

Effect of short-term peripheral myopic defocus on ocular biometrics using Fresnel “press-on” lenses in humans

Ryo Kubota (✉ dr.kubota@kubotavision.com)

Kubota Vision Inc.

Nabin R Joshi

Manhattan Vision Associates/Institute for Vision Research

Inna Samandarova

Manhattan Vision Associates/Institute for Vision Research

Maksud Oliva

Manhattan Vision Associates/Institute for Vision Research

Arkady Selenow

Manhattan Vision Associates/Institute for Vision Research

Amitava Gupta

Kubota Vision Inc.

Steven R Ali

Manhattan Vision Associates/Institute for Vision Research

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Abstract

This study assessed axial length and choroidal thickness changes following short-term peripheral myopic defocus in normal adult subjects. Twenty subjects underwent defocus sessions by viewing a full-field projected movie 4 meters away for 4 hours in the morning, while wearing spectacle lenses, corrected for distance vision in both eyes. The right eye, serving as the test eye, was peripherally defocused using a Fresnel lens overlay of + 3.50D with a central aperture of 11.5 mm, while the left eye served as the control. A subset of 10 subjects from the same cohort also underwent additional defocus sessions with + 5.00D of peripheral defocus. Axial length was measured and radial sub-foveal choroidal scans were obtained before and after the defocus sessions. The mean increase in axial length of the test eyes was 8 μm ($p < 0.05$) less than that of the control eyes with + 3.50D peripheral defocus condition and 14 μm ($p < 0.05$) less than the control eyes with + 5.00 D peripheral defocus condition. The difference in mean changes for choroidal thickness between test and control eyes were not significant for both dioptric conditions. Our results demonstrated that short-term peripheral myopic defocus significantly inhibited axial elongation in adult humans, without significant changes in choroidal thickness.

Introduction

The human eye is sensitive to the presence of light as well as its optical vergence direction. Several human studies have shown that the eye can sense the direction of full-field defocus relative to the retinal surface, whether myopic, hyperopic, or astigmatic in nature [1–5]. This physiological phenomenon has been investigated by measuring the central axial length (from the anterior part of the cornea to the posterior retinal pigment epithelium) and the central (sub-foveal) choroidal thickness, before and after controlled defocus sessions.

Although the exact mechanism of the biometric changes due to defocus in human eyes remains unclear, it has been shown through experimentation in animal models that the defocus signals are received and interpreted locally within the eye [6–8]. Rymer and Wildsoet proposed a mechanism in which the retina, and or the retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) can “read” the direction of focus of incoming light rays on the retina and affecting the choroid to actively change its thickness in order to move the retina towards the image plane, via changes in retinal homeostasis mediated by neurotransmitters [9, 10]. Hence, in the case of myopic defocus, the relative reduction in axial length would theoretically result from thickening of the sub-foveal choroid; in the case of hyperopic defocus the opposite should occur, in which the increased axial length would result from thinning of the sub-foveal choroid. Additionally, underlying these induced changes in axial length and choroidal thickness, there is also the natural daily circadian rhythm changes in axial length and choroidal thickness [11–14]. In general, during the morning hours the choroid thins while the axial length elongates, and in the afternoon the inverse occurs. Literature states that the diurnal changes of axial length are greater in magnitude than choroidal thickness changes [11–14]. Despite the inverse correlation of axial length and choroidal thickness changes which occur throughout the day, the total variance of change in axial length magnitude cannot be explained *entirely* by the changes in sub-

foveal choroidal thickness. This opens up the possibility of other contributing factors such as intra-ocular pressure which also has a rhythmic circadian property [14].

Read et al, Chiang et al, and Wang et al, all showed that following short term (30 minutes to 2 hours) full-field monocular myopic defocus in humans, the axial length decreased, and the choroidal thickness increased in the test eye. In the control eye, the biometrics underwent normal diurnal changes (i.e., the axial length elongates, and the choroid thins, peaking around noon then possibly reversing in direction) [1, 12–16]. Thus, literature clearly shows that the application of full field myopic defocus alters the natural daily variations of axial length and choroidal thickness in human subjects [2, 3].

