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Short Communication

Revised Estimate of Total Collagen in the Human Body -

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ABSTRACT

Based on global mean adult body mass, it was calculated that the human body, on average, contains 3.6×10^{21} molecules of collagen type 1. This revised estimate is nearly four times higher than previously published estimates.

Keywords: Collagen; Collagen type 1; Proteins; Proteomics; Neptune; Tropocollagen

Collagen is the most abundant protein in the animal kingdom. In vertebrates, 28 different types of collagen composed of 46 distinct polypeptide chains have been identified [1] and collagen fibrils are reportedly five to ten times stronger than steel [2]. The collagen type 1 monomer is a triple helix 300 nm in length assembled from three protein subunits. It is synthesized in the rough endoplasmic reticulum as a 407,000 Da precursor. Later, specific peptidases cleave terminal propeptides to yield the mature tropocollagen monomer of approximately 300,000 Daltons.

Based on global averages, mean adult human body mass is 62.0 kg. This ranges from 80.7 kg in North America, which comprises only 6% of the world population, to 57.7 kg in Asia, which holds 61% of the world population [3]. On average, total protein mass is 15.1% of total body mass [4] and over 25% of the body's total protein mass is collagen. At least 80% of the body's total collagen is collagen type 1.

Based on the global mean adult body mass, we have calculated there are approximately six millimoles of collagen type 1 in the human body which, when multiplied by Avogadro's number, equals 3.6×10^{21} molecules. This is nearly four times higher than previously published estimates of 1×10^{21} molecules calculated for a 70 kg body mass [5].

Even by the most conservative estimate, if all of the collagen type 1 monomers in the human body were outstretched and lined

end to end, the resulting filament would span approximately 3×10^{14} m. Remarkably, this length would trace the orbit of the planet Neptune over ten times. To put this distance into better perspective, travelling at an average speed of 5.4 km per second, Neptune has completed only one orbit since its discovery in 1846.

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