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13th AISF PRE-MEETING COURSE
"Difficult Clinical Issues in Hepatology"
Aula Magna, Università di Roma "Sapienza" - P.le A. Moro, 5
Course Directors: F. Piscaglia, Bologna and P. Toniutto, Udine

Wednesday, February 23rd

09.30-10.45 **Registration and Entry questionnaire**

10.45-11.00 **Course Presentation**

F. Piscaglia & P. Toniutto

Session I

Portal hypertension

Chairpersons: P. Caraceni, Bologna
G.L. Rapaccini, Rome

11.00-11.20 Management of refractory
gastrointestinal bleeding in cirrhosis
G. D'Amico, Palermo

11.20-11.40 Management of refractory ascites
F. Salerno, Milan

11.40-12.00 Management of chronic hepatic
encephalopathy
P. Amadio, Padua

12.00-12.20 Diagnosis and management of pre-
hepatic portal hypertension
J. De Ville De Goyet, Rome

12.20-13.00 *Discussion*

13.00-14.00 **Lunch**

Session II

Viral hepatitis

Chairpersons: S. Bruno, Milan
A. Picciotto, Genoa

14.00-14.20 Management of severe side effects due
to antiviral drugs in responder patients
G.B. Gaeta, Naples

14.20-14.40 Clinical management of viral hepatitis in
dialysis
A. Mangia, S. Giovanni Rotondo

14.40-15.10 Clinical management of viral hepatitis
during pregnancy and breast feeding
G. Indolfi, Florence

15.10-15.30 *Discussion*

Session III

Liver failure

Chairpersons: P. Burra, Padua
A. Gasbarrini, Rome

15.30-15.50 Indications for artificial liver support
systems
P. Angeli, Padua

15.50-16.10 Criteria to refer patient with complicated
liver cirrhosis and fulminant liver failure
to intensive care unit
A. Ottobrelli, Turin

16.10-16.30 *Discussion*

16.30-16.50 **Break**

Session IV

Surgery and oncology in hepatology

Chairpersons: B. Daniele, Benevento
M. Rossi, Rome

16.50-17.10 Evaluation of surgical risk in patients with
liver diseases
S. Fagioli, Bergamo

17.10-17.30 Management of rare liver tumours
G.L. Grazi, Rome

17.30-17.50 Management of side effects of anti
angiogenetic inhibitors in treating
hepatocellular carcinoma
M. Di Maio, Naples

17.50-18.10 *Discussion*

18.10-18.40 **General Assembly I**



MANAGEMENT OF REFRACTORY GASTROINTESTINAL BLEEDING IN CIRRHOSIS (GESTIONE DEL SANGUINAMENTO GASTROINTESTINALE REFRATTARIO NELLA CIRROSI)

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Abstract

In 10-20% of patients with acute variceal bleeding, initial therapy fails to control bleeding and rescue treatments are needed. Whenever possible, a second endoscopy is done but if bleeding continues or the severity of bleeding precludes endoscopic therapy, an alternative treatment is needed. A self expanding esophageal covered stent which can stop bleeding by compressing the esophageal varices is currently assessed in RCTs, after the initial uncontrolled encouraging experience. Trans-Jugular intra-hepatic porto-systemic shunt (TIPS) controls variceal bleeding in nearly 95% of patients but mortality remains high because of progressive liver dysfunction and encephalopathy. However, a randomized controlled trial has recently documented that early TIPS, within 24-72 hours of hospital admission, in patients at high risk for treatment failure significantly improves survival and reduces the risk of rebleeding either in the short or in the long term.

Background

Current recommendations for the treatment of acute variceal bleeding in cirrhosis include hemodynamic stabilization, antibiotic prophylaxis, and combined pharmacological and endoscopic therapy (1-2). Specific vasoactive drug therapy is based on terlipressin and somatostatin or its analogues. However, despite optimal application, treatment fails to control bleeding in 10-20% of patients and mortality in these patients is in the order of 30-50%, significantly higher compared to overall mortality of acute variceal bleeding which is nowadays 10-15% (3). Most of these patients die because of the progression of liver dysfunction triggered by continuing bleeding or rebleeding with progressive liver failure and sepsis while only a minority actually die because of exanguination (4).

Treatment of acute bleeding

The first step in the treatment of acute bleeding is prompt resuscitation to preserve tissue oxygenation, correct intravascular volume and anemia. Blood transfusion should be aimed at achieving a Hemoglobin concentration of 7-8 g/dl avoiding overtransfusion which has been shown to increase mortality and rebleeding (5). Since hospital infections are frequent in patients admitted for variceal bleeding and are significantly associated with failure to control bleeding, early rebleeding and mortality, antibiotic prophylaxis based on quinolones and ceftriaxone is now recommended after several RCTs and meta-analyses have proven their efficacy (1). Glypressin or somatostatin (or its analogues) should be started as soon as a portal hypertensive bleeding is suspected; endoscopy should be performed after hemodynamic stability has been achieved, to identify the source of bleeding and to perform banding ligation of varices if they are the source of bleeding. Vasoactive drugs should be continued even after endoscopic therapy for 2-5 days (1). This therapeutic approach will control bleeding in 80-90% of patients, while the remaining will continue to bleed and approximately 20% of those with bleeding controlled will rebleed within 6 weeks (3).



Treatment of refractory bleeding

The first option for refractory bleeding or rebleeding is to attempt a second endoscopic course while continuing or modifying vasoactive treatment. While the efficacy of a second endoscopic attempt has not been proven in RCTs and its recommendation is therefore based on experts' opinion, two RCTs have shown that doubling the dose of somatostatin (from 250 to 500 mcg/h) significantly improves bleeding control and that terlipressin reduces HVPG significantly more than either 250 or 500 mcg/h of somatostatin (6-7). There is therefore an evidence basis to switch from somatostatin to terlipressin or to double dose in patients with uncontrolled bleeding under somatostatin.

A covered self expanding metal esophageal stent has been recently proven to be effective in controlling acute variceal bleeding in 34 patients with bleeding uncontrolled with initial standard pharmacological and endoscopic therapy. The stent controlled bleeding in all the patients and none rebled. Migration of the stent in 7 patients and esophageal ulcer in one patient were considered minor adverse events. This type of stent is currently under evaluation compared to Sangstaken-Blakemore tube in a multicenter RCT (8).

Several uncontrolled series have shown that TIPS, when used as a rescue therapy in patients with uncontrollable bleeding, virtually stops bleeding in all patients. However mortality after rescue TIPS is very high, being in the order of 50-60%. With the hypothesis that this high mortality was mainly attributable to progressive liver failure, sepsis and multiorgan failure due to continuing bleeding or rebleeding, a RCT has recently shown that in selected patients with very high risk of refractory bleeding, early TIPS performed within 24 to 72 hours of bleeding results in significantly higher control of bleeding, lower rebleeding rate and higher survival either in the short or in the long term (9).

Conclusion

Refractory variceal bleeding significantly increases the risk of death not only for exanguination but also, and more importantly, because of progression of liver dysfunction, sepsis and multiorgan failure. A very early aggressive treatment, like TIPS, in patients at high risk of continuing bleeding or rebleeding may be crucial in saving these patients. It is therefore important to identify accurate indicators of the risk of refractory bleeding in order to submit high risk patients to alternative treatments, which should be tested in specifically designed RCTs



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MANAGEMENT OF REFRACTORY ASCITES (TRATTAMENTO DELL'ASCITE REFRATTARIA)

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TERAPIA DI PRIMA SCELTA: PARACENTESI

L'ascite refrattaria è una severa complicanza dei pazienti cirrotici con ipertensione portale (1). La patogenesi della formazione di ascite riconosce due meccanismi principali ed indispensabili: l'aumento della pressione sinusoidale epatica con associata vasodilatazione sistemica e la ritenzione di sodio a livello renale. Il trattamento della ascite è impenziato principalmente sulla risoluzione della ritenzione renale di sodio attraverso una dieta iposodica e l'impiego di diuretici.

Con il termine di ascite refrattaria si definisce una condizione nella quale tale trattamento non è più efficace o perché la dose massima di diuretico somministrabile non è in grado di potenziare la sodiuria fino ad ottenere un bilancio di sodio negativo, oppure, più spesso, perché la somministrazione dei diuretici deve essere sospesa perché induce effetti collaterali non tollerabili (insufficienza renale, encefalopatia, ipotensione arteriosa, ecc).

In tali casi la terapia più semplice è sicuramente quella rappresentata dalla paracentesi di grande volume associata ad infusione di albumina umana. Tale trattamento è rapidamente efficace e facilmente applicabile. Diversi trial hanno confrontato la paracentesi rispetto alla terapia diuretica o all'uso di shunt peritoneo-venoso dimostrando una maggiore efficacia ed una minore incidenza di complicanze (2-5). La principale complicanza della paracentesi è la comparsa della cosiddetta "*post-paracentesis circulatory dysfunction*" (PPCD), che è causata da una accentuazione della ipovolemia efficace che viene rivelata da un incremento significativo della attività reninica plasmatica e che si associa ad incremento della creatinina-mia e a riduzione della sodiemia. I soggetti che sviluppano una PPCD hanno una sopravvivenza più breve rispetto a quelli che non la sviluppano (6). E' per questo motivo che si raccomanda di associare nelle paracentesi >5 litri una infusione *e.v.* di albumina umana, alla dose di 8 grammi per litro di liquido drenato. Non disponiamo di studi che abbiano definito quando praticare questa somministrazione. Pertanto, l'infusione può essere praticata durante, al termine, oppure qualche ora dopo l'evacuazione. L'impiego della albumina si è dimostrato più efficace nel prevenire la PPCD rispetto ad altri plasma expander quali il destrano o la poligelina (6).

La paracentesi, tuttavia, non corregge i meccanismi patogenetici della refrattarietà. Quindi l'ascite si ripresenta nei giorni successivi alla evacuazione fino a determinare ancora necessità di nuove sedute di paracentesi. Nei casi in cui i diuretici non siano divenuti completamente inefficaci e siano ben tollerati, si suggerisce di proseguire la loro somministrazione al fine di ritardare la necessità di ripetere la paracentesi. Nei casi più gravi però la recidiva di ascite è molto rapida e pertanto gli intervalli liberi tra due paracentesi possono ridursi a pochi giorni rendendo la pratica meno tollerata dal paziente e più impegnativa per il medico.



TERAPIE DI SUPPORTO

Accanto all'impiego della paracentesi + albumina per controllare il versamento ascitico divenuto refrattario alla terapia farmacologica, bisogna accennare al ruolo di terapie ancillari che possono essere utili per il benessere del paziente e per la prevenzione di alcune serie complicate. Queste terapie comprendono:

1. una corretta modulazione delle dosi dei diuretici antialdosteronici e dell'ansa per evitare diselettroliemie, soprattutto ipo- o iper-kaliemie,
2. l'impiego di resine a scambio ionico nei casi in cui il controllo di una iperkaliemia sia difficile come nel caso in cui si voglia proseguire la somministrazione di spironolattone in presenza di valori di potassiemia elevati,
3. la correzione di una iponatremia severa ($\text{PNa} < 130 \text{ mEq}$) tramite infusione di albumina umana e sospensione dei diuretici. La somministrazione di soluzioni saline ipertoniche è generalmente sconsigliata salvo che il paziente sia ipoteso. L'impiego di farmaci aquaretici, cioè di antagonisti della vasopressina, è una alternativa che richiede ancora una attenta valutazione del rapporto rischio/beneficio (7).
4. l'impiego di antibiotici non assorbibili (neomicina, rifamixina) o di lattulosio o lactitolo per prevenire episodi di encefalopatia epatica, molto frequenti in pazienti con ascite refrattaria.
5. l'impiego di una precoce terapia antibiotica empirica associata ad albumina nel caso di peritonite batterica spontanea (SBP) per prevenire una sindrome epatoreale.
6. Una profilassi con norfloxacinina nei pazienti con pregresso episodio di SBP o in quelli di classe C di Child con valori di bilirubina o di creatinina elevati o con iponatremia cronica.
7. l'impiego di vasocostrittori nel caso di sindrome epatoreale di tipo 1.

L'utilità dell'impiego di propranololo, finora raccomandato nei casi in cui è indicata una profilassi del sanguinamento da varici, è stata recentemente messa in discussione da un lavoro che ha dimostrato come l'uso dei beta-bloccanti nei pazienti con ascite refrattaria aumenti il rischio di morte (8).

TIPS

Una seconda scelta terapeutica è la TIPS (transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt). Tale trattamento corregge il principale meccanismo patogenetico dell'ascite riducendo la pressione portale a valori fisiologici o di poco superiori. Inoltre, l'inserzione dello stent porto-epatico comporta un aumento del ritorno venoso al cuore con conseguente aumento dell'indice cardiaco e riduzione dello stato di ipovolemia efficace (9). Ciò può migliorare la perfusione renale e ripristinare la efficacia della terapia diuretica.

La TIPS ha dimostrato di essere più efficace delle paracentesi (10), risolvendo la refrattività nell'80% dei casi all'incirca, ma gravata di maggiori effetti collaterali, in particolare l'encefalopatia epatica ed il rischio di insufficienza epatica acuta. Ciò ha reso necessario restringere i criteri di selezione dei pazienti cirrotici adatti ad essere trattati con una TIPS, escludendo pazienti con ricorrenti episodi di encefalopatia, quelli con una bilirubinemia elevata, con uno score di Child-Pugh > 11 , con danno renale organico. Ciò non permette di trattare ogni paziente refrattario con una TIPS (vengono esclusi circa il 40% dei pazienti con ascite refrattaria).

Alcuni trial controllati hanno confrontato la paracentesi di largo volume e la TIPS come trattamento dell'ascite refrattaria. Una meta-analisi per dati individuali ottenuti da 4 di questi trial randomizzati ha dimostrato, oltre alla migliore efficacia, anche una migliore sopravvivenza nei pazienti trattati con TIPS (11).