The effects and possible physiological correlates of peripheral defocus on central biometric components have been explored in various animal models. Smith et al, 2007 showed that peripheral defocus cues only (without central defocus cues) were able to affect axial elongation in rhesus monkeys. They accomplished this by ablating the central 10–12 degrees of the visual field and then using various plus and minus lenses as defocus stimuli. Their results demonstrated that the retinas responded to form deprivation, and therefore, visual signals from the fovea were not essential for emmetropization and defocus mediated ocular growth [17]. Smith et al, 2020, further showed that the placement of the peripheral defocus zone affects the potency of defocus-mediated ocular growth [18]. After testing different defocus zones, they found that myopic defocus in the near periphery (less than 20 degrees from the fovea) showed the greatest potency in the slowing of axial growth. Contrary to the results obtained in rhesus monkeys, Schippert et al, 2006 failed to show effectiveness of peripheral myopic defocus in guiding a predicted pattern of ocular growth in young chickens [19]. Hence, it can be speculated that the mechanisms and biometrics involved in ocular growth vary across different species. Further research is needed to investigate underlying factors (e.g., duration, magnitude, direction, and location of defocus) that contribute to such physiological changes across different species, especially humans.

Biometric changes following short-term (less than 6 hours) peripheral myopic defocus has not been studied in humans. Hence, the objective of our study was to determine whether short-term peripheral myopic defocus would cause predictable changes in central ocular biometry (i.e., axial length shortening and choroidal thickening) in humans. We examined biometric changes in adult human subjects with a non-invasive methodology using two different magnitudes of dioptric (D) defocus supplied by peripherally placed Fresnel lenses, leaving the central 11.5 mm of visual field unaffected. This diameter was found to be optimal for central visual performance, compared to the other lesser diameters [20].

Methods

Twenty (20) subjects with normal vision (13 females and 7 males, mean age 25.5, range = 19–31 years) were recruited for the study. The mean spherical equivalent refractive error of the cohort was -2.02 D, ranging from plano to -4.13 D. All the subjects had a refractive cylinder of ≤ 0.75 D. There were 14 Asian subjects and 6 Caucasian subjects. Written informed consent was obtained from all subjects before enrollment, and the study adhered to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki. The Informed Consent

Form and protocol were approved by an independent Institutional Review Board (IRB ID # 7716, Sterling IRB, Georgia, USA).

Upon consenting, a complete evaluation of the subjects was performed, which included evaluation of ocular health, visual acuity, and subjective refraction. Inter-pupillary distances were measured with a manual pupillometer. The subjects were individually fitted with appropriate frames and CR-39 prescription lenses without any coating, which were best corrected for distance refraction. The subjects then progressed to the defocus study sessions.

The changes in biometric components were explored using a monocular defocus protocol, in which the right eye was chosen as the test eye and the left eye as the control. Similar protocols have been extensively used in the literature to study the physiological effects of full-field monocular defocus stimuli [2, 14]. In this study, peripheral myopic defocus was applied with “press-on” Fresnel lenses (3M Health Care, MN, USA) with an approximately 30-degree (11.5 mm) central aperture on top of the spectacle lens on the right eye, centered on the pupillary axis. The fully corrected spectacle lens of the left eye had no additional defocus applied. The emmetropic subjects were given spectacles with plano refractive correction, and the Fresnel lenses were positioned accordingly.

The rationale for the size of the clear, central aperture came from our previous set of experiments where we showed that the 11.5 mm aperture was optimal in terms of visual performance compared to smaller apertures [20]. Two different dioptric powers of the Fresnel lenses were used in the study, + 3.50 and + 5.00D. Twenty subjects completed the defocus session for the + 3.50D condition. A subset of 10 subjects from the same cohort also underwent a session with + 5.00D of peripheral defocus supplied through Fresnel lenses on a different day following at least 24 hours of washout period in order to assess a potential effect of a higher dioptric stimulus. Due to operational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, the remaining 10 subjects were not able to complete the + 5.00D defocused condition testing.

