk associated with the presence of HTW phenotype by 50%.

It is believed that, in the presence of visceral obesity, the lipolytic activity in visceral adipocytes is high, resulting in an increased release of free fatty acids and consequent cellular accumulation, mainly in the liver, muscles, and pancreas. Excess free fatty acids in the liver provide a substrate for the production of hepatic triglycerides and triglyceride-rich lipoproteins in the circulation. Furthermore, excess circulating free fatty acids can induce insulin resistance and hyperinsulinemia, due to glucose uptake inhibition and to oxidation by muscles and other organs. Thus, individuals with visceral obesity have important metabolic alterations that can be diagnosed early through the HTW phenotype.

Studies on the HTW phenotype in childhood and adolescence are scarce. However, several investigations have been performed in European, Canadian, and North-American adult populations. The results of these studies have indicated a positive association between HTW phenotype and higher mean values of total cholesterol, LDL-C, and non-HDL cholesterol, and lower HDL-C levels, corroborating the findings of other studies involving younger age ranges, possibly indicating that the phenomenon occurs both in adolescence and in adulthood.

Studies with a cohort design may indicate whether the event begins in childhood and/or adolescence and continues into adulthood, as it occurs with atherosclerotic plaque formation. The available evidence is consistent for the association between HTW phenotype and atherogenic metabolic abnormalities and cardiovascular risk. This evidence can sustain the position of many investigators that the HTW phenotype can be used as an accurate and inexpensive screening tool to identify individuals at cardiometabolic risk, who would benefit from proper prevention and/or early treatment. Moreover, information is consistent for the indication and use of HTW phenotype as a tool of equal or greater importance than the current diagnostic criteria for metabolic syndrome for the identification of cardiovascular risk.

The HTW phenotype is a practical and easily applied tool, as its use depends only on waist circumference and fasting triglycerides measurements. Waist circumference is an anthropometric indicator strongly associated with abdominal obesity, predicting hyperinsulinemia and elevated levels of apolipoprotein B, whereas triglyceride concentrations have the power to predict the small, dense particles of LDL-C, which cannot be assessed by LDL-C determination, only through sophisticated and expensive methods. Thus, the HTW phenotype predicts the atherogenic metabolic triad, nontraditional risk factors for coronary artery disease, which have been considered better predictors of cardiovascular disease.

Some limitations of this study should be considered. The first concerns the cross-sectional design, which precludes the establishment of a cause-and-effect association between events; however, it raises several questions that need further research to be answered. The second is the lack of information on some of the risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as hypertension, alcohol consumption, smoking, physical activity, and inflammatory markers and cardiovascular risk protectors that were not collected in this study. The third is the lack of sample population of higher economic status, making it impossible to compare the different strata. Additionally, the lack of standardization of available classification criteria for HTW phenotype, mainly in the younger population, must be mentioned. However, the results of this study are reinforced by the biological plausibility and similar results reported by prospective studies supporting the theory that the HTW phenotype is a good risk indicator for cardiovascular disease morbimortality.

Thus, the clinical results of this study supplement others, adding evidence that the HTW phenotype is associated with an atherogenic lipid profile, contributing to support the use of HTW phenotype in clinical and epidemiological studies due to its ease of application, practicality, accuracy, and low cost. Hence, it can provide early identification of children, adolescents, and adults who may be at metabolic risk, and is very useful in primary care, guiding the adoption of primary prevention measures. It is emphasized, therefore, that physicians and other professionals working in primary care should be instructed in order to identify these individuals early and manage them adequately, regarding both prevention and therapeutics.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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