TRAPIANTO DI FEGATO

Il trapianto di fegato è un intervento che migliora significativamente lo stato di compromissione causato dalla cirrosi e, soprattutto, l'attesa di vita del paziente. La sopravvivenza media dei pazienti che hanno sviluppato ascite è di 2-3 anni, mentre quella dei pazienti con ascite refrattaria è di 6-12 mesi. Pertanto, se non affrontato in precedenza, l'opzione di una candidatura a trapianto va sempre presa in considerazione nei pazienti cirrotici all'atto del primo scompenso, soprattutto quando lo scompenso sia causato dalla comparsa di ascite. Purtroppo la selezione esclude molti di questi pazienti dal trapianto per non idoneità.

CONCLUSIONE

Sulla base di tali evidenze possiamo concludere affermando che:

- il trattamento di prima scelta dell'ascite refrattaria è rappresentato dalla paracentesi di grande volume associata ad infusione di albumina umana;
- contemporaneamente, quando la efficacia dei diuretici non sia completamente compromessa, il loro uso è raccomandato, ponendo attenzione a prevenire squilibri idroeletrolitici, insufficienza renale o encefalopatia epatica;
- l'impiego di beta-bloccanti al fine di prevenire un sanguinamento da varici a rischio richiede una attenta valutazione del rapporto rischio/beneficio;
- nei casi eleggibili, la TIPS è un trattamento raccomandato, soprattutto nei casi in cui il trattamento con paracentesi diviene più intenso e pertanto mal tollerato.
- Il trapianto di fegato resta l'unica opzione in grado di assicurare un significativo aumento della sopravvivenza ed una risoluzione completa dei sintomi e dei rischi della cirrosi compensata.



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MANAGEMENT OF CHRONIC HEPATIC ENCEPHALOPATHY (GESTIONE DELLA ENCEFALOPATIA EPATICA CRONICA)

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Premessa

Per encefalopatia epatica (EE) s'intende l'insieme delle alterazioni neuropsichiche causate dall'insufficienza epatocellulare e/o dallo shunt porto sistemico (*linee guida AISF*).

Nella letteratura internazionale è prevalentemente accolta la definizione di EE come presenza di alterazioni neuropsichiche di cui si escluda altra causa in un soggetto con cirrosi, shunt porto-sistematico o insufficienza epatica acuta (1), questa definizione ha due difetti: 1) non vi è motivo per il quale più motivi di danno encefalico non possano coesistere, e quindi avversi encefalopatia epatica associata ad altra patologia, 2) una definizione in negativo si presta al rischio di grossolanità se non si elencano i criteri di esclusione delle altre patologie poste in diagnosi differenziale.

L'EE può presentarsi in forma sporadica o occasionale: in tal caso l'episodio di EE è per lo più scatenato da eventi clinici rilevanti quali sanguinamento o sepsi. L'EE può presentarsi con episodi ad elevata ricorrenza, spesso sostenuti da cause banali o non rilevabili. In tal caso gli episodi di EE sono intervallati da un ritorno alla normalità più o meno completo. Può anche protrarsi un quadro di EE persistente, di solito con l'andamento ondulante nel quale periodi di EE di basso grado sono intervallati a episodi di EE ad alto grado.

Il termine di EE cronica, di per sé non è consigliato dall'attuale nosologia (1) benché sia adeguato per quadri di encefalopatia ricorrente e persistente, nonché al più raro quadro della degenerazione epatocerebrale acquista non Wilsoniana (2) dominato anche da importanti componenti motorie, così come a quadri di EE complicati da mielopatia epatica (3-5).

Diagnosi

Se un soggetto con cirrosi epatica e/o shunt porto-sistemico presenta una condizione simil-dementigena e/o con episodi di delirium ricorrente, suggestivi di un'EE "cronica" è necessario, innanzi tutto, verificare se si tratti veramente di sola EE, o se si tratti di una forma mista in cui coesistano più alterazioni metaboliche e/o vi sia un'altra patologia neurologica associata.

Peraltro, è importante rilevare che, anche se coesistessero in un paziente una componente neurodegenerativa con una metabolica, il trattamento della componente metabolica, di per sé reversibile, comporta un miglioramento clinico complessivo, ancorché non si raggiunga il recupero funzionale completo.

In caso di una sospetta EE ad alta ricorrenza o permanente, il primo elemento da indagare è se il paziente presenta un grado d'insufficienza epatica e/o di shunt porto-sistemico tali da giustificare la presenza di EE. Già Sherlock et al (6) e più recentemente Riggio et al (7) hanno mostrato come soggetti con EE ricorrente abbiano una rilevante quota di shunt porto-sistemico. E' da rilevare che una quota importante di shunt porto-sistemico è talora rilevabile in soggetti senza grave insufficienza epatica.

Un correlato rilevante dell'insufficienza epatica e dello shunt porto-sistemico è l'iperammoniemia, anche se in vari paesi vi è una preconcetta e acritica diffidenza nei confronti del dosaggio dell'ammoniemia (8).



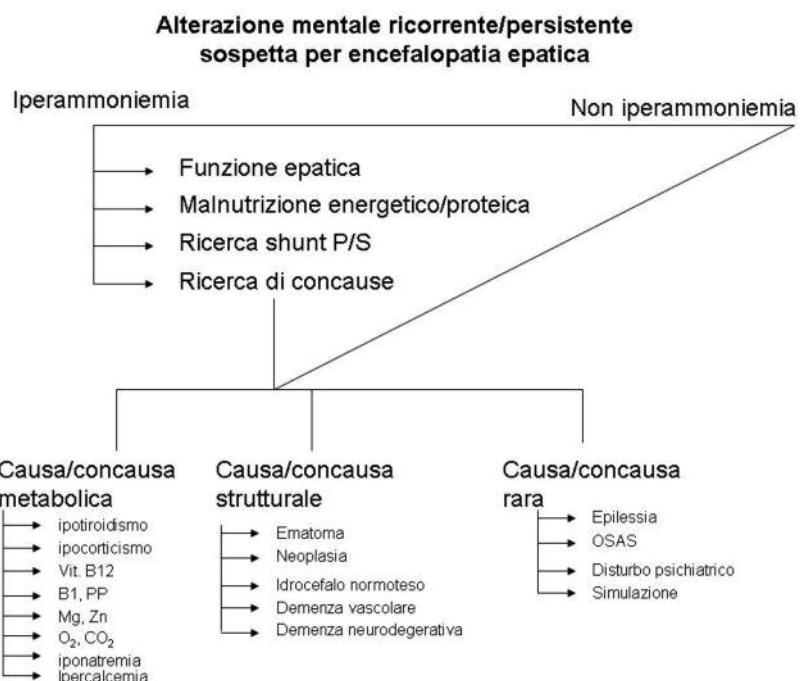
Tale diffidenza deriva in gran parte da rilievi effettuati nel passato con metodiche obsolete/inaccurate e dalla mancanza di una correlazione stretta fra ammoniemia e sintomi dell'EE. In realtà, anche se si prescinde dal considerare il ruolo dell'ammoniaca nella patogenesi dell'EE (9, 10), in assenza di iperammoniemia è difficile immaginare che l'insufficienza epatica e/o lo shunt porto-sistemico abbiano un'entità tale da permettere l'insorgenza di EE.

In presenza di iperammoniemia non si è autorizzati, tuttavia, ad ascrivere immediatamente una condizione di delirium o coma, all'EE, perché un soggetto iperammoniemico può avere un danno cerebrale di altra natura o esservi una concausa metabolica od organica rilevante. Per contro, in assenza d'iperammoniemia, la necessità di ricercare un'altra causa di alterazione mentale/cerebrale è stringente.

Teoricamente, una maggiore accuratezza è fornita dalla rilevazione, mediante spettrometria protonica in RM, dell'aumento del picco della glutamina a livello cerebrale (11), poiché la glutamina è il metabolita cerebrale dell'ammoniaca, pertanto non si può ritenere che vi sia EE senza aumento cerebrale di glutamina, anche se l'aumento di glutamina –analogamente all'iperammoniemia- non esclude che vi sia anche un'altra patologia in atto.

Pertanto, nei pazienti con quadri di delirium ricorrente o alterazione mentale persistente con iperammoniemia, è comunque opportuno considerare la presenza di concause metaboliche significative aggiuntive/alternative all'EE: ipotiroidismo, iponatremia severa, encefalopatie carenziali (deficit di tiamina, vitamina B12, niacina, folati, magnesio e forse zinco), ipercalcemia, ipercapnia/ipossia, encefalopatia uremica e/o da disequilibrio dialitico, ipocorticismo. Andrà anche effettuato un esame morfologico (TAC, RMN), per verificare la presenza d'idrocefalo normoteso, ematoma subdurale, neoplasie, gravi atrofie dei corpi mammillari (Korsakoff) o quadri suggestivi di vasculopatia cerebrale (pregressi ictus, demenza sottocorticale) o di demenza di Alzheimer. In casi rari e atipici, andranno considerati la sindrome delle apnee notturne, la simulazione, episodi comiziali e disturbi psichiatrici (Figura 1).

Figura 1: Schema per l'inquadramento diagnostico di soggetti con sospetta EE persistente o altamente ricorrente.





In conclusione, prima di cercare di trattare un paziente con EE “cronica” è opportuna una riflessione estesa per giungere a una diagnosi corretta che inquadri esaurientemente il paziente e il problema o i problemi da trattare. In particolare, se sono presenti concuse, queste andranno trattate insieme all’EE. Ciò è importante in particolare nei soggetti che rispondono in modo inadeguato ad un trattamento ipoammoniemizzante o nei quali il profilo neuropsichico si allontana da quello più comune nell’encefalopatia epatica (rallentamento psicomotorio con alterazioni attenteive e note di apatia/disinibizione, scarso coinvolgimento della memoria).

Per una gestione corretta del paziente, è anche opportuna una stadiazione riproducibile dello stato mentale (12) e può anche essere considerato l’esecuzione di un EEG per ottenere, attraverso la frequenza del ritmo di fondo (13), una misura semplice che permetta di monitorare obiettivamente l’efficacia del trattamento instaurato.

Trattamento

Il trattamento, poi, si potrà distinguere in:

1. *specifico*, volto a contrastare i meccanismi patogenetici dell’EE
2. *aspecifico*, volto a trattare l’epatopatia nel suo insieme.

Il trattamento specifico si avvale di farmaci volti a ridurre l’iperammoniemia, poiché farmaci che agiscono su altri meccanismi neurobiologici alla base dell’EE sono ancora in fase di studio.

Tra i farmaci antiammoniemici, quelli dei quali vi è evidenza clinica di efficacia sono i disaccaridi in posologia tale da portare a due evacuazioni al dì e gli antibiotici non assorbibili. Tra questi, la rifaxamina +/- disaccaride ha mostrato di ridurre il rischio cumulativo di sviluppare un episodio di EE conclamata dal ~40 al ~20% in 6 mesi di follow up di pazienti con EE ricorrente (14).

Pertanto, il trattamento di elezione nell’EE altamente ricorrente e/o persistente è rappresentato dall’associazione disaccaride/antibiotico non assorbibile, segnatamente rifaxamina.

Un altro provvedimento non farmacologico efficacie è la riduzione dell’entità dello shunt porto-sistemico, sia esso provocato attraverso TIPPS o shunt chirurgico, sia spontaneo (15). Ovviamente ciò comporta un aumento della pressione portale e pertanto va considerato il possibile aumento del rischio di emorragia.

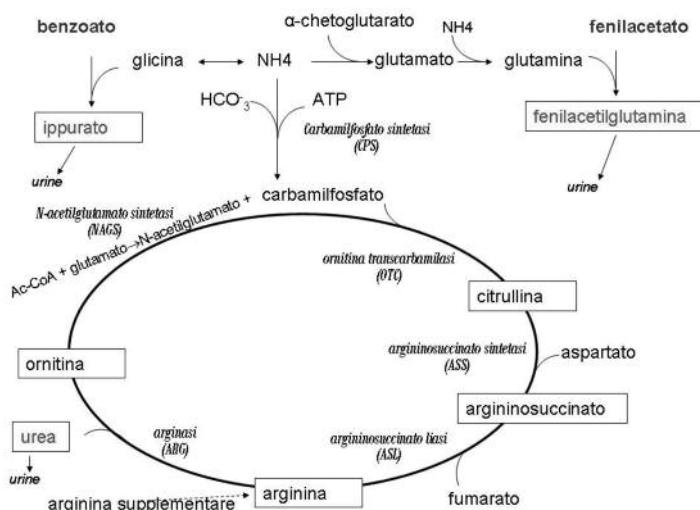
Altri farmaci proponibili in associazione con disaccaridi e antibiotici, perché agiscono sull’iperammoniemia con un meccanismo diverso e potenzialmente complementare a quello dei disaccaridi e degli antibiotici, sono il fenilacetato e il benzoato di sodio, il fenilacetato di ornitina, l’aspartato di ornitina e la carnitina. Il fenilacetato e il benzoato di sodio rimuovono l’ammoniaca indipendentemente dal ciclo dell’urea e sono pertanto usati in ambito pediatrico nel trattamento dell’iperammoniemia da difetti del ciclo dell’urea (Fig. 2).

Esistono, peraltro scarse evidenze di efficacia di tali prodotti nel trattamento dell’EE (16, 17) e non vi è nessuna prova di un effetto sinergico ai disaccaridi e antibiotici, anche se da un punto di vista farmacologico è possibile che ciò avvenga. Un nuovo prodotto in corso di registrazione per l’EE è il fenilacetato di ornitina che presenta il vantaggio di fornire fenilacetato associato ad ornitina: questa viene metabolizzata a glutamina e così fornisce in quantità ottimale la glutamina necessaria a complessarsi con il fenilacetato per eliminare ammoniaca (18).

Altri trattamenti che potrebbero essere complementari ai disaccaridi/antibiotici sono l’aspartato di orni-

tina e la carnitina; i probiotici *a priori* hanno scarso significato in soggetti già in trattamento con antibiotici. L'aspartato di ornitina, non in commercio in Italia, fornisce due aminoacidi la cui disponibilità è coinvolta nella regolazione del ciclo dell'urea (cfr. Fig. 2). La disponibilità di carnitina è necessaria perché non venga limitata la sintesi di carbamolifosfato, molecola iniziale nel ciclo dell'urea (cfr. Fig.2). A controprova di ciò, picchi di iperammoniemia sono documentati in carenze secondarie di carnitina nelle alterazioni congenite del ciclo dell'urea e nella tossicità da valproato.