Description Of The Defocus Sessions:

All test sessions started at approximately 8:30 A.M. to assure that the subjects’ eyes were defocused during the ascending phase of the diurnal curve. Before each defocus session, both intra-ocular pressure and blood pressure were measured in all subjects to ensure normal ranges. The illuminance of the room was kept at low photopic levels. The subjects were instructed to watch color movies on a screen (8 feet high X 12 feet wide) at 4 meters away, while wearing spectacles corrected and fitted for distance refraction (both eyes) for 10 minutes to “wash out” any effects from the prior near viewing tasks.

Six measurements of axial length for each eye were obtained with a Lenstar APS 900 system (Haag-Streit AG, Koeniz, Switzerland) on 5 different occasions: once before the initiation of defocus (baseline after the “washout”), every hour during the defocus sessions, and at the termination of the session at approximately 12:30 pm. All the measurements were performed carefully with minimal movement from the subjects. The Lenstar APS 900 is a non-contact, optical biometer based on the optical low-coherence

principle. We used the automated acquisition mode for all the subjects, which minimized any operator-related biases.

In addition, 2 sets of OCT acquisitions, each consisting of 6 radial spokes under the Enhanced Depth Imaging (EDI) mode, were obtained for each eye in all subjects before and after defocus sessions, with the center of the scan passing through the fovea using a Heidelberg Spectralis OCT2 (Heidelberg Inc., Germany). The scans were approximately 30 degrees in diameter, and 50 ART scans were obtained with optimum signal to noise ratio. Following a quality check, an unmasked designee converted the images into “raw exports” before sending them to trained, masked researchers to outline the boundary of the choroid. Sub-foveal choroidal thickness over the central 0.50 mm was evaluated with a custom segmentation program designed by the study group. This program scaled the images to correct for lateral magnification based on subjects’ biometric components. The schematic representation of the study measurement timeline is shown in Fig. 1.

For the statistical analysis, the change of axial length and sub-foveal choroidal thickness was determined by comparing the measurements taken at the end of defocus and those taken at baseline. The means and standard error of mean (SEM) were used to describe the distributions, and 2-tailed, unpaired t-tests were used to evaluate systematic differences (if any). Data was analyzed using Microsoft Excel (Microsoft Corporation, Seattle, WA). GraphPad Prism 8 (GraphPad software, San Diego, CA) was used to perform the analysis and prepare the figures. Bonferroni’s correction was applied whenever applicable and a corrected value of $p < 0.05$ was considered for statistical significance.

Results

The mean axial length elongation was significantly less for the test eye as compared to the control eye after 4 hours of peripheral myopic defocus for both defocus conditions ($t = 2.47$, $df = 38$, corrected $p = 0.036$ for + 3.50D defocus condition; and $t = 2.73$, $df = 18$, corrected $p = 0.027$ for + 5.00 D defocus condition after Bonferroni’s correction for multiple comparisons). Figure 2 shows the mean axial length change in microns (Mean \pm SEM) for test and control eyes for both dioptric myopic defocus magnitudes.

The magnitude of changes in sub-foveal choroidal thickness were less obvious than those observed for axial length as shown in Fig. 3. For the + 3.50 D peripheral defocus condition, both the test and control eye choroids thinned; however, the magnitude of change was slightly higher for the control eye compared to the test eye (-10 vs -8 μm), without statistical significance ($t = 0.46$, $df = 38$, at $p = 0.64$). For the + 5.00 D peripheral defocus condition, the sub-foveal choroidal thickness in the control eye thinned by 4 μm , while the test eye thickened by 7 μm compared to the baseline. The corrected p-value for the differences was still not statistically significant ($t = 2.15$, $df = 18$, corrected $p = 0.08$).

