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6 **Dipeptidyl-peptidase-4**  
7 **Inhibitors and Heart Failure:**  
8 **Class Effect, Substance-**  
9 **Specific Effect, or Chance**  
10 **Effect?**

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29 The increased risk of heart failure hospitalizations related to treatment with the DPP-4  
30 inhibitor saxagliptin observed in the SAVOR TIMI 53 trial, is likely not to be a chance  
31 effect, but rather a previously unrecognized side effect of this drug, as this risk was  
32 very consistently apparent across all subgroups of this large multicenter, prospective,  
33 randomized trial. Whether this side effect might represent a class effect of all DPP-4  
34 inhibitors remains to be seen. Results of randomized prospective multicenter trials with  
35 the DPP-4 inhibitors alogliptin and vildagliptin have in fact generated new uncer-  
36 tainties and clearly not totally excluded the possibility of a class side effect. A  
37 meta-analysis of 59 randomized controlled trials with various DPP-4 inhibitors evaluat-  
38 ing data from 36,620 patients with diabetes and a minimal observation period of  
39 24 weeks, confirmed a 21 % increase of heart failure events compared to placebo treat-  
40 ment, however, not in comparison to treatment with other blood glucose lowering  
41 drugs. German registry data also did not show an increased risk for heart failure for  
42 the latter comparison. Potential interactions of DPP-4 inhibitors with other drugs,  
43 e.g. ACE inhibitors, have been discussed in relation to the increased heart failure risk,  
44 as well as interactions with peptides regulating cardiovascular functions that are also

split by DPP-4 enzymes such as BNP, substance P, and NPY. Results from ongoing large multicenter trials with the DPP-4 inhibitors sitagliptin and linagliptin are expected to clarify the potential heart failure issue related to treatment with DPP-4 inhibitors.

## Introduction

Chronic heart failure develops rather frequently in patients with diabetes mellitus, i.e. some 30 % more often compared to non-diabetic subjects [1, 2, 3••, 4]. Thus, heart failure has emerged as a clinically important issue in the context of diabetes-associated cardiac complications [1, 2, 3••, 4]. Heart failure, however, has also attracted wide attention in relation to the development of innovative blood glucose-lowering drugs for people with diabetes, e.g. dual PPAR alpha/gamma agonists ("glitazars") and the thiazolidindiones or PPAR gamma agonists ("glitazones"). Because of the negative experience with muraglitazar and a doubling of the rate of heart failure and cardiovascular complications in the published labelling studies [5], the American Food and Drug Administration and the European Medicines Agency have updated their labelling rules for new diabetes drugs, particularly focusing on cardiovascular safety [6]. This is further augmented by similar adverse results obtained from randomized, placebo-controlled, prospective cardiovascular outcome studies with rosiglitazone [7–9], but also with pioglitazone [10, 11]. The disadvantageous outcome results with aleglitazar in the recently stopped Aleglitazar to Reduce Cardiovascular Risk in Coronary Heart Disease

Patients with a Recent Acute Coronary Syndrome Event and Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus (ALECARDIO) Study seem to underpin the validity of the new regulatory measures [12]. The debate over an increased heart failure risk connected with the use of blood glucose-lowering drugs, however, has entered a new phase, after the results of the randomized, placebo-controlled Saxagliptin Assessment of Vascular Outcomes Recorded in Patients with Diabetes Mellitus (SAVOR-TIMI 53) Study became available. Unexpectedly, the authors found a 27 % increased risk for heart failure hospitalizations in the group on treatment with saxagliptin, a dipeptidyl-peptidase-4 (DPP-4) inhibitor, compared to the placebo group [13•]. Furthermore, results of randomized, prospective, multicenter trials with other DPP-4 inhibitors, i.e. with alogliptin and vildagliptin have in fact generated new uncertainties and clearly not excluded the possibility that an increased heart failure risk may comprise a previously unrecognized side effect of the whole class of DPP-4 inhibitors [14, 15•, 16].

The mini-review presented here attempts to evaluate whether the increased risk of heart failure hospitalizations seen in SAVOR-TIMI 53 represents a class side effect of DPP-4 inhibitors, a saxagliptin specific side effect, or a "chance" effect.