Figura 2: Schema illustrante il meccanismo d'azione dei rimotori non ureici di azoto: benzoato (a sinistra) e fenilacetato (a destra). Questi rimuovono ammonio per vie alternative al suo ingresso nel ciclo dell'urea. Il benzoato si coniuga con la glicina e dà luogo a ippurato che viene escreto con l'urina, portando ad un'eliminazione equimolare di ammonio; il fenilacetato (a destra) si complessa con la glutamina, dando luogo a fenilacetilglutamina che viene escreta con le urine, portando all'eliminazione di due moli di ammonio per una mole di fenilacetato



Tuttavia, a parte le premesse biochimiche e fisiopatologiche, le evidenze cliniche circa l'utilità di questi trattamenti in associazione ai disaccaridi e agli antibiotici non assorbibili sono carenti.

Peraltro, non meno importanti dei trattamenti specifici sono i trattamenti aspecifici, volti a trattare l'epatopatia nel suo insieme: l'astensione dall'alcool, il trattamento dell'infezione da HBV -nei casi di cirrosi HBV correlata- e la malnutrizione.

A questo riguardo, non va dimenticata la supplementazione orale con aminoacidi a catena ramificata (BCAA) che ha un effetto nutrizionale, sia diretto e sia dovuto alla stimolazione dell'appetito, con ricaduta positivo sulla rigenerazione e sulla funzione epatica e sul rischio di EE (19-21). La supplementazione con BCAA è indicata in particolare qualora il paziente abbia una comprovata intolleranza ad un apporto proteico adeguato (1,2 g di proteine pro Kg di peso ideale) (22). L'apporto proteico potrà essere orientato ad un prevalente apporto di proteine di origine vegetariana, se gradite dal paziente, pur mancando evidenze consistenti circa l'utilità di tale indicazione (23).



Una considerazione a parte merita il trapianto di fegato, per la quale l'encefalopatia severa recidivante o permanente, in presenza o meno di alterazioni motorie associate e di mielopatia, rappresenta un' indicazione specifica, indipendente dal punteggio MELD (3, 24).

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MANAGEMENT OF PRE-HEPATIC PORTAL HYPERTENSION (IPEE) (GESTIONE DELL'IPERTENSIONE PORTALE EXTRA EPATICA)

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Etiologia

- 1 - È "sconosciuta" (idiopatica) nella maggior parte dei casi. Le indagini eseguite al momento della diagnosi di solito mostrano l'assenza di vena porta che risulta sostituita da un cavernoma. Solo in alcuni casi è stato possibile osservare l'evoluzione della patologia da trombosi della VP a cavernoma (1).
- 2 - Tra le cause di trombosi della vena porta in epoca neonatale, la cateterizzazione della vena ombelicale è la più probabile (2, 3, 4).
- 3 - Tra le cause più rare di IPEE esistono:
 - a. le complicanze chirurgiche della splenectomia in particolare nei pazienti con indicazione ematologica: malattie della membrana del globulo rosso, emoglobinopatie con stato di ipercoagulabilità cronica precedente l'intervento (5, 6)
 - b. la compressione estrinseca da patologia della regione del legamento epato duodenale e della testa del pancreas: cisti del coledoco (7), perforazione spontanea della via biliare (8), emangiomi (9)
 - c. gli stati settici inclusi gli ascessi epatici neonatali (10), le forme disseminate di malattia da gaffio di gatto (11) o l'appendicite perforata (12)
 - d. il ruolo dello stato trombofilico nella etiopatogenesi dell'occlusione della VP è poco conosciuto in età pediatrica (ripresenta l'etiologia più frequente nell'adulto). Altri fattori scatenanti sono stati studiati come l'infezione da CMV o ematoma intramurale del digiuno in pz emofilico (13,14). E' probabile che fattori di rischio protrombotici probabilmente giochino un ruolo più importante nella trombosi delle vene renali che nella trombosi della VP eccetto forse i casi di trombosi estesa della vena porta, mesenterica e splenica (15).

Manifestazioni cliniche.

Le manifestazioni cliniche dell'IPEE sono legate all'insorgenza delle complicanze.

a. Funzione epatica, coagulazione, ascite. La funzione di sintesi del fegato è di solito normale. Una riduzione dell'albuminemia si può osservare dopo sanguinamento gastrointestinale. Per quanto riguarda il profilo coagulativo, i pazienti con IPEE hanno una coagulopatia multifattoriale che somma la piantropenia da sequestro splenico a un allungamento dell'INR da deficit dei fattori sintetizzati dal fegato. Un'ascite transitoria può apparire dopo un sanguinamento intestinale prolungato mentre l'ascite cronica è più rara e si riscontra in particolare nelle ipertensioni portali di lunga durata.

b. Sanguinamento di origine digestiva. Da varici a livello del tubo digerente.
c. Splenomegalia e ipersplenismo.

d. Complicanze biliari. la presenza di dilatazione delle vie biliari intra/extrapeatiche si associa spesso all'IPEE (16) probabilmente secondaria a compressione estrinseca da parte del cavernoma. Una colelitiasi può comparire, secondaria alla dilatazione delle VB.

e. Complicanze cardiovascolari. La presenza di una sindrome epato-polmonare va ricercata in tutti i pazienti con IPEE in quanto è controindicazione assoluta a qualsiasi intervento di shunt porto sistemico.

f. Ritardo della crescita. Rimane una questione controversa (17, 18). Il meccanismo che porta al ritardo di crescita è sconosciuto.



Diagnosi

la diagnosi di ipertensione portale da cavernoma della VP viene fatta all'ecodoppler (sensibilità: 94-100%, specificità: 90-96%). Permette lo studio morfologico del fegato con rilievo delle dimensioni, dei margini, e delle caratteristiche ecostrutturali del parenchima; consente di valutare lo stato delle vie biliari e dell'impalcatura vascolare in particolare della confluenza con la vena mesenterica e splenica, dell'arteria epatica e delle vene sovraepatiche, individua e caratterizza eventuali lesioni focali e misura la milza.

La valutazione iniziale dei pazienti con IPEE prevede:

- emocromo per valutazione dell'ipersplenismo
- studio della trombofilia: coagulazione di base, fibrinogeno, antitrombina 3, proteina C anticoagulante, proteina S anticoagulante, PTT sensibile LAC, APC-resistance, Fattore V Leiden, Fattore II Protrombinico, fattore II, V, VII e VIII, X, mutazione MTHFR (metilentetraidrofolato - reduttasi), Omocisteinemia e Plasminogeno.
- indici di sintesi epatica (albumina, proteine totali, colesterolo, ammoniemia, urea, proteina C reattiva), di citolisi (ALT, AST) e di colestasi (bilirubina totale e diretta, GGT, fosfatasi alcalina).
- Valutazione del rischio di emorragia digestiva:
esofagogastroduodenoscopia per indagare la presenza di varici esofagee.

Imaging e valutazione per intervento chirurgico:

- a. Ecografia e/o Tomografia Assiale Computerizzata: valutazione vascolare completa, volumetria della milza, valutazione di shunt porto sistemici spontanei
- b. Portografia Indiretta Retrograda Transgiugulare: è l'esame essenziale per stabilire la pervietà del recesso di Rex e quindi la fattibilità di uno shunt meso Rex. Permette lo studio dell'anatomia, del calibro e della pervietà del sistema portale intraepatico.

Opzioni terapeutiche

L'atteggiamento corrente e' orientato al trattamento profilattico della complicanze. In questo senso il gold standard e' lo shunt meso rex, (19,20,21) che permette di ristabilire un normale flusso del sangue portale dal circolo splanchnico al fegato. Se lo shunt non e' fattibile esistono altri mezzi di prevenzione delle complicanze, in particolare emorragiche, dell'IPEE: terapia medica con -bloccanti [propanololo] per ridurre la pressione nel circolo splanchnico, legatura/sclerosi endoscopica, embolizzazione splenica parziale . In caso di emorragia acuta da varici il paziente deve essere stabilizzato dal punto di vista emodinamico prima di procedere al trattamento delle varici sanguinanti. La legatura delle varici esofagee, gravata da una minore incidenza di complicanze, è diventata la tecnica maggiormente utilizzata.

Tecniche chirurgiche

- a. Lo shunt MesoRex ristabilisce la perfusione mesenterico-portale verso il fegato (22, 23). Questa tecnica è orà considerata il *gold standard* nell'approccio terapeutico dell'ipertensione da trombosi della vena porta ed è indicata anche in modo profilattico. (24,25, 26, 27).
- b. Shunt Spleno Renale Distale. Derivazione selettiva con eventuale splenectomia associata.
- c. Shunt Meso-Cavale, shunt porto cava e shunt spleno renale prossimale (con splenectomia)
- d. TIPPS: visto la trombosa della vena porta e l'assenza di ipertensione intraepatica, il TIPPS non è una procedure indicata nel trattamento

- e. Interventi palliativi come l'embolizzazione della milza. Pazienti affetti da grave ipersplenismo non ancora candidati a shunt o al trapianto, possono essere sottoposti a legatura dell'arteria splenica o alla procedura di embolizzazione della milza.
- f. trapianto di fegato: in casi molto selezionati quando il mesoRex non è possibile in pazienti con contraindicatione al shunt porto sistemico e complicanze non trattabile in modo conservativo

Indicazione alla chirurgia e strategia attuale

Sono riconosciute svariate indicazioni, assolute e relative, alla terapia chirurgica dell'ipertensione portale. Storicamente, la chirurgia dell'ipertensione portale è sempre stata riservata ai casi di grave ipersplenismo o a quelli in cui l'approccio conservativo, medico ed endoscopico, diveniva insufficiente a prevenire il sanguinamento da varici.

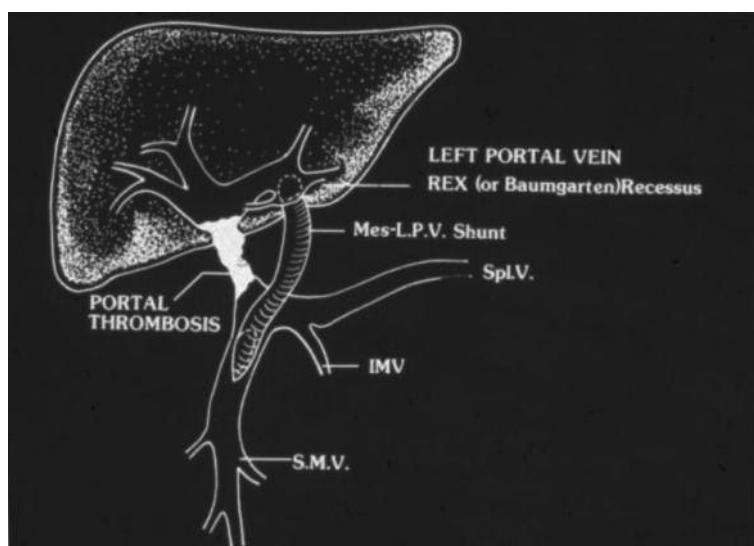
Nel bambino con ipertensione portale extraepatica e fegato sano, quando il bypass meso-Rex non sia fattibile, l'indicazione alla chirurgia segue i criteri abituali. Per contro, tenendo conto che lo Shunt Meso-Rex permette il fisiologico ripristino del normale flusso portale verso il fegato attualmente si considera che questa tecnica debba essere utilizzata in maniera profilattica in tutti i casi in cui le condizioni anatomiche (pervietà della vena mesenterica superiore, pervietà del ramo portale sinistro incluso il recesso di Rex e di entrambe le vene giugulari) siano favorevoli

Strategia attuale e algoritmo gestionale

Gli interventi palliativi, quali gli shunt porto-sistemici (porto-cavale, meso-cavale e spleno-renale prossimale) mirati esclusivamente al controllo della sintomatologia sono utilizzati sempre meno lasciando una via preferenziale al trapianto di fegato per i bambini affetti da cirrosi, al Meso Rex per i bambini con cavernoma su fegato sano e un Rex pervio ed un piccolo spazio agli shunt selettivi come quello spleno-renale distale per i bambini con altre condizioni e una funzionalità epatica molto stabile.

Il bypass Meso Rex abolisce il blocco pre-epatico, rivascolarizza il fegato in modo fisiologico e risolve lo stato ipertensivo portale e la sintomatologia correlata (varici esofagee, splenomegalia ed ipersplenismo). Questa tecnica è considerata il gold standard nell'approccio terapeutico dell'ipertensione da trombosi della vena porta e va considerata in modo profilattico.

I bambini con malattia epatica stabile, e quelli con ipertensione portale extraepatica ma con anatomia non favorevole per shunt meso-Rex, sono seguiti in modo conservativo con rivalutazioni cliniche e endoscopiche periodiche.