Figure 4 shows the change in axial length of the control eye and test eye over 4 hours of defocus (Mean \pm SE) for the two defocus conditions at each measurement point. Linear regression models were fit with the line passing through the origin (assuming the change is zero at baseline).

As shown in Fig. 4, the rate of increase of axial length for the control eye was larger than that of the test eye. The rate of increase or slope of the straight-line fit was approximately 3 times greater for the control eye in the + 3.50 condition and 7 times greater for the control eye in the + 5.00D condition. It is notable that the rate of increase for the control eye was almost identical for both dioptric conditions, as demonstrated by the slope of the two best fit linear fits in Fig. 4.

Discussion

Pertaining to axial length, we have shown for the first time in human subjects that short-term peripheral myopic defocus alone (with a clear central zone of 11.5mm diameter) can reduce the elongation of central axial length during the ascending phase of the circadian rhythm. Additionally, this phenomenon was repeatable and qualitatively correlated with two different magnitudes of peripheral defocus i.e., + 3.50 D and + 5.00 D. In other words, the stronger the defocus signal in the periphery, the stronger the tendency of effect. The effects of peripheral myopic defocus on ocular biometrics were similar in nature to the effects of full field myopic defocus (as stated in the literature) over time, where the changes in test eyes were consistently smaller than the changes in the control eyes during the corresponding time of the day [2, 16]. Thus, our results indicate that the defocus signal processing properties of the human eye remain intact even with only peripheral short-term myopic defocus, resulting in axial length changes along the central axis. More precisely, when only the peripheral image plane was moved anterior of the retina (i.e., peripheral myopic defocus), the central retina attempted compensation by moving itself forward (i.e., decreasing axial length). Pertaining to changes in sub-foveal choroidal thickness, our results were inconclusive. As shown in Fig. 3, the choroid thinned in the test eyes for + 3.50 D condition, while it thickened for + 5.00 D dioptric condition. Furthermore, the Bonferroni correction rendered all comparisons insignificant.

Read et al, 2010 showed almost a perfect correlation between axial length and choroidal thickness changes following 1 hour of full field myopic defocus, i.e., when axial length decreased by approximately 12 μm , the choroidal thickness increased by 12 μm [1]. Similarly, but not so definitively, Wang et al, 2016 found the same opposing trends in axial length and choroidal thickness but without significance for subjects undergoing full field myopic defocus [16]. In our current study, the differences in sub-foveal choroidal thickness changes for test and control eyes following defocus sessions were similar to those reported by Wang et al, 2016. Our results also showed a trend (without reaching statistical significance), whereby the mean choroidal thickness measures for the test eyes were thicker than the control eyes after the defocus sessions.

Future Directions And Implications:

While this study showed significant findings in the morning hours (i.e., the ascending circadian phase), it would be beneficial to conduct studies in the descending part of the circadian curve to add further insight into the relationship between peripheral defocus and biometric changes. Also, the use of hyperopic

defocus and/or light diffusers (i.e., vergence signal diffusers) applied in the periphery can give further insight into the physiological relationship between peripheral defocus and biometric changes.

Finally, from an optical perspective, when the peripheral image plane was moved in front of the retina, the central retina attempted compensation by moving itself forward. These findings enhance our understanding of the interaction of biometric aspects of the eye to peripheral myopic defocus. Further research is warranted to understand the underlying mechanisms of ocular biometric changes in response to various peripheral defocus applications whether the application stimuli be short-term versus long-term, myopic versus hyperopic, low versus high dioptric magnitude, central versus peripheral, and small versus large (in size).

Declarations

Competing Interests

R.K. and A.G. are part of Kubota Vision Pharmaceutical Holdings Inc. A.S. and S.R.A of Manhattan Vision Associates/Institute for Vision Research received funding from Kubota Vision Pharmaceutical Holdings Inc. to perform the study. N.R.J., I.S. and M.O. are employees of Institute for Vision Research and have no disclosures.