## Evidence from randomized cardiovascular outcome trials

SAVOR-TIMI 53 randomized 16,492 patients with type 2 diabetes and a history of cardiovascular (CV) events or at high CV risk either to saxagliptin or placebo and followed them for a median of 2.1 years [13•]. A primary endpoint event (i.e. a composite of CV death, myocardial infarction, or stroke) occurred in 613 patients of the saxagliptin group and 609 patients of the placebo group. In other words, the CV event rate was identical in both groups [hazard ratio (HR) for saxagliptin 1.00; 95 % confidence interval (CI) 0.89 – 1.12;  $p=0.99$  for superiority and  $p<0.001$  for non-inferiority]. An increased CV risk from saxagliptin treatment, therefore, appeared to be excluded. On the other hand, an advantage of saxagliptin treatment in terms of CV complications could not be substantiated either. Looking at the

113 predefined and adjudicated secondary endpoints, however, an imbalance in  
114 heart failure events requiring hospitalization became apparent. More patients  
115 in the saxagliptin group had been hospitalized for heart failure compared to  
116 the placebo group (3.5 % vs. 2.8 %; HR 1.27; 95 % CI 1.07 – 1.51;  $p=0.007$ ).  
117 This result was unexpected and could have also reflected a chance finding in  
118 the context of multiple statistical comparisons [13•]. Meanwhile, however, it  
119 is clear [15•] that this imbalance in heart failure hospitalizations had oc-  
120 curred both in the 2,105 patients with a prior history of heart failure, i.e. a  
121 high risk group for heart failure, as well as in the remaining patients without  
122 a prior history of heart failure (11.7 vs. 10.2 % in patients with prior heart  
123 failure, HR 1.21; 95 % CI 0.93 – 1.58 vs. 2.3 and 1.7 in patients without prior  
124 heart failure, HR 1.32; 95 % CI 1.04 – 1.65;  $p=0.68$  for interaction).  
125 Conversely, looking at the concentrations of NT-pro-BNP measured at  
126 baseline, it was revealed that the excess of heart failure hospitalizations  
127 had happened more or less exclusively in the highest NT-pro-BNP  
128 quartile (10.9 vs. 9.0 %; HR 1.31; 95 % CI 1.0 – 1.6;  $p=0.021$ ), sug-  
129 gesting a role of “subclinical” heart failure as a risk factor of the unto-  
130 ward effect of saxagliptin. Beyond that, the increased heart failure risk in  
131 the saxagliptin group was consistently seen in all of subgroups. The re-  
132 sult was independent of demographic or biochemical variables such as  
133 age, gender, BMI, renal function, glycemic, and lipid parameters, as well  
134 as a concurrent therapy with diabetes drugs like insulin, metformin, or  
135 sulphonylureas or with the various classes of antihypertensive drugs,  
136 including ACE inhibitors or angiotensin receptor blockers, or with aspi-  
137 rin or statins. Thus, the increased heart failure risk seems likely not to be  
138 a chance effect, but rather a previously unrecognized side effect of  
139 saxagliptin, although it is important to note that it had no impact on the  
140 overall primary CV outcome in SAVOR-TIMI 53.

141 In parallel to SAVOR-TIMI 53, the Examination of Cardiovascular Out-  
142 comes with Alogliptin versus Standard of Care (EXAMINE) Trial was pub-  
143 lished, another randomized and placebo-controlled study evaluating the  
144 DPP-4 inhibitor alogliptin in 5,380 patients with diabetes and recent myo-  
145 cardial infarction or unstable angina, respectively, with a mean follow-up of  
146 18 months [14]. Similar to SAVOR-TIMI 53, EXAMINE was focused on CV  
147 safety in a cohort of diabetic patients at high risk for CV complications.  
148 Again, the primary outcome was defined as a composite of CV death, non-  
149 fatal myocardial infarction, or stroke and showed no difference between the  
150 two treatment groups. Three hundred and five patients in the alogliptin  
151 group (11.3 %) and 316 patients in the placebo group (11.8 %) had  
152 developed a primary endpoint event (HR 0.96; 95 % CI upper limit  
153 1.16;  $p<0.001$  for non-inferiority,  $p=0.32$  for superiority). Surprisingly,  
154 no results with regard to heart failure events were released in the primary  
155 publication despite the fact that some 28 % of patients in both study  
156 arms had a prior history of heart failure [14]. In published responses to  
157 enquiries about heart failure, a statement was made by the investigators  
158 of EXAMINE that no significant differences had been observed for heart  
159 failure between the two treatment groups of the trial [15•]; this state-  
160 ment was not qualified further. According to presentations of the  
161 EXAMINE data at large international meetings such as EASD or ACC,  
162 however, the situation seems to be less clear [17]. Looking at a newly