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MANAGEMENT OF SEVERE SIDE EFFECTS DUE TO ANTIVIRAL DRUGS IN RESPONDER PATIENTS (GESTIONE DEGLI EFFETTI COLLATERALI DEI FARMACI ANTIVIRALI NEI PAZIENTI RESPONDER)

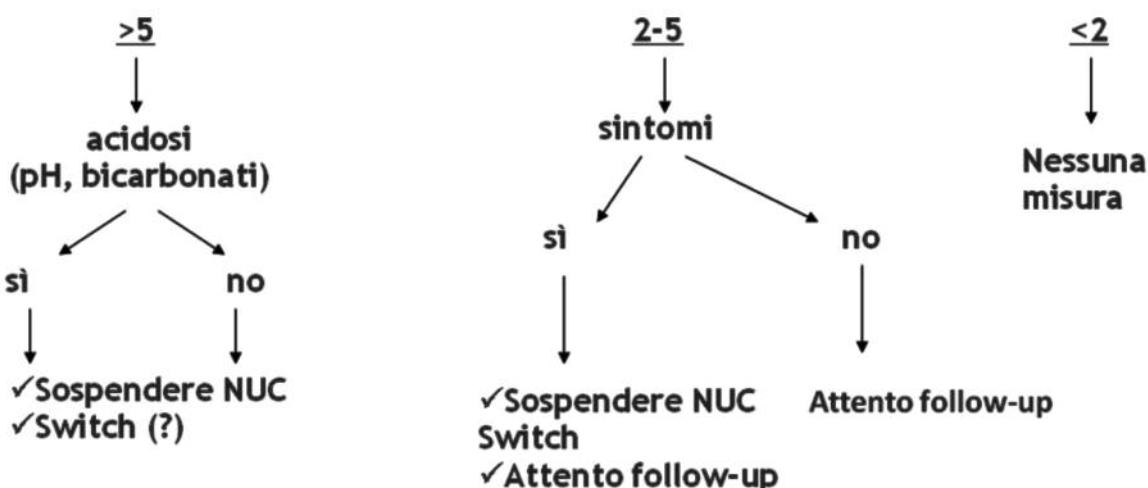
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Tutti i farmaci alle dosi terapeutiche standard comportano un rischio di generare reazioni indesiderate, con frequenza estremamente variabile. L'intensità degli eventi avversi varia da minima e transitoria fino ad eventi mortali. Occorre tener presente che i trial clinici registrativi dei nuovi farmaci hanno una numerosità calcolata sull'end point di efficacia prescelto e non sulla incidenza attesa di eventi avversi rari; inoltre la casistica arruolata è selezionata, essendo esclusi pazienti con comorbidità, malattia epatica avanzata, assunzione di altri farmaci. Pertanto eventi avversi meno frequenti o legati a particolari tipologie di pazienti possono non essere evidenziati nel corso di trial registrativi ma solo in studi o sorveglianza post-marketing.

Antivirali attivi contro HBV

Alcuni eventi avversi sono legati all'intera classe di farmaci. La lunga esperienza nella terapia di HIV ha mostrato che gli analoghi nucleosidici possono provocare inibizione della polimerasi gamma mitocondriale, le cui conseguenze sono acidosi lattica, miopatia, neuropatia, pancreatite. Questa eventualità è rara per gli analoghi nucleosidici attivi contro HBV, per i quali non è richiesta una sorveglianza specifica (dosaggio lattati) in corso di terapia, ma solo una sorveglianza sindromica. Tra gli analoghi raccomandati come prima linea dalle linee guida italiane (1), *entecavir* è stato associato ad acidosi lattica in 5 pazienti, tutti con malattia epatica avanzata ($MELD \geq 22$) (2). Altri studi di coorte in pazienti con cirrosi non hanno confermato il rischio di acidosi lattica in corso di terapia con entecavir (3). Studi di coorte "real life" confermano la sostanziale sicurezza del farmaco nel medio periodo (4). Il livello plasmatico di lattati può subire variazioni che non richiedono modifiche della terapia e che regrediscono spontaneamente. Un algoritmo di comportamento è sintetizzato nella Tabella 1.





La telbivudina ha causato negli studi registrativi elevazione della creatin-fosfo-chinasi nel 12% dei pazienti, con sintomi di miopatia in rari casi. E' sconsigliata la somministrazione con altri farmaci responsabili di miopatia (ad es. statine) (1). Un trial che prevedeva l'uso di telbivudina in associazione con Peg-IFN alfa2a è stato sospeso per una elevata incidenza di neuropatie.

Gli analoghi nucleotidici possiedono una potenziale tossicità renale. Per il *tenofovir* disponiamo di una lunga esperienza nella terapia di HIV e di una serie di studi di farmacocinetica. Il farmaco viene escreto per via renale anche mediante un meccanismo di trasporto attivo a livello del tubulo prossimale, condiviso con altri farmaci. La tossicità a carico delle cellule del tubulo prossimale comporta una aumentata fosfaturia e nei casi più avanzati glicosuria e perdita di aminoacidi e proteine a basso peso; la riduzione del filtrato glomerulare può essere un evento tardivo (5). La perdita di fosfati può tradursi in osteopenia; non esistono studi prospettici su questo punto in pazienti con epatite cronica B. La coorte di pazienti trattati in aperto con tenofovir fino a 4 anni (roll-over dagli studi registrativi) (6,7) dimostra una incidenza di complicanze renali inferiore ad 1%; questo dato è confermato anche da una coorte europea "real life" in corso di follow-up. Attualmente nella pratica clinica è consigliato il monitoraggio mensile, durante il primo anno di terapia, di fosfaturia/fosfatemia e di GFR calcolato mediante la stima della clearance della creatinina (utilizzando le formule MDRD o Cockcroft-Gault, disponibili in rete).

Per tutti gli analoghi attivi contro HBV è necessario un adattamento della posologia in caso di clearance della creatinina inferiore a 50 mL/min, secondo lo schema riportato nella Tabella 3. Pertanto è necessario determinare GFR all'inizio della terapia in tutti i pazienti e controllarne i valori periodicamente in corso di terapia.

Tabella 3. Adattamento posologico degli analoghi nucleos(t)idici in base ai valori di GFR

Farmaco	Telbivudina	Entecavir	Adefovir	Tenofovir
GFRmL/min/1.73 m ² SC	Dose 600 mg	Dose 0,5 mg	Dose 10 mg	Dose 245 mg
> 50	24h	ogni 24 hr	24 h	24 h
30-49	48 h	ogni 48 h	48 h	48 h
10-30	72 h	ogni 72 hr	72 h	72-96h
ESRD	96 h	ogni 5-7 gg	7 giorni	7 giorni

Antivirali attivi contro HCV

Numerose molecole ad azione diretta contro HCV (DAA=direct-acting antivirals) sono in differenti fasi di sperimentazione. Telaprevir e boceprevir sono le prime molecole che hanno iniziato all'iter registrativo e pertanto si prevede che possano essere disponibili all'inizio dell'anno 2012. I trial condotti su pazienti di genotipo1 naïve o relapser/non-responder prevedono per entrambi i farmaci la somministrazione in triplice terapia con peg-IFN e ribavirina, per una durata di 8-12 settimane per il telaprevir e di 24-48 settimane per il boceprevir (8-12). Ai comuni eventi avversi registrati con la terapia standard si sommano quindi gli eventi tipici di questi farmaci (Tabella 4)



Tabella 4. Sommario dei più comuni eventi avversi in corso di terapia con Peg-IFN + ribavirina e DAA

- **Eventi avversi comuni in corso di terapia con Peg-IFN+ribavirina:**
 - Astenia, cefalea, nausea, febbre, mialgia
 - Anemia e neutropenia
 - Depressione, irritabilità, insomnia
 - Rash
- **Eventi avversi tipici con DAA:**
 - Telaprevir: rash, anemia
 - Boceprevir: anemia, vomito, disgeusia

Gli studi SPRINT-1 & SPRINT-2 (8,9) hanno registrato anemia (intesa come Hgb <10 g/dL) nel 47-56% dei pazienti che ricevevano boceprevir vs. il 29-34% nei gruppi trattati con Peg-IFN-ribavirina (SOC=standard of care). L'anemia da boceprevir era di grado 2 WHO (valori di Hgb tra 8.0 e 9.5 g/dL) nel 27% dei pazienti e di grado 3 (tra 6.5 e <8.0 g/dL) nel 2%. L'uso di eritropoietina ha ridotto l'incidenza di anemia e le sospensioni precoci della terapia dovute ad anemia.

Il rash cutaneo è il tipico evento avverso da telaprevir registrato negli studi PROVE 1, PROVE 2 e PROVE 3 (10-12); l'incidenza era del 47-59% vs. il 20-41% nei gruppi trattati con SOC, nel 5-7% dei casi il rash era classificato grave (grado 3/4) ed ha richiesto la sospensione del trattamento. Il rash di grado uno è localizzato, non si accompagna a sintomi sistemicci e non richiede interruzione della terapia. Il grado 2 è una eruzione che coinvolge fino al 50% della superficie corporea, può coesistere prurito, modesta abrasione cutanea e interessamento delle mucose. Nei trial era consentito il trattamento con corticosteroidi per uso topico ed anti-istaminici sistemici; in caso di progressione del rash il telaprevir andava sospeso; la mancata risoluzione entro 7 giorni richiedeva la sospensione della ribavirina. Il rash di grado 3/4 interessa oltre il 50% della superficie corporea, è palpabile, sono presenti bolle, ulcerazioni, anche delle mucose, fino ad aspetti di epidermolisi; può essere presente febbre ed eosinofilia. In questo caso telaprevir va sospeso immediatamente.



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MANAGEMENT OF VIRAL HEPATITIS IN HEMODIALYSIS PATIENS

(GESTIONE DELLE EPATITI VIRALI NEI PAZIENTI IN EMODIALISI)

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Key concepts

- La prevalenza dell'infezione da HCV è in calo, ma supera ancora il 10%; quella dell'infezione da HBV è molto inferiore al 10%
- Sia HCV che HBV riducono la sopravvivenza del paziente in dialisi
- La diagnosi precoce di infezione da HCV richiede monitoraggio di ALT e HCVAb
- La terapia di combinazione con IFN e RBV per HCV comporta interruzioni in ¼ pazienti
- Nel trattamento degli HBsAg positivi vanno considerati analoghi nucleosidici ad elevata barriera genetica e scarsa tossicità renale

Introduzione

Nei pazienti in trattamento emodialitico, il danno epatico rappresenta una causa di morte. In questi pazienti, il virus dell'epatite C (HCV) è responsabile di infezione più spesso del virus dell'epatite B, ma in entrambi i casi l'infezione virale contribuisce ad aggravare la malattia renale. Per entrambe le infezioni, in corso di emodialisi esistono una serie di problematiche di tipo epidemiologico, diagnostico e terapeutico.

Infezione cronica da HBV

La prevenzione della trasmissione nosocomiale ha rappresentato un importante traguardo nel trattamento dei pazienti con malattia renale cronica. I pazienti HBsAg positivi in dialisi, nei paesi occidentali, rappresentano attualmente meno del 10%. Nello studio DOPPS che ha reclutato nel 2003 pazienti sia in Europa che negli USA, la percentuale di siero conversione è risultata di 0 per 100 pazienti anno, tuttavia l'epatite B continua ad essere presente nelle unità di dialisi.

E' emerso come, nei pazienti in dialisi, l'infezione da HBV progredisca lentamente per cui prima che si manifestino la cirrosi e l'epatocarcinoma è spesso necessario un lungo periodo di follow-up. Tuttavia, fra i pazienti in dialisi la mortalità nei pazienti con infezione da HBV è 3-4 volte superiore rispetto a quella registrata nei pazienti con funzione renale conservata. Al contrario, è stato però anche ipotizzato che lo stato di immunosoppressione possa fare aumentare i livelli di HBV DNA e accelerare la progressione del danno epatico alterando così la storia naturale della malattia.

Nell'esperienza generale, i segni di citolisi, nel contesto della dialisi, sono modesti. Nei pazienti con infezione da HBV, i livelli di transaminasi sono normali o appena aumentati e quelli di HBV DNA in genere bassi e stabili nel tempo.



Terapia

Diverse, fra le opzioni terapeutiche attualmente destinate ai pazienti HBsAg positivi al di fuori della dialisi, possono essere utilizzate anche in questo contesto. Tuttavia, non esistono studi clinici controllati su cui basare le indicazioni al trattamento con i farmaci utilizzati al di fuori della dialisi. Pochi sono gli studi in cui sia stato utilizzato l'interferone perché sicuramente uno dei problemi correlati alla terapia interferonica, la tollerabilità, è accentuato in corso di dialisi e immunosoppressione. Diversi studi hanno valutato la risposta agli analoghi nucleotidici.

Le linee guida AISF sul trattamento dei pazienti a rischio di riattivazione suggeriscono di trattare i carriers attivi di HBV e di sottoporre a monitoraggio i pazienti portatori inattivi.

La lamivudina è stata impiegata con successo in molti studi, ma poiché in questi pazienti la terapia è in genere di lunga durata, il trattamento in monoterapia ha portato all'insorgenza di resistenza. Gli analoghi di nuova generazione sono stati usati anche nei pazienti con insufficienza renale.

E' stato segnalato che, in corso di creatinina <50 ml/min, le dosi di entecavir debbano essere ridotte. Poiché all'uso di adefovir e tenofovir sono state associate tossicità tubulare e danno renale acuto, il farmaco, il primo farmaco non trova indicazione in questo contesto, il secondo trova indicazione solo dopo attenta valutazione del rischio/beneficio. L'esperienza più consolidata in termini di dati prodotti rimane ancora quella con la lamivudina.

Un aspetto peculiare dei pazienti con infezione da HBV in trattamento dialitico è rappresentato dalla loro scarsa responsività al vaccino quando confrontati con i pazienti sani. Recentemente è stato dimostrato che il levamisolo, come adiuvante della vaccinazione per l'HBV, è in grado di fare aumentare la percentuale di soggetti emodializzati che sviluppano anticorpi antiHBs dopo la vaccinazione.

Infezione cronica da HCV

Epidemiologia

L'esposizione al rischio di contrarre l'infezione da virus C attraverso il sangue è frequente nel contesto ambientale delle unità di dialisi. Questo spiega perché, anche dopo l'implementazione del controllo delle trasfusioni di sangue ed emoderivati a partire dal 1990, la trasmissione nosocomiale dell'HCV fra i dializzati non si sia azzerata. Analisi filogenetiche sui virus isolati nei soggetti infettati hanno anche dimostrato che le fonti principali di trasmissione nelle unità di dialisi possono essere un infrequente cambio di guanti fra un paziente e l'altro, una scarsa sterilizzazione delle macchine da dialisi, il ri-uso di filtri e soluzioni da dialisi ed infine il ri-uso di fiale da eparina multi dose. E' stato anche dimostrato che, isolare i pazienti HCV positivi per il trattamento emodialitico in stanze separate durante ogni sessione, porta ad una significativa riduzione della trasmissione dell'HCV.

Negli ultimi 10 anni si è registrato un importante calo nell'incidenza dell'HCV fra i dializzati, ma nel 2005 il gruppo francese di Izopet riportava ancora su 1,323 pazienti arruolati in 25 centri francesi una positività per gli anticorpi anti HCV del 16.3%. Nel corso di un periodo di osservazione di 3 anni, in tale studio, venivano registrate 14 nuove infezioni da HCV con un'incidenza dello 0.4% l'anno.