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Figures

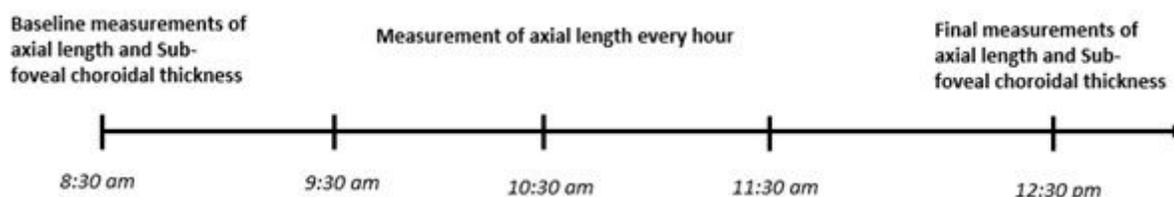


Figure 1

Schematic representation of the measurement procedure milestones

Change in axial length after 4 hours of defocus

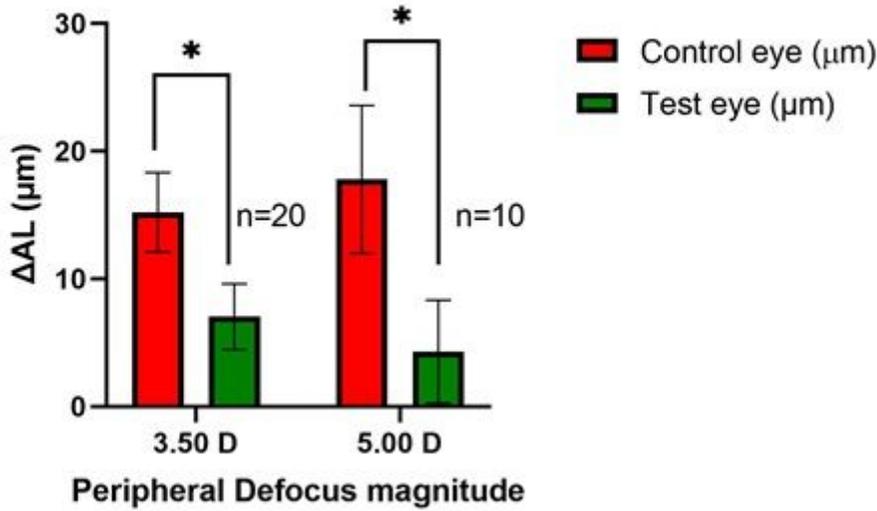


Figure 2

Axial length changes (Mean ± SEM) following 4 hours of peripheral defocus sessions Note: * represent significant differences with corrected p<0.05