defined explorative composite endpoint (all-cause mortality, non-fatal myocardial infarction or stroke, emergency revascularization for instable angina, or hospitalization for heart failure) no significant differences were found (HR 0.98; 95 % CI 0.86 – 1.12) and the frequency of heart failure within this composite endpoint amounted to 3.1 % in the alogliptin group compared to 2.9 % in the placebo group (HR 1.07; 95 % CI 0.79 – 1.46). However, this contrasts with the tendency that all patients requiring hospitalization for heart failure in the trial were considered irrespective of other prior events. One hundred and six patients were contained in the alogliptin group compared to 89 patients in the placebo group (HR 1.19; 95 % CI 0.89 – 1.58). A full publication of these data is urgently needed. For the time being, a preliminary meta-analysis looking at all heart failure in SAVOR-TIMI 53 and EXAMINE (Table 1) fosters the suspicion that an increased heart failure risk might be an emerging side effect of the whole class of DPP-4 inhibitors, not just of saxagliptin (a total of 395 patients with hospitalization requiring heart failure on DPP-4 inhibitors in comparison to 317 patients on placebo, HR 1.24; 95 % CI 1.07 – 1.44).

Another DPP-4 inhibitor, vildagliptin, has been investigated in terms of cardiac safety in diabetic heart failure patients in the Vildagliptin in Ventricular Dysfunction Diabetes (VIVID) Trial [16]. Again, only information derived from congressional presentations is currently available and a full publication is eagerly awaited. The VIVID Trial had enrolled 254 patients with diabetes and chronic heart failure NYHA class I-III and randomized them to either vildagliptin or placebo therapy. The echocardiographic ejection fraction was determined as primary endpoint and measured at baseline and at 1-year follow-up. Both groups showed significant improvement of some 4 % at 1 year with no significant difference existing between the two groups. Unexpected, however, was the finding of a significant increase of the left-ventricular end-diastolic and end-systolic volume as well as of the stroke volume in the vildagliptin arm compared to placebo. Conversely, plasma BNP concentrations had fallen by 28 % in the vildagliptin group, and by 14 % in the placebo group. The difference, however, was not statistically significant. Likewise, no significant difference was seen in terms of all-cause mortality (four patients on placebo vs. 11 patients on vildagliptin). The trial, however, was not powered to detect differences in clinical endpoints and conclusions regarding cardiac safety of vildagliptin are, therefore, limited. Hence, uncertainties remain which would need to be addressed in a much larger trial with a much

t1.1 **Table 1. Heart failure requiring hospitalization in prospective, randomized studies evaluating DPP-4 inhibitors and cardiovascular outcomes – a Meta-Analysis**

t1.2	Study	DPP-4 inhibitor	Placebo	OR (95 % CI)
t1.3	SAVOR-TIMI 53	289	228	1.27 (1.06–1.52)
t1.4	EXAMINE	106	89	1.19 (0.89–1.58)
t1.5	Combined	395	317	1.24 (1.07–1.44)

longer follow-up. The finding of larger hearts after a 1 year of therapy with vildagliptin does not exclude an increased heart failure risk, but might be rather suggestive for it.

## Potential pathophysiologic links

DPP-4 inhibitors inhibit more or less specifically the enzyme DPP-4 that exists as trans-membranous exo-peptidase in many cells of the body and splits off dipeptides at the N-terminal end of proteins or peptides immediately after a proline or alanine residue (sometimes also after other amino acid residue) in position 2 [18]. Among a wide scope of aspects, DPP-4 has turned out to be an important regulator of the incretin effect, as it splits the two main incretin hormones released from the L- or K-cells, respectively, in the small intestines, i.e. glucagon-like peptide 1 (GLP-1) and glucose-dependent insulinotropic polypeptide (GIP). In the case of GLP-1, the hormone loses its capacity to bind to the GLP-1 receptor of cells and to induce signal transduction by the removal of the dipeptide. Inhibition of GLP-1 degradation by DPP-4 inhibitors increases the GLP-1 receptor-dependent effects and is the basis of the mode of action of the class of blood glucose-lowering drugs called DPP-4 inhibitors. On the other hand, the GLP-1 molecule shortened by the dipeptide seems to have physiologic albeit GLP-1 receptor-independent effects, e.g. at the heart [18]. DPP-4 inhibitors, therefore, shift the effects of the original peptide and the shortened peptide in favor of the original peptide. Whether this shift also impacts the biological action of the shortened peptide is unclear, but might, however, be of importance in the context of a potential link between the use of DPP-4 inhibitors and the occurrence of heart failure.