Zampieron, in uno studio epidemiologico europeo su 46 centri di dialisi e 2125 pazienti, ha riscontrato, nel 2006, una prevalenza dell'HCV del 7.2%. In questo studio, l'incidenza è risultata 4.5% in Europa e 8% in Italia. Questi dati dimostrano come vi sia un decremento nella prevalenza dell'infezione da HCV



nelle unità di dialisi europee. E' interessante notare come in questo studio sia stato registrato un gradiente Nord-Sud e una prevalenza più alta nei pazienti che ospitino un maggior numero di immigrati.

Manifestazioni cliniche e diagnosi

La mancanza di un metodo affidabile per la diagnosi precoce dell'infezione da HCV contratta in corso di dialisi è in parte responsabile della prevalenza ancora elevata dell'infezione fra i dializzati. Una caratteristica clinica dei pazienti in dialisi è, infatti, il modesto incremento degli enzimi epatici. Pertanto, il riscontro degli anticorpi anti HCV con test ELISA di III generazione è spesso, in corso di emodialisi, il metodo più immediato per diagnosticare l'infezione, ma il test non ci aiuta a distinguere una infezione cronica da una acuta.

Attualmente viene raccomandato di effettuare, nei pazienti sottoposti a dialisi, determinazioni mensili dei livelli delle transaminasi e semestrali dell'HCVAb; tuttavia, l'utilizzo di un test molecolare per valutare la presenza dell'acido nucleico virale consente una determinazione più accurata poiché in questa categoria sono stati riportati casi in cui, in assenza di HCVAb, l'HCV RNA risultasse positivo.

In questi pazienti è però vero anche il contrario, cioè esiste il rischio di false negatività legate al fatto che se il prelievo per l'HCV RNA non viene eseguito in condizioni corrette può dare risultati falsamente negativi in ragione di diversi fattori (sostanze inibenti, legame HCV RNA-membrane dialitiche).

La biopsia epatica è stata per anni considerata il gold standard per stabilire la severità della malattia epatica nei pazienti con HCV in emodialisi. L'invasività della procedura ha recentemente suggerito, in analogia con quanto si è verificato nei pazienti con infezione cronica da HCV al di fuori del contesto della dialisi, di comparare in questo contesto clinico, l'accuratezza di markers non invasivi di diagnosi di danno epatico come Fibrotest, Actitest o APRI score, con la biopsia epatica. Uno studio comparativo fra biopsia e ACTITEST and APRI non ha dato risultati incoraggianti poiché sia PPV che NPV sono risultati bassi per Fibrotest ed Actitest. L'impiego del fibroscan, già valutato in qualche studio, sembra essere, invece, più promettente.

La sopravvivenza nei pazienti con HCV

I pazienti con epatite C in trattamento emodialitico hanno una ridotta sopravvivenza rispetto ai pazienti HCV positivi senza insufficienza renale. Una recente meta-analisi su 11.589 soggetti ha dimostrato che il rischio di morte aumenta di 1.3 volte nei pazienti HCV positivi in dialisi rispetto ai pazienti negativi. L'aumento del rischio è da ricondursi all'evoluzione della malattia epatica in cirrosi ed epatocarcinoma.

Terapia

L'efficacia e la sicurezza della terapia antivirale per l'HCV con la combinazione di PegInterferone e ribavirina in corso di emodialisi rimane da chiarire. La più importante limitazione degli studi finora effettuati è stata la elevata percentuale di pazienti che interrompono precocemente la terapia. Tuttavia la risposta al trattamento sembra soddisfacente se si considerano i risultati di una recente meta-analisi che ha dimostrato una risposta nel 56% dei soggetti trattati. E' chiaro che i dati vanno analizzati in accordo con il genotipo dell'HCV. Secondo questa analisi, è possibile ottenere risposte sostenute comparabili a quelle dei pazienti



senza insufficienza renale, riportabili a percentuali al di sotto del 50% nel genotipo 1 e di circa 80% nei genotipi 2.

La percentuale di interruzioni precoci del trattamento riportata in questa meta-analisi è stata del 25%. Tale evidenza conferma pertanto che le interruzioni del trattamento sono molto più frequenti in questa popolazione che al di fuori del contesto della dialisi. L'anemia rappresenta la causa più frequente di interruzione del trattamento e terapie di supporto come l'eritropoietina si sono rivelate scarsamente efficaci. Sono necessari studi prospettici e controllati che dimostrino se la sopravvivenza di questi pazienti migliori dopo il trattamento.

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CLINICAL MANAGEMENT OF VIRAL HEPATITIS DURING PREGNANCY AND BREAST FEEDING (GESTIONE CLINICA DELLE EPATITI VIRALI DURANTE LA GRAVIDANZA E L'ALLATTAMENTO)

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Firenze

Introduzione

I virus dell'epatite B e C (*Hepatitis C Virus, HCV*) sono i principali agenti eziologici di epatite cronica virale in età pediatrica e adulta [Williams, 2006].

Nei paesi industrializzati con l'introduzione dei metodi di profilassi alla nascita e del programma di vaccinazione di massa per il virus B, l'infezione da HCV è diventata la più importante causa di epatopatia cronica ad eziologia infettiva nel bambino [Slowik & Jhaveri, 2005].

La profilassi alla nascita per HBV è efficace nel ridurre la trasmissione perinatale nell'85-95% dei nati. Tutte le donne dovrebbero essere sottoposte durante la gravidanza a screening per l'epatite B. I neonati da madri positive per l'antigene di superficie dell'epatite B dovrebbero ricevere immunoglobuline e vaccinazione anti-epatite B entro 12 ore dalla nascita mentre tutti gli altri neonati dovrebbero ricevere la vaccinazione anti-epatite B prima di essere dimessi.

Dal 1992 la trasmissione perinatale è diventata la principale modalità di infezione da HCV in età pediatrica [Bortolotti et al., 1998; 2001; 2007]. Non esistono misure efficaci per prevenire la trasmissione perinatale dell'epatite C pertanto non è al momento ritenuto indicato lo screening di tutte le donne in gravidanza. L'efficacia della trasmissione perinatale del virus C, se confrontata con quella del virus B, è molto più bassa. Il meccanismo ultimo della trasmissione di HCV da madre a figlio è tuttora sconosciuto. Numerosi studi hanno valutato i fattori di rischio per la trasmissione perinatale di HCV identificando e permettendo la classificazione di tre differenti categorie di rischio: (1) fattori che aumentano il rischio; (2) fattori che predicono il rischio; (3) fattori che non sono associati con il rischio di trasmissione.

Timing della Trasmissione HCV

Il momento esatto della trasmissione dell'infezione HCV da madre a figlio è tuttora sconosciuto. Il virus può essere trasmesso sia durante la vita intrauterina che al momento del parto. Il ritrovamento del genoma virale nel siero dei neonati nelle prime 24 ore di vita, suggerisce la possibilità di contagio precoce durante la vita intrauterina [Weiner et al., 1993; Resti et al., 1998; Mok et al., 2005]. Circa 1/3 dei bambini infetti contrae l'infezione durante la gravidanza [Mok et al., 2005]. In realtà, nella maggior parte dei bambini infetti il virus è identificabile nel sangue solo a distanza di alcuni mesi dal parto e ciò è possibile come conseguenza di trasmissione perinatale cioè la trasmissione che avviene al momento del parto o nella fasi conclusive della gravidanza [Gibb et al., 2000; European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network., 2001; Steininger et al., 2003].



Epidemiologia della Trasmissione Perinatale HCV

In una revisione sistematica di un gran numero di studi sulla trasmissione perinatale di HCV eseguiti dal 1992 al 2000, l'incidenza di trasmissione perinatale da madre anti-HCV positiva, indipendentemente dal riscontro di viremia, è risultata 1,7%. Tale percentuale sale a 4,3% quando la madre è viremica e a 19,4% quando la madre è coinfectata con il virus dell'immunodeficienza umana (HIV). Tra i 383 casi di trasmissione perinatale identificati in questo studio, solo in un bambino la trasmissione era avvenuta da madre non viremica [Yeung et al., 2001]. Anche i risultati degli studi epidemiologici più recenti confermano quelli appena descritti [European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2001; 2005; Healy et al., 2001; Resti et al., 2002a ; Mast et al., 2005].

Fattori che Aumentano il Rischio di Trasmissione Perinatale, Fattori che Predicono il Rischio, Fattori Non Associati al Rischio di Trasmissione Perinatale di HCV.

Nella tabella 1 sono riassunte le attuali conoscenze sui fattori di rischio per la trasmissione perinatale di HCV.

Fattori che aumentano il rischio di trasmissione perinatale del virus dell'epatite C

Viremia HCV. La trasmissione perinatale avviene quasi esclusivamente da madri viremiche cioè da donne con HCV-RNA dosabile con metodica PCR nel sangue periferico [Dore et al., 1997; Granovsky et al., 1998; Resti et al., BMJ 1998; Tovo et al., 2000; Dal Molin et al., 2002; Saez et al., 2004; European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005]. Nonostante occasionalmente alcuni autori [Granovsky et al., 1998; Tovo et al., 2000; European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005] abbiano descritto donne non viremiche che trasmettono l'infezione, la viremia materna è considerata un fattore essenziale. L'andamento della viremia, tanto nei bambini quanto negli adulti, può essere intermittente, pertanto la negatività della ricerca di HCV-RNA prima o all'inizio della gravidanza, non può escludere la possibilità di una positività nelle successive settimane di gestazione con conseguente rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Resti et al., 1998]. I dati disponibili circa il possibile ruolo dei livelli di viremia materna per la trasmissione perinatale sono contrastanti [Lin et al., 1994; Ohto et al., 1994; Matsubara et al., 1995; Moriya et al., 1995; Resti et al., 1998; Conte et al., 2000; Okamoto et al., 2000; Mast et al., 2005]. Alcuni studi in letteratura riportano che livelli elevati di HCV-RNA nel siero materno si associano ad un più alto rischio di trasmissione [Lin et al., 1994; Ohto et al., 1994; Matsubara et al., 1995; Moriya et al., 1995; Okamoto et al., 2000]. Altri studi non dimostrano questa associazione e evidenziano sovrapposizione dei livelli di viremia nelle madri che trasmettono e non trasmettono l'infezione [Resti et al., 1998; Conte et al., 2000; Mast et al., 2005]. Una possibile spiegazione per questi risultati contrastanti potrebbe ricondursi al timing di esecuzione della PCR per HCV-RNA durante la gravidanza. La concentrazione di HCV-RNA nel siero, infatti, è fluttuante durante la gravidanza e solitamente aumenta nel terzo trimestre [Gervais et al., 2000; Paternoster et al., 2001]. Tutti gli studi concordano nel dire che durante la gravidanza non è possibile identificare un valore di viremia al di sotto del quale il rischio di trasmissione dell'infezione al figlio si azzeri.

Infezione delle cellule mononucleate del sangue periferico. L'infezione da parte del virus dell'epatite C delle cellule mononucleate materne aumenta il rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Azzari et al., 2000; 2008].

Sesso. In un recente studio multicentrico europeo è stato dimostrato che i neonati di sesso femminile hanno un rischio due volte maggiore rispetto a quelli di sesso maschile di contrarre l'infezione [European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005].



diatic Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005]. Come suggerito recentemente dagli stessi autori, tale differenza potrebbe essere spiegata dalla diversa capacità di risposta alle infezioni tra il sesso maschile e quello femminile [Pembrey et al., 2008]. Studi precedenti non sono riusciti a dimostrare nessuna relazione tra sesso e trasmissione perinatale di HCV [Granovsky et al., 1998; Resti et al., 1998].

Rottura precoce delle membrane e complicanze legate al parto. La rottura delle membrane per più di 6 ore si associa ad un aumentato rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Spencer et al., 1997; European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005; Mast et al., 2005].

Procedure ostetriche ed esposizione intra-parto a sangue materno infetto da HCV. I dati a nostra disposizione circa il possibile ruolo delle manovre ostetriche nel promuovere la trasmissione iatrogena del virus dell'epatite C sono pochi e non permettono di trarre conclusioni definitive. Per quanto riguarda il rischio di trasmissione connesso all'esecuzione dell'amniocentesi, ad esempio, un singolo studio ha dimostrato che l'amniocentesi è un fattore di rischio per la trasmissione dell'infezione al neonato [Minola et al., 2001], anche se HCV è stato riscontrato nel liquido amniotico solo nel 6,3% delle madri viremiche che si sono sottoposte ad amniocentesi durante il quarto mese di gravidanza [Delamare et al., 1999]. Il monitoraggio invasivo del feto durante il travaglio con elettrodi applicati sul cuoio capelluto così come il verificarsi di lacerazioni vaginali o perineali durante il parto vaginale espongono il neonato al sangue materno infetto e aumentano il rischio di trasmissione perinatale del virus [Mast et al., 2005; Steininger et al., 2003].

Fattori che predicono il rischio di trasmissione perinatale di HCV

Confezione HIV. Il rischio di trasmissione perinatale del virus dell'epatite C aumenta nelle madri con coinfezione HCV-HIV non trattate con farmaci anti-retrovirali [Ohto et al., 1994; Manzini et al., 1995; Pacagnini et al., 1995; Zanetti et al., 1995; Tovo et al., 1997; Granovsky et al., 1998; Thomas et al., 1998; Gibb et al., 2000; European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2001]. Secondo alcuni autori l'aumento del rischio di trasmissione perinatale da donne coinfette è secondario all'aumento dei livelli di HCV-RNA. Nelle donne coinfette HCV-HIV i livelli di HCV-RNA sono, infatti, più elevati per l'immunodepressione connessa all'infezione HIV [Zanetti et al., 1995]. Un'ipotesi alternativa riguarda la capacità del virus HIV di facilitare l'ingresso e la replicazione del virus dell'epatite C all'interno delle cellule del sangue periferico materno [Blackard et al. 2005], condizione associata ad un aumentato rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Azzari et al., 2000; 2008]. La confezione HCV-HIV e la storia di tossicodipendenza materna sono spesso associate [Resti et al., 2002a]: recentemente è stato dimostrato che l'elevato rischio di trasmissione perinatale dell'epatite C nei nati da madre coinfetta è secondario alla storia materna di utilizzo di droghe per via endovenosa [Resti et al., 2002a].