Change in sub-foveal choroidal thickness after 4 hours of defocus

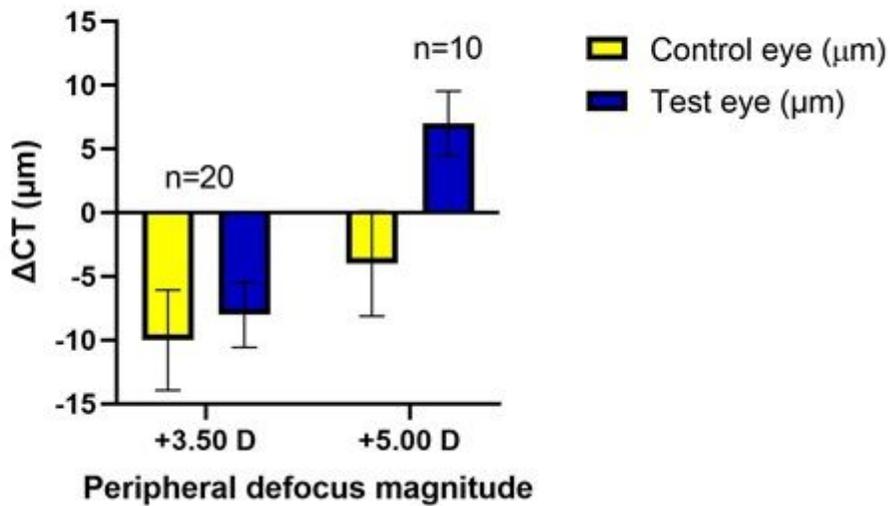
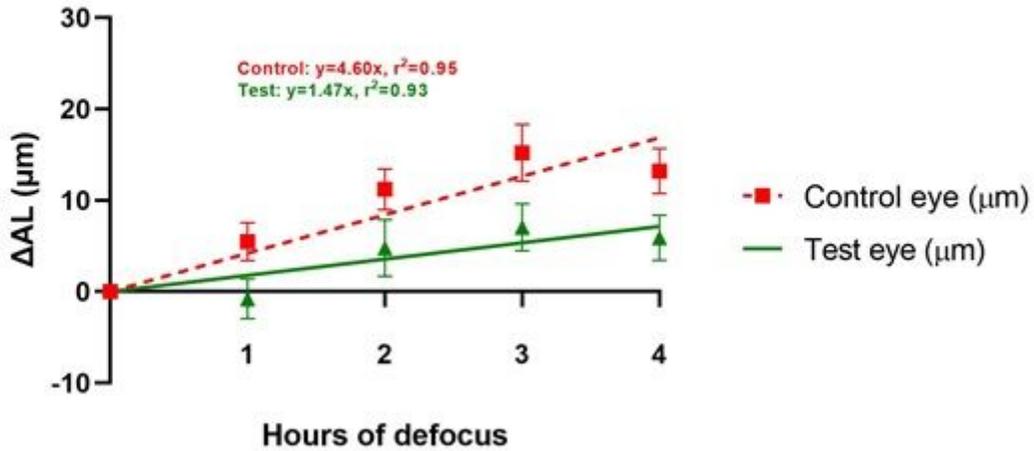


Figure 3

Sub-foveal choroidal thickness changes (Mean ± SEM) following 4 hours of peripheral defocus sessions

Axial length changes over time with +3.50D of peripheral defocus



Axial length changes over time with +5.0D of peripheral defocus

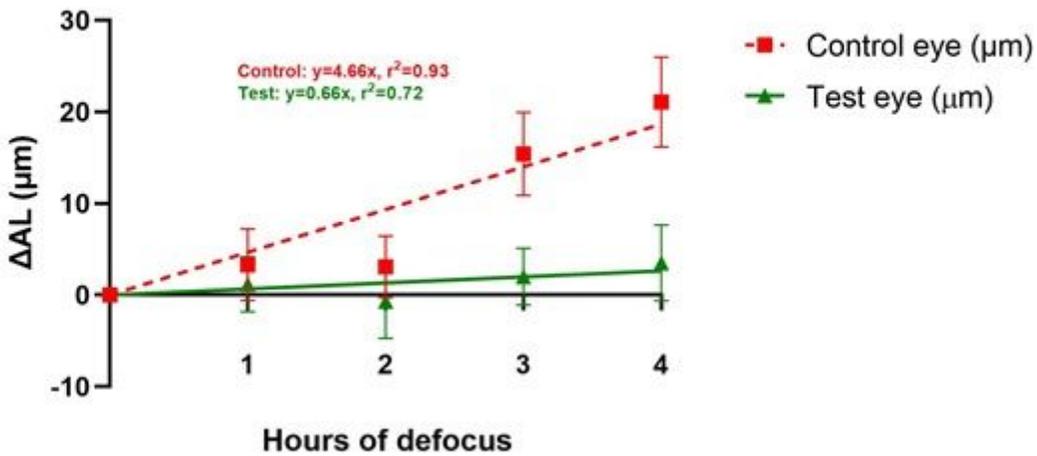


Figure 4

Linear straight line-fits showing mean change in axial length \pm SEM in microns over time