Meanwhile, it has become apparent that the DPP-4 enzyme splits a multitude of biologically important peptides that exert effects on the heart [18, 19]. An incomplete list of these peptides (the number of the amino acid residues is shown in brackets) summarizes their cardiac effects (other effects are again shown in brackets):

- GLP-1 (GLP-1 7-36): increased cardiac function, glucose uptake, decreased contractility, apoptosis (blood vessels: increased NO-production, decreased inflammation)
- B-Type Natriuretic Peptide (BNP 1-32): decreased LV-remodeling (blood vessels: increased vasodilatation; kidney: increased natriuresis)
- Substance P (SP 1-11): decreased chronotropy and inotropy (brain: altered cardiac adrenergic tone)
- Neuropeptide Y (NPY 1-36): increased Ca<sup>2+</sup>-voltage
- Peptide YY (PYY 1-36): (blood vessels: increased collateral blood flow)
- GLP2 (GLP-1 1-33): (blood vessels: increased blood flow, blood pressure and heart frequency)
- Stromal-derived factor 1 alpha (SDF1 alpha 1-68): (progenitor cells: increased homing of progenitor cells in ischemic myocardium, increased angiogenesis)

- GIP (GIP 1–42): in rodents, receptors detected in the atrium and ventricle (lipogenesis?, but also effects on signal transduction pathways of endothelial cells)

An enhancement of these effects, therefore, could exhibit substantial modulations of heart function, and a connection with the increased occurrence of heart failure cannot primarily be excluded. Our current knowledge of this area of research, however, is rather limited. Studies are certainly warranted about whether circulating concentrations of BNP and their measurement are affected by DPP-4 inhibition, especially in patients with heart failure. In addition, the DPP-4 enzyme splits the basic fibroblast growth factor (bFGF), perhaps anchoring proteins for cytokines within the extracellular matrix (18). Conversely, some of the cleavage products of DPP-4 induced degradation exert profound cardiac effects. They are summarized below:

- **GLP-1 9–36**: increased cardiac function, glucose uptake, decreased apoptosis (blood vessels: increased vasodilatation)
- **BNP 3–32**: (kidney: increased natriuresis)
- **NPY 3–36**: (blood vessels: increased angiogenesis)

Whether these effects might be modified in the context of therapeutic DPP-4 inhibition is again unclear and merits scientific attention. It is also noteworthy in this connection that PYY 3–36 in comparison to PYY 1–36 penetrates the blood brain barrier much more easily and induces anorexic effects in the brain. Moreover, PYY 3–36 represents an anti-secretory and pro-absorptive hormone and regulates the post-prandial water and sodium influx into the gut, especially in the ileum and colon [19]. Obviously, therapeutic usage of DPP-4 inhibition might influence a multitude of biological processes in a very complex way, not to mention the various affinities and specificities in regulating signal transduction pathways and partial inhibitory effects of the enzymes DPP-8 and DPP-9. Hence, not only do potential connections with the occurrence of heart failure need further clarification, but also aspects beyond.

## Discussion

In aggregate, weighing the evidence in relation to the increased occurrence of heart failure requiring hospitalization while on therapy with saxagliptin, one seems to deal with a previously unknown side effect of a blood glucose lowering DPP-4 inhibitor, as this signal appears to be very consistent and robust in the huge data base of SAVOR-TIMI 53 [13•, 15•]. It is important in terms of clinical relevance, however, that this increased risk for heart failure had no effect on the primary endpoint and by an independent committee adjudicated endpoint which comprised a composite of cardiovascular death, non-fatal myocardial infarction, and non-fatal stroke [13•]. The NT-pro-BNP concentrations measured in SAVOR should have been unaffected by therapy with the DPP-4 inhibitor and suggest a role of “subclinical” heart failure as a risk factor for the observed side effect. NT-pro-BNP is produced in equimolar



294 amounts when BNP is generated from pro-BNP. Conversely, it remains to be  
295 determined whether the BNP concentrations measured in the VIVID trial  
296 might have been influenced by the administration of the DPP-4 inhibitor  
297 vildagliptin, and if so, whether such an effect might have had an effect on  
298 cardiac function [16]. Among a number of effects, BNP is involved in left-  
299 ventricular remodeling [18], and an increase of left-ventricular end-dia-  
300 stolic and end-systolic volume was seen in VIVID connected with the  
301 use of the DPP-4 inhibitor vildagliptin, although the primary endpoint,  
302 i.e. the ejection fraction, showed a very similar improvement as in the  
303 placebo arm [16].

304 Potential interactions with ACE inhibitors have also been discussed in the  
305 context of possible pathogenic links [20–22]. Paradoxical increases of blood  
306 pressure and heart rate have been described at higher doses of ACE inhibitors  
307 which might have been induced by interactions with SP1-11 or NPY1-36  
308 [19–22]. Increased concentrations of norepinephrine and signs of enhanced  
309 vaso-constrictory effects of angiotensin II have been observed [21, 23, 24].  
310 Vildagliptin has been associated with cardiac arrhythmias in experiments  
311 with dogs and an increased number of first degree AV blocks has been noted  
312 in humans [25].

313 At present, however, it has neither been confirmed nor excluded by the  
314 results of the VIVID as well as the EXAMINE study whether the heart fail-  
315 ure findings in SAVOR may represent a class side effect of all DPP-4 inhibi-  
316 tors. A recent meta-analysis has raised new serious concerns. Fifty-nine  
317 available prospective and randomized studies evaluating DPP-4 inhibitors  
318 for at least 24 weeks have gathered a data base of a total of 36,620 patients  
319 with a mean follow-up time of 46.7 weeks [26]. A highly significant increase  
320 of heart failure hospitalizations were reported on treatment with DPP-4 in-  
321 hibitors compared to placebo therapy (n=24,111, RR 1.21, 1.03 – 1.42),  
322 whereas no significant differences were found in terms of all-cause mortality,  
323 CV mortality, myocardial infarction, or stroke. In comparison to other blood  
324 glucose-lowering agents, however, DPP-4 inhibitors showed comparable  
325 clinical outcomes including heart failure [26]. Trends in favor of DPP-4 in-  
326 hibitors regarding all-cause mortality, myocardial infarction, and stroke did  
327 not reach the level of significance. These observations are in agreement with  
328 1-year follow-up data of a large German registry, called DiaRegis, enrolling  
329 non-insulin requiring patients with type 2 diabetes [27]. Although add-on  
330 treatments were at the discretion of the individual physician and were  
331 not allocated randomly, patients on new DPP-4 inhibitor therapy as  
332 compared to new sulphonylurea therapy exhibited some non-significant  
333 trends for lower rates of stroke and unstable angina, like in the meta-  
334 analysis, but no difference was noted in terms of heart failure. Con-  
335 flicting data were also recently reported at the Joint Meeting of the In-  
336 ternational Society of Endocrinology and the American Endocrine Society  
337 [28]. In a retrospective cohort study using the Cleveland Clinic electronic  
338 health record system, patients with type 2 diabetes who received a pre-  
339 scription for metformin plus a DPP-4 inhibitor had a significant, albeit  
340 small, increased risk for heart failure compared with those who received  
341 metformin and other oral antidiabetic agents [28]. In contrast, a large  
342 data base of “real world” type 2 diabetic patients obtained at the Joslin  
343 Diabetes Center, Boston, did not find an adverse heart failure signal in

344 patients starting DPP-4 inhibitor therapy, but rather the opposite, i.e. a  
345 less frequent rate of heart failure [28].

346 Thus, in all, important arguments exist at present, not to take the heart  
347 failure findings seen in SAVOR-TIMI 53 as unequivocally granted as being  
348 indicative for a class side effect of all DPP-4 inhibitors.

## 349 Perspectives

350 Regarding DPP-4 inhibitors and heart failure, the book is not closed yet. The  
351 much larger and longer ongoing randomized controlled trials evaluating the  
352 DPP-4 inhibitors sitagliptin and linagliptin and looking at hard CV outcomes  
353 will probably be key [29, 30]. The Trial Evaluating Cardiovascular Outcomes  
354 with Sitagliptin (TECOS) and the Cardiovascular Outcome Study of  
355 Linagliptin versus Glimepiride in Patients with Type 2 Diabetes (CAROLI-  
356 NA), in which more than 20,000 patients with diabetes have been enrolled,  
357 are expected to clarify the issue [29, 30]. Finally, likewise, still ongoing large  
358 multicenter studies with GLP-1 receptor agonists might contribute new notions  
359 on the topic.  
360  
361

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## 366 Compliance with Ethics Guidelines

### 369 Conflict of Interest

370 Dr. Eberhard Standl, Dr. Michael Erbach, and Dr. Oliver Schnell each declare no potential conflicts of  
371 interest.  
372

### 373 Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent

374 This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by any of the authors.  
375  
376

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