Infezione del padre. L'infezione HCV del padre-partner sessuale di una madre infetta, ha valore predittivo circa il rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Indolfi et al., 2008], anch'esso, come la confezione HCV-HIV, secondario alla storia materna di utilizzo di droghe per via endovenosa [Indolfi et al., 2008].

Storia materna di utilizzo di droghe per via endovenosa. Diversi autori hanno dimostrato che la storia materna di utilizzo di droghe per via endovenosa aumenta il rischio di trasmissione perinatale di HCV [Resti et al., 1995; Sabatino et al 1996; Granovsky et al., 1998; Mazza et al., 1998; Zanetti et al., 1998; Azzari et al., 2008]. Solo uno studio recente non è riuscito a dimostrare alcuna correlazione tra storia di tossicodipendenza e il rischio di trasmissione perinatale [European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005].



L'infezione delle cellule linfocitarie materne si realizza significativamente più spesso nelle madri con storia di utilizzo di droghe per via endovenosa piuttosto che nelle donne che non hanno un passato di tossicodipendenza [Resti et al., 2002b]. Recentemente è stato dimostrato che l'aumentato rischio di trasmissione perinatale da madri con storia di utilizzo di droghe per via endovenosa, è secondario all'infezione HCV delle cellule mononucleate del sangue periferico [Azzari et al., 2008].

Attività di malattia materna: alanina transaminasi. L'influenza dell'attività di malattia materna sulla probabilità di trasmissione dell'infezione al figlio non è stata sufficientemente indagata. Due studi recenti hanno dimostrato che nelle madri infette elevati valori di alanina transaminasi nell'anno che precede la gravidanza ed al momento del parto si associano ad un aumentato rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Hayashida et al., 2007; Indolfi et al., 2006]. Almeno due differenti spiegazioni sono possibili: in primo luogo le madri con maggiore citolisi epatica hanno una malattia più aggressiva che si associa anche a livelli di viremia più elevati [Martinot-Peignoux et al., 2001]; in seconda ipotesi nei soggetti con ipertransaminasemia l'eterogeneità delle quasispecie virali HCV è maggiore e questa condizione è in grado di favorire la trasmissione perinatale sia di HCV che di HIV [Galli et al., 1993; Resti et al., 1998; 2002b].

Fattori non associati al rischio di trasmissione perinatale di HCV

Tipo di parto. Allo stato attuale, come recentemente confermato da una *Cochrane review* [McIntyre et al., 2006], non sono disponibili *trial* controllati e randomizzati per valutare in modo definitivo se il parto cesareo di elezione possa ridurre il rischio di trasmissione perinatale. Alcuni studi non dimostrano alcuna influenza della modalità di parto (cesareo vs naturale) sul rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Spencer et al., 1997; Tovo et al., 1997; Thomas et al., 1998; Granovsky et al., 1998; Resti et al., 1998; Conte et al., 2000; European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2001; 2005; Dal Molin et al., 2002; 2005; Resti et al., 2002a]. Solo uno studio pubblicato nel 2000 ha dimostrato che il parto cesareo di elezione eseguito prima della rottura delle membrane, riduce il rischio di trasmissione perinatale rispetto al parto naturale o al cesareo eseguito in urgenza [Gibb et al., 2000]. Nel particolare contesto delle madri coinfectate HIV-HCV i risultati sul possibile ruolo protettivo del parto cesareo nei confronti della trasmissione perinatale di HCV sono contrastanti [McIntyre et al., 2006]. L'*European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network* [2001] ha dimostrato che il parto cesareo di elezione in madri coinfectate HCV-HIV protegge contro la trasmissione di HCV. Questi risultati non sono stati confermati in successivi lavori condotti dallo stesso gruppo su madri coinfectate HCV-HIV trattate con terapia anti-retrovirale [European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005].

Rischio per le gravidanze successive se nella gravidanza precedente era avvenuta trasmissione perinatale dell'infezione. Le madri che hanno trasmesso l'infezione in una precedente gravidanza non hanno un rischio maggiore di trasmettere l'infezione nelle gravidanze successive [Resti et al., 2000].

Allattamento al seno. Le madri con infezione da HCV possono allattare al seno i loro figli. HCV-RNA è stato rilevato nel latte umano e nel colostro [Lin et al., 1995; Bernard, 1998; Ruiz-Extremera et al., 2000]. Teoricamente le madri potrebbero trasmettere l'infezione ai loro figli allattati al seno, tuttavia la quantità di virus presente è troppo bassa per infettare il neonato e comunque, anche se presente, questa minima quantità di HCV-RNA è inattivata dal succo gastrico. Malgrado un isolato caso descritto in letteratura di trasmissione dell'infezione attraverso il latte materno [Kumar & Shahul, 1998], dati su ampie coorti di madri HCV-positive e i loro figli, dimostrano che l'allattamento al seno può essere praticato in sicurezza



senza aumentare il rischio di trasmissione perinatale [Lin et al., 1995; Spencer et al., 1997; Polywka et al., 1999; Gibb et al., 2000;; Resti et al., 2002a; Ruiz-Extremera et al., 2000; Conte et al., 2001; European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2001; Tajiri et al., 2001; Dal Molin et al., 2002]. Per le madri con coinfezione HCV-HIV, come per quanto illustrato circa l'indicazione al parto tramite taglio cesareo, esistono dati contrastanti sulla possibilità di allattamento al seno. L'aumentato rischio di trasmissione di HCV da madri coinfectate HCV-HIV non trattate [European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2001], non è stato confermato nelle donne che hanno ricevuto terapia anti-retrovirale [European Paediatric Hepatitis C Virus Network, 2005]. Un suggerimento pratico per le madri con coinfezione HIV-HCV sulla scelta della modalità di parto e se effettuare l'allattamento al seno è quello di seguire le attuali raccomandazioni per l'infezione da HIV indipendentemente dalla coinfezione con HCV.

Genotipo HCV. Non è stata dimostrata alcuna relazione tra rischio di trasmissione perinatale e genotipo HCV materno [Zuccotti et al., 1995; Resti et al., 1998; Zanetti et al., 1999; Indolfi et al., 2006].

Concordanza HLA tra madre e figlio. I fattori immunogenetici correlati all'aplotipo HLA della madre e del figlio e la loro concordanza sono stati accuratamente studiati nel valutare i meccanismi di trasmissione perinatale di numerose infezioni virali [MacDonald et al., 1998; Biggar et al., 2006]. In un recente studio italiano è stato visto che la discordanza tra il sistema HLA della madre e del figlio non riveste alcun ruolo sulla trasmissione perinatale di HCV a differenza di quanto dimostrato in precedenza per HIV dove la concordanza ha un ruolo protettivo sulla trasmissione [Azzari et al., 2007].

Il Ruolo Centrale dell'Infezione Linfocitaria: Prospettive Future

In due studi italiani del 2000 e del 2008 [Azzari et al., 2000, 2008] è stato dimostrato che l'infezione delle cellule linfocitarie materne da parte di HCV e l'attività replicativa del virus all'interno delle stesse è strettamente correlata con la trasmissione perinatale [Azzari et al., 2000].

Alcuni importanti fattori di rischio per la trasmissione perinatale, come la confezione HIV-HCV, la storia materna di tossicodipendenza, l'infezione paterna e l'infezione delle cellule linfocitarie materne spesso coesistono nella stessa madre [Resti et al., 2002a; 2002b; Minola et al., 2006; Indolfi et al., 2008]. Per tale motivo, per valutare il peso dei singoli fattori sulla trasmissione sono state eseguite analisi multivariate su gruppi numerosi di madri con infezione da virus C insieme ai loro figli. I risultati dimostrano che l'aumento del rischio connesso con la confezione materna HIV-HCV e con l'infezione HCV paterna è dipendente dalla storia materna di tossicodipendenza [Resti et al., 2002; Indolfi et al., 2008]. A sua volta, il rischio di trasmissione perinatale connesso alla tossicodipendenza materna è secondario all'infezione delle cellule linfocitarie materne [Azzari et al., 2008]. Questi risultati suggeriscono che la presenza del virus all'interno delle cellule linfocitarie materne sia il fattore di rischio più importante per la trasmissione perinatale di HCV [Azzari et al., 2000]. Gli aspetti virologici che favoriscono l'ingresso del virus nella cellule mononucleate ed il meccanismo attraverso il quale l'infezione delle cellule materne favorisce la trasmissione perinatale deve essere ancora chiarito. A tale proposito sono state fornite interessanti ipotesi. Una prima ipotesi riguarda la possibilità che le cellule linfocitarie materne infettate da HCV funzionino da vettore del virus e *carrier* dell'infezione nel figlio. In secondo luogo è possibile che specifiche varianti virali siano dotate di un vantaggio che gli consenta di infettare le cellule mononucleate materne e così di interagire e superare le difese immunitarie della barriera placentare [Azzari et al., 2008]. Il meccanismo che sottende il passaggio di HCV dalle cellule linfocitarie materne alle cellule bersaglio nel nuovo ospite deve ancora essere chiarito.



Conclusione

Lo screening per l'infezione da virus dell'epatite B e le conseguenti misure profilattiche sul bambino sono indicate in tutte le donne in gravidanza.

Nonostante l'aumento delle conoscenze sui fattori di rischio che influenzano la trasmissione perinatale dell'infezione da virus dell'epatite C, sono ancora poche le conoscenze su meccanismi e *timing* dell'infezione perinatale e non sono disponibili efficaci misure preventive [Indolfi et al., 2009]. Differenti studi sui fattori di rischio per la trasmissione perinatale di HCV hanno identificato il ruolo centrale dell'infezione linfocitaria materna [Azzari et al., 2000; 2008; Resti et al., 2002a; 2002b; Indolfi et al., 2008]. Allo stato attuale, tutti i bambini nati da madre anti-HCV positiva devono essere sottoposti a test di screening per la diagnosi di infezione. Il parto cesareo non è raccomandato nelle donne con la sola infezione da HCV. Le madri infette possono allattare il proprio bambino.



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**Tabella 1.** Fattori di rischio per la trasmissione perinatale del virus dell'epatite C.

<i>Fattori di rischio</i>	<i>Fattori predittivi</i>	<i>Fattori non associati al rischio</i>
Viremia materna	Coinfezione HCV-HIV	Tipo di parto
Infezione linfocitaria materna	Utilizzo di droghe per via endovenosa	Precedenti figli infetti
Sesso femminile del nascituro	Attività di malattia materna (ipetransaminasemia)	Allattamento al seno
Rottura precoce delle membrane, complicanze del parto	Infezione paterna	Genotipo
Procedure ostetriche e esposizione intra-parto a sangue materno infetto		Concordanza materno-fetale HLA

Note: HCV, virus dell'epatite C; HIV, virus dell'immunodeficienza umana; HLA, sistema maggiore di istocompatibilità.



INDICATIONS TO THE USE OF EXTRA CORPOREAL HEPATIC SUPPORTS

(INDICAZIONI ALL'IMPIEGO DEI SUPPORTI EXTRACORPOREI ALLA FUNZIONE EPATICA)

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L'insufficienza epatica acuta (ALF), l'insufficienza epatica acuta su cronica (ACLF) e, sia pure in minor misura, la primary non function (PNF) dopo trapianto di fegato rappresentano le condizioni cliniche in cui ha trovato spazio l'applicazione dei sistemi di supporto extracorporei della funzione epatica (1-3). L'ALF e l'ACLF sono caratterizzate da un'elevata mortalità e quindi rappresentano un'indicazione al trapianto di fegato anche se il deterioramento acuto della funzione epatica che le caratterizza è potenzialmente reversibile (nel 15%-20% dei casi nell'ALF) (1,2). La PNF rappresenta per la stessa ragione un'indicazione assoluta al re-trapianto epatico d'urgenza. Una caratteristica che accomuna le tre condizioni cliniche è il fatto che la probabilità di morte o di complicanze irreversibili aumenta sia in funzione del grado di insufficienza epatica, sia del tempo trascorso dalla sua insorgenza e quindi dall'eventuale inserimento in lista d'attesa (1,2). L'applicazione dei sistemi di supporto extracorporeo della funzione epatica ha lo scopo primario di consentire la ripresa della funzione epatica, in modo completo nell'ALF e in modo parziale nell'ACLF, e lo scopo secondario di rappresentare un bridge verso il trapianto in tutte e tre le condizioni cliniche sopra riportate. Sul piano fisiopatologico il razionale di tale applicazione ha lo scopo di intervenire sulle due espressioni fondamentali del quadro clinico che accomuna tali condizioni cliniche: a) la progressione del danno epatico e b) le manifestazioni extraepatiche.

La progressione del danno epatico rappresenta un fenomeno estremamente complesso e la sua trattazione va al di là dello scopo di questa relazione, ma uno dei suoi fondamenti è sicuramente rappresentato dalla morte degli hepatociti. La morte hepatocitaria può avvenire attraverso due meccanismi: a) quello intrinseco innescato dall'attivazione dei recettori di morte cellulare (recettori FAS) e/o dei recettori cellulari per una citochina, il Tumor Necrosis Factor α (TNF- α) e b) quello estrinseco rappresentato dallo stress ossidativo. Tali meccanismi agiscono poi attraverso un danno mitocondriale e/o attraverso l'attivazione della cascata caspatica, potenziandosi reciprocamente. A seconda dell'entità del danno mitocondriale la morte cellulare può avvenire per lisi (in caso di danno mitocondriale completo e conseguente depauperamento delle riserve energetiche cellulari) o per apoptosis (in caso di danno mitocondriale parziale). Il meccanismo di morte hepatocitaria estrinseco è potenziato da sostanze biologicamente attive tra cui il TNF- α e l'ossido nitrico (NO). Analogamente, le specie reattive dell'ossigeno (ROS), la bilirubina, i sali biliari, il TNF- α e l'NO potenzianno anche il meccanismo estrinseco. Le stesse manifestazioni extraepatiche nell'ALF e nell'ACLF sono legate ad un aumentato rilascio di sostanze biologicamente attive. A titolo esemplificativo, ciò che accade nell'ACLF precipitata o da una grave infezione batterica (peritonite batterica spontanea in paziente cirrotico) o da un abuso alcolico (epatite alcolica acuta su cirrosi epatica) è un abnorme rilascio di endotossine e di citochine proinfiammatorie, quali il TNF- α , che va a determinare un ulteriore contrazione del volume circolante efficace attraverso una compromissione della contrattilità cardiaca. Alla riduzione del volume circolante efficace consegue una grave attivazione dei sistemi vasocostrittori endogeni (sistema renina-angiotensina, sistema nervoso-simpatico, rilascio per via non osmotica della vasopressina)



che determina la comparsa dell’insufficienza renale, spesso rapidamente progressiva (5). Il rationale dell’applicazione dei sistemi extracorporei di supporto alla funzione epatica è quello di rimuovere alcune di queste sostanze tra cui per esempio il TNF α . Alcune di queste sostanze svolgono però un ruolo altrettanto fondamentale nei processi di rigenerazione epatica. Questa considerazione vale sia per il TNF α che per un’altra citochina pro-infiammatoria, l’IL-6, i quali attraverso il “pathway dell’NF-kB o pathway specifici attiva i meccanismi di “cellular survival”. Quindi il rimuovere queste sostanze così come l’inibire o il modularne farmacologicamente le azioni biologiche potrebbe avere un effetto non necessariamente positivo sulla progressione del danno epatico. Analogamente, il ruolo preponderante che le infezioni batteriche o micotiche hanno nell’evoluzione del quadro clinico di una ALF o di una ACLF ed in particolare nel condizionare lo sviluppo di complicanze extraepatiche, viene attribuito ad un eccesso di risposta infiammatoria sistemica e dunque ad una squilibrio tra citochine pro-infiammatorie tra cui TNF α , IL-6 da un lato e citochine anti-infiammatorie, tra cui IL-10, IL-18 dall’altro a favore delle prime. Studi più recenti sembrano dimostrare però che il rapporto tra queste 2 categorie di citochine può modificarsi nell’evoluzione di una complicanza infettiva passando da un quadro di eccesso di quella rappresentata dalle citochine pro-infiammatorie o systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS) a quella caratterizzata da un eccesso di citochine anti-infiammatorie o compensatory anti-inflammatory response syndrome (CARS). Ora sul piano clinico la CARS può avere attraverso lo sviluppo di sovra-infezioni, un impatto prognostico sovrapponibile a quello della SIRS. Ne consegue che rimuovere TNF α o IL-6 non sempre potrebbe essere un’opzione terapeutica vantaggiosa nel trattamento di una ACL o ACLF.

Nel corso degli ultimi 20 anni sono stati applicati nel trattamento dell’ALF e dell’ACLF diversi sistemi di supporto extracorporeo della funzione epatica, distinti in artificiali, cioè non basati sull’impiego di cellule, e bioartificiali, i quali invece prevedono l’impiego di epatociti di derivazione animale (maiale) o da linee cellulari (epatoblastoma). Sul piano metodologico sono stati condotti studi clinici controllati, (confrontando il supporto extracorporeo al trattamento medico convenzionale) aventi come end point primari la mortalità ed il bridging al trapianto, e studi non controllati, aventi come scopo primario l’effetto su disfunzioni d’organo (insufficienza renale o encefalopatia), su sintomi “intrattabili” quali il prurito e su parametri emodinamici e/o bioumorali.

Nel 2004 la Cochrane Hepatobiliary Group ha pubblicato una meta-analisi relativa all’impiego dei sistemi di supporto extracorporeo della funzione epatica nell’ALF e nell’ACLF considerando soltanto i trials clinici controllati (6). I risultati della meta-analisi hanno evidenziato che: a) l’impiego dei sistemi di supporto extracorporeo della funzione epatica non è gravato da una maggiore percentuale di complicanze rispetto al trattamento medico convenzionale, b) considerando congiuntamente i pazienti con ALF e ACLF i sistemi di supporto extracorporeo della funzione epatica non hanno determinato alcun effetto sulla mortalità e sul bridging al trapianto. Tuttavia, entrando nell’analisi dei sottogruppi, i supporti extracorporei della funzione epatica hanno dimostrato un effetto positivo sulla sopravvivenza nell’ACLF ed un effetto positivo su due disfunzioni d’organo: l’encefalopatia e l’insufficienza renale.

Come tutte le meta-analisi, anche quella sopra riportata, si presta a numerose osservazioni critiche ed in particolare che: a) i trials negativi trovano con maggiore difficoltà accesso alle pubblicazioni, b) nessuno dei trials considerati prevedeva un calcolo del campione e c) sono stati considerati insieme pazienti con patologie diverse (ALF e ACLF e ancora pazienti con e senza disfunzioni d’organo). L’osservazione critica principale comunque sembra essere quella relativa al confronto di sistemi extracorporei di supporto della funzione epatica molto diversi. Appare poco giustificato paragonare sistemi che rimuovono solo i mercaptani con sistemi come la MARS (Molecular Adsorbents Recirculating System) che è capace di rimuovere non solo i mercaptani ma anche bilirubinemia, sali biliari, ammonio e soprattutto NO. Nella MARS



il plasma del paziente viene filtrato attraverso le fibre cave di una membrana dotata di un cut-off di circa 50K dalton; la membrana è impregnata di albumina e viene mantenuta tale da un circolo continuo di albumina al 20%. L'albumina del paziente non passa la membrana, mentre le sostanze legate all'albumina e sopra elencate vengono trasferite all'albumina della soluzione. Sul piano metodologico appare quindi scontato andare a considerare separatamente i trials clinici controllati relativi ai sistemi di supporto extracorporeo della funzione epatica tecnicamente più avanzati quali per esempio la MARS e il Prometheus (7,8,9). Una meta-analisi condotta esclusivamente su trias clinici relativi alla MARS non hanno dimostrato un effetto statisticamente significativo di questo supporto extracorporeo sulla sopravvivenza rispetto al trattamento medico convenzionale né nell'ALF né nell'ACLF. Va tuttavia osservato che questa meta-analisi si riferisce ad un campione di popolazione molto limitato (67 pazienti: 30 con ALF e 37 con ACLF) e di conseguenza non può rappresentare l'osservazione conclusiva sugli effetti della MARS sulla sopravvivenza in questi pazienti (10). In questo contesto vanno analizzati i dati relativi agli studi clinici multicentrici sino ad oggi condotti con MARS o Prometheus nell'ALF e nell'ACLF. I risultati dello studio "Fulmar", relativo all'impiego della MARS nel trattamento dell'ALF non hanno dimostrato un effetto significativo di questo supporto extracorporeo artificiale alla funzione epatica in termini di sopravvivenza a 6 mesi "intention to treat", pur evidenziando un trend favorevole nei pazienti con ALF da paracetamolo. Va tuttavia osservato che la MARS quando applicata per un totale di almeno 3 trattamenti ha determinato un incremento significativo della sopravvivenza "transplant free" nei pazienti con ALF (10).

I risultati dello studio "Relief", relativo all'impiego della MARS nell'ACLF (11) e dello studio "Helios", relativo all'impiego del Prometheus nella stessa condizione clinica (12), non hanno dimostrato alcun effetto significativo sulla sopravvivenza anche se il Prometheus ha determinato un significativo incremento della sopravvivenza in due sottogruppi di pazienti, quelli con MELD > 30 e quelli con sindrome epato-renale di tipo 1 (12). Il dato relativo agli effetti del Prometheus (12) o della MARS (13) sulla sopravvivenza nei pazienti con sindrome epatorenale di tipo 1 va tuttavia interpretato con attenzione e cautela dal momento che il supporto extracorporeo alla funzione epatica è stato confrontato con la terapia medica standard che non prevedeva necessariamente l'uso di un vasocostrittore e albumina, cioè dell'opzione terapeutica oggi più impiegata nel trattamento di questa condizione clinica avendone modificato in senso positivo la prognosi (14,15). Per ciò che concerne, infine, i sistemi di supporto extraepatico della funzione epatica bioartificiali, va osservato come quello basato sull'impiego di epatociti di maiale (Hepat-assist) si sia dimostrato l'unico ad avere un effetto positivo sulla sopravvivenza nell'ALF ad eziologia definita in un trial clinico controllato multicentrico (16). Un'ultima breve considerazione va fatta sull'impiego dei sistemi extracorporei di supporto alla funzione epatica nel prurito intrattabile. È stato infatti osservato in studi prospettici, sia pure non controllati, che la MARS è efficace e sicura nel trattamento del prurito "intrattabile" nei pazienti con colestasi severa legata ad un'epatopatia primitiva o a una disfunzione del graft. Pur trattandosi di un impiego di "nicchia", e sicuramente riduttivo del potenziale "terapeutico" di questa opzione, va considerato dal momento che oltre che migliorare la qualità di vita dei pazienti può contribuire a ridurre questa specifica indicazione al trapianto nei pazienti candidabili (17).

Considerazioni conclusive

L'entusiasmo suscitato dagli studi pilota sull'impiego dei supporti extracorporei alla funzione epatica nei pazienti con ALF, ACLF e PNF è stato ridimensionato dai risultati dei recenti trials clinici controllati. Le ragioni di questo ridimensionamento devono essere analizzate alla luce di: a) delle più recenti acquisizioni relative ai processi che stanno alla base della progressione del danno epatico e della rigenerazione epatica e di quelli che svolgono un ruolo preponderante nella patogenesi delle complicanze extraepatiche dall'al-



tro, b) degli insegnamenti raccolti sull'impiego ottimale di tali supporti negli studi sin qui condotti e c) dalla ulteriore evoluzione tecnologica di tali sistemi. Questa è anche la “*condicio sine qua non*” per futuri trials clinici nei quali testare la reale efficacia di questi sistemi, che dovrà inoltre tener conto dei progressi che nel frattempo la terapia medica “convenzionale” ha raggiunto nel trattamento della progressione del danno epatico e di talune complicanze extraepatiche.

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REFERENCE TO THE LECTURE ENTITLED: CRITERIA TO REFER PATIENT WITH COMPLICATED LIVER CIRRHOSIS AND FULMINANT LIVER FAILURE TO INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

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AASLD POSITION PAPER

AASLD Position Paper: The Management of Acute Liver Failure

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Preamble

These recommendations provide a data-supported approach. They are based on the following: (1) formal review and analysis of recently-published world literature on the topic [Medline search], (2) American College of Physicians Manual for Assessing Health Practices and Designing Practice Guidelines,¹ (3) guideline policies, including the AASLD Policy on the Development and Use of Practice Guidelines and the AGA Policy Statement on Guidelines,² (4) the experience of the authors in the specified topic.

Intended for use by physicians, the recommendations in this document suggest preferred approaches to the diagnostic, therapeutic and preventive aspects of care. They are intended to be flexible, in contrast to standards of care, which are inflexible policies to be followed in every case. Specific recommendations are based on relevant published information. This document has been designated as a Position Paper, since the topic contains more data based on expert opinion than on randomized controlled trials and thus is not considered to have the emphasis and certainty of a Practice Guideline. Nevertheless, it serves an important purpose of facilitating proper and high level patient care and we have characterized the quality of evidence supporting each recommendation, in accordance with the Practice Guidelines Committee of the AASLD

recommendations used for full Practice Guidelines (Table 1³). These recommendations are fully endorsed by the AASLD.

Introduction

Acute liver failure (ALF) is a rare condition in which rapid deterioration of liver function results in altered mentation and coagulopathy in previously normal individuals. U.S. estimates are placed at approximately 2,000 cases per year.⁴ The most prominent causes include drug-induced liver injury, viral hepatitis, autoimmune liver disease and shock or hypoperfusion; many cases ($\approx 20\%$) have no discernible cause.⁵ Acute liver failure often affects young persons and carries a high morbidity and mortality. Prior to transplantation, most series suggested less than 15% survival. Currently, overall short-term survival with transplantation is greater than 65%.⁵ Because of its rarity, ALF has been difficult to study in depth and very few controlled therapy trials have been performed. As a result, standards of intensive care for this condition have not been established.

Definition

The most widely accepted definition of ALF includes evidence of coagulation abnormality, usually an INR ≥ 1.5 , and any degree of mental alteration (encephalopathy) in a patient without preexisting cirrhosis and with an illness of < 26 weeks duration.⁶ Patients with Wilson disease, vertically-acquired HBV, or autoimmune hepatitis may be included in spite of the possibility of cirrhosis if their disease has only been recognized for < 26 weeks. A number of other terms have been used including fulminant hepatic failure and fulminant hepatitis or necrosis. Acute liver failure is a better overall term that should encompass all durations up to 26 weeks. Terms used signifying length of illness such as hyperacute (< 7 days), acute (7-21 days) and subacute (> 21 days and < 26 weeks) are not particularly helpful since they do not have prognostic significance distinct from the cause of the illness. For example, hyperacute cases may have a better prognosis but this is because most are due to acetaminophen toxicity.⁵

Abbreviations: ALF, acute liver failure; NAC, N-acetylcysteine; HELLP, Hemolysis, Elevated Liver Enzymes, Low Platelets syndrome; ICH, intracranial hypertension; ICP, intracranial pressure; CT, computerized tomography; US ALFSG, United States Acute Liver Failure Study Group; CPP, cerebral perfusion pressure; MAP, mean arterial pressure; SIRS, systemic inflammatory response syndrome; FFP, fresh frozen plasma; rFVIIa, recombinant activated factor; GI, gastrointestinal; H2, histamine-2; PPI, proton pump inhibitors; CVVHD, continuous venovenous hemodialysis; APACHE, Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation; AFP, alpha fetoprotein; MELD, Model for End-stage Liver Disease.

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**Table 1. Quality of Evidence on Which a Recommendation Is Based³**

Grade	Definition
I	Randomized controlled trials
II-1	Controlled trials without randomization
II-2	Cohort or case-control analytic studies
II-3	Multiple time series, dramatic uncontrolled experiments
III	Opinions of respected authorities, descriptive epidemiology

Diagnosis and Initial Evaluation

All patients with clinical or laboratory evidence of moderate to severe acute hepatitis should have immediate measurement of prothrombin time and careful evaluation for subtle alterations in mentation. If the prothrombin time is prolonged by \approx 4–6 seconds or more (INR \geq 1.5) and there is any evidence of altered sensorium, the diagnosis of ALF is established and hospital admission is mandatory. Since the condition may progress rapidly, with changes in consciousness occurring hour-by-hour, early transfer to the intensive care unit (ICU) is preferred once the diagnosis of ALF is made.

History taking should include careful review of possible exposures to viral infection and drugs or other toxins. If severe encephalopathy is present, the history may be provided entirely by the family or may be unavailable. In this setting, limited information is available, particularly regarding possible toxin/drug ingestions. Physical examination must include careful assessment and documentation of mental status and a search for stigmata of chronic liver disease. Jaundice is often but not always seen at presentation. Right upper quadrant tenderness is variably present. Inability to palpate the liver or even to percuss a significant area of dullness over the liver can be indicative of decreased liver volume due to massive hepatocyte loss. An enlarged liver may be seen early in viral hepatitis or with malignant infiltration, congestive heart failure, or acute Budd-Chiari syndrome. History or signs of cirrhosis should be absent as such features suggest underlying chronic liver disease, which may have different management implications. Furthermore, the prognostic criteria mentioned below are not applicable to patients with acute-on-chronic liver disease.

Initial laboratory examination must be extensive in order to evaluate both the etiology and severity of ALF (Table 2). In addition to coagulation parameters, early testing should include routine chemistries (especially glucose as hypoglycemia may be present and require correction), arterial blood gas measurements, complete blood counts, blood typing, acetaminophen level and screens for other drugs and toxins, viral hepatitis serologies (most prominently A and B), tests for Wilson disease, autoanti-

bodies (anti-nuclear and anti-smooth muscle antibodies) and a pregnancy test in females. Plasma ammonia, preferably arterial,^{7,8} may also be helpful. A liver biopsy, most often done via the transjugular route because of coagulopathy, may be indicated when certain conditions such as autoimmune hepatitis, metastatic liver disease, lymphoma, or herpes simplex hepatitis are suspected. As the evaluation continues, several important decisions must be made: whether to admit the patient to an ICU, whether to transfer the patient to a transplant facility, and (if already at a transplant center) whether and when to place the patient on the list for transplantation. For patients in a non-transplant center, the possibility of rapid progression of ALF makes early consultation with a transplant facility critical. Specific prognostic indicators may point toward the need for transplantation. For patients with acetaminophen-related ALF in particular, an arterial pH of $<$ 7.3 should prompt immediate consideration for transfer to a transplant center and placement on a transplant list.⁹

Patients with altered mentation should generally be admitted to an ICU. Planning for transfer to a transplant center should begin in patients with grade I or II encephalopathy (Table 2) because they may worsen rapidly. Early transfer is important as the risks involved with patient transport may increase or even preclude transfer once stage III or IV encephalopathy develops. Evaluation for transplantation should begin as early as possible. In these critically ill patients with potential for rapid deteri-

Table 2. Initial Laboratory Analysis

Prothrombin time/INR
Chemistries
sodium, potassium, chloride, bicarbonate, calcium, magnesium, phosphate, glucose
AST, ALT, alkaline phosphatase, GGT, total bilirubin, albumin, creatinine, blood urea nitrogen
Arterial blood gas
Arterial lactate
Complete blood count
Blood type and screen
Acetaminophen level
Toxicology screen
Viral hepatitis serologies
anti-HAV IgM, HBSAg, anti-HBc IgM, anti-HEV§, anti-HCV*
Ceruloplasmin Level#
Pregnancy test (females)
Ammonia (arterial if possible)
Autoimmune markers
ANA, ASMA, Immunoglobulin levels
HIV status‡
Amylase and lipase

*Done to recognize potential underlying infection.

#Done only if Wilson disease is a consideration (e.g., in patients less than 40 years without another obvious explanation for ALF); in this case uric acid level and bilirubin to alkaline phosphatase ratio may be helpful as well.

†Implications for potential liver transplantation.

‡If clinically indicated.



oration it is necessary to make treatment plans promptly. Social and financial considerations are unavoidably tied to the overall clinical assessment where transplantation is contemplated. It is important to inform the patient's family or other next of kin of the potentially poor prognosis and to include them in the decision-making process.

Recommendations

- 1. Patients with ALF should be admitted and monitored frequently, preferably in an ICU (III).**
- 2. Contact with a transplant center and plans to transfer appropriate patients with ALF should be initiated early in the evaluation process (III).**
- 3. The precise etiology of ALF should be sought to guide further management decisions (III).**

Determining Etiologies and Specific Therapies

Etiology of ALF provides one of the best indicators of prognosis,⁵ and also dictates specific management options.

Acetaminophen Hepatotoxicity

Acetaminophen hepatotoxicity is suggested by historic evidence for excessive ingestion either as an intended suicidal overdose or the inadvertent use of supra-therapeutic quantities of pain medications. Acetaminophen is a dose-related toxin; most ingestions leading to ALF exceed 10 gm/day. However, severe liver injury can occur rarely when doses as low as 3-4 gm/day are taken.¹⁰ Very high aminotransferases may be seen; serum levels exceeding 3,500 IU/L are highly correlated with acetaminophen poisoning¹¹ and should prompt consideration of this etiology even when historic evidence is lacking. Because acetaminophen is the leading cause of ALF (at least in the United States and Europe) and there is an available antidote, acetaminophen levels should be drawn in all patients presenting with ALF. Low or absent acetaminophen levels do not rule out acetaminophen poisoning since the time of ingestion may be remote or unknown, especially when overdose may have been unintentional and/or occurred over several days. If acetaminophen ingestion is known or suspected to have occurred within a few hours of presentation, activated charcoal may be useful for gastrointestinal decontamination. While it is most effective if given within one hour of ingestion,¹² it may be of benefit as long as 3 to 4 hours after ingestion.¹³ Administration of activated charcoal (standard dose 1g/kg orally, in a slurry) just prior to administration of N-acetylcysteine does not reduce the effect of N-acetylcysteine.¹³ N-acetylcysteine (NAC), the

antidote for acetaminophen poisoning, has been shown to be effective and safe for this purpose in numerous controlled trials.¹⁵⁻¹⁸ The standard acetaminophen toxicity nomogram¹⁹ may aid in determining the likelihood of serious liver damage, but cannot be used to exclude possible toxicity due to multiple doses over time, or altered metabolism in the alcoholic or fasting patient.²⁰ Given these considerations, administration of NAC is recommended in any case of ALF in which acetaminophen overdose is a suspected or possible cause. NAC should be given as early as possible, but may still be of value 48 hours or more after ingestion.²¹ NAC may be given orally (140 mg/kg by mouth or nasogastric tube diluted to 5% solution, followed by 70 mg/kg by mouth q 4 h × 17 doses) and has few side effects (occasional nausea, vomiting, rare urticaria or bronchospasm). In patients with ALF oral administration may often be precluded (for instance, by active gastrointestinal bleeding or worsening mental status), and NAC may be administered intravenously (loading dose is 150 mg/kg in 5% dextrose over 15 minutes; maintenance dose is 50 mg/kg given over 4 hours followed by 100 mg/kg administered over 16 hours). Allergic reactions may be successfully treated with discontinuation, antihistamines²² and epinephrine for bronchospasm.

Recommendations

- 4. For patients with known or suspected acetaminophen overdose within 4 hours of presentation, give activated charcoal just prior to starting NAC (I).**
- 5. Begin NAC promptly in all patients where the quantity of acetaminophen ingested, serum drug level or rising aminotransferases indicate impending or evolving liver injury (II-1).**
- 6. NAC may be used in cases of acute liver failure in which acetaminophen ingestion is possible or when knowledge of circumstances surrounding admission is inadequate (III).**

Mushroom Poisoning

Mushroom Poisoning (usually *Amanita phalloides*) may cause ALF, and the initial history should always include inquiry concerning recent mushroom ingestion. There is no available blood test to confirm the presence of these toxins, but this diagnosis should be suspected in patients with a history of severe gastrointestinal symptoms (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, abdominal cramping), which occur within hours to a day of ingestion. If these effects are present, it may be early enough to treat patients with gastric lavage and activated charcoal via naso-gastric tube. Fluid resuscitation is also important. Traditionally, very low rates of survival have been reported without



transplantation,²³ but more recently complete recovery has been described with supportive care and medical treatment.²⁴ Penicillin G and silibinin (silymarin or milk thistle) are the accepted antidotes despite no controlled trials proving their efficacy.^{23,25,26} While some reports have not found penicillin G to be helpful,²⁷ enough efficacy has been reported to warrant consideration of the drug (given intravenously in doses of 300,000 to 1 million units/kg/day) in patients with known or suspected mushroom poisoning.²⁸ Silibinin has generally been reported to be more successful than penicillin G, although penicillin G has been used more frequently in the United States.^{27,28} Silibinin/silymarin is not available as a licensed drug in the United States, although it is widely available in Europe and South America. In the United States, it is commercially available as milk thistle extracts, tablets, capsules or tincture. These products usually contain 70%-80% silymarin, although there is no governmental regulation of such herbal supplements; silymarin concentrations may vary considerably between preparations and manufacturers.²⁹ When used for treatment of mushroom poisoning, silymarin has been given in average doses of 30-40 mg/kg/day (either intravenously or orally) for an average duration of 3 to 4 days.²⁶ N-acetylcysteine is often combined with these other therapies, but has not been shown to be effective in animal studies³⁰; nevertheless, case reports have described its use as a part of overall management.³¹

Recommendation

7. In ALF patients with known or suspected mushroom poisoning, consider administration of penicillin G and silymarin (III).

8. Patients with acute liver failure secondary to mushroom poisoning should be listed for transplantation, as this procedure is often the only lifesaving option (III).

Drug Induced Hepatotoxicity

A variety of medications have been associated with acute liver injury. Before implicating a particular substance, history should include careful listing of all agents taken, the time period involved, and the quantity ingested. Drugs other than acetaminophen rarely cause dose-related toxicity. Most examples of idiosyncratic drug hepatotoxicity occur within the first 6 months after drug initiation. A potentially hepatotoxic medication that has been used continually for more than 1 to 2 years is unlikely to cause de novo liver damage. Certain herbal preparations and other nutritional supplements have been found to cause liver injury,³² so inquiry about such substances should be included in a complete medication his-

Table 3. Some Drugs Which May Cause Idiosyncratic Liver Injury Leading to ALF

Isoniazid	Isoflurane
Sufonamides	Lisinopril
Phenytoin	Nicotinic acid
Statins	Imipramine
Propylthiouracil	Gemtuzumab
Halothane	Amphetamines/Ecstasy
Disulfiram	Labetalol
Valproic acid	Etoposide
Amiodarone	Flutamide
Dapsone	Tolcapone
Herbals*	Quetiapine
Didanosine	Nefazodone
Efavirenz	Allopurinol
Metformin	Methyldopa
Oflloxacin	Ketoconazole
PZA	
Troglitazone	
Diclofenac	
Combination agents with enhanced toxicity:	
Trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole	
Rifampin-isoniazid	
Amoxicillin-clavulanate	
*Some Herbal products/dietary supplements that have been associated with hepatotoxicity include:	
Kava kava	Chaparral
Skullcap	Germander
Pennyroyal	Jin Bu Huan
Heliotrope	Rattleweed
Comfrey	Sunn hemp
Senecio	Impila
Greater celandine	Gum Thistle
He Shou Wu	Ma Huang
LipoKinetix	Bai-Fang herbs

tory. There are no specific antidotes for idiosyncratic drug reactions; corticosteroids are not indicated unless a drug hypersensitivity reaction is suspected. Determination of a particular medication as the cause of ALF is a diagnosis of exclusion. Other causes of ALF should still be ruled out even if a drug is suspected. Any presumed or possible offending agent should be stopped immediately where possible. Classes of drugs commonly implicated include antibiotics, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents and anti-convulsants (Table 3).

Recommendations

9. Obtain details (including onset of ingestion, amount and timing of last dose) concerning all prescription and non-prescription drugs, herbs and dietary supplements taken over the past year (III).

10. Determine ingredients of non-prescription medications whenever possible (III).

11. In the setting of acute liver failure due to possible drug hepatotoxicity, discontinue all but essential medications (III).



Viral Hepatitis

Hepatitis serological testing should be done for identification of acute viral infection (Table 2) even when another putative etiology is identified. Viral hepatitis has become a relatively infrequent cause of ALF (United States: 12%; hepatitis B – 8%, hepatitis A – 4%).⁵ Acute hepatitis D may occasionally be diagnosed in a hepatitis B positive individual. Although controversial, hepatitis C alone does not appear to cause ALF.^{5,33} Hepatitis E is a significant cause of liver failure in countries where it is endemic, and tends to be more severe in pregnant women.^{33,34} This virus should be considered in anyone with recent travel to an endemic area such as Russia, Pakistan, Mexico, or India. With acute viral hepatitis, as with many other etiologies of ALF, care is mainly supportive. Of note, the nucleoside analog lamivudine (and possibly adefovir), used widely in the treatment of chronic hepatitis B, may be considered in patients with acute hepatitis B, although these drugs have not been subjected to a controlled trial³⁵ in acute disease. Acute liver failure due to reactivation of hepatitis B may occur in the setting of chemotherapy or immunosuppression. Recent evidence suggests that patients found to be positive for HBsAg who are to begin such therapy should be treated prophylactically with a nucleoside analog, and that such treatment should be continued for 6 months after completion of immunosuppressive therapy (please refer to the AASLD Practice Guideline on Management of Chronic Hepatitis B, Update of Recommendations³⁶). Herpes virus infection rarely causes ALF. Immunosuppressed patients or pregnant women (usually in the third trimester) are at increased risk, but occurrences of herpes virus ALF have been reported in healthy individuals.^{33,37,38} Skin lesions are present in only about 50% of cases. Liver biopsy is helpful in making the diagnosis. Treatment should be initiated with acyclovir for suspected or documented cases.^{37,38} Other viruses such as varicella zoster³⁹ have occasionally been implicated in causing hepatic failure.

Recommendations

12. Viral hepatitis A- and B- (and E-) related acute liver failure must be treated with supportive care as no virus-specific treatment has been proven effective (III).

13. Nucleoside analogs should be given prior to and continued for 6 months after completion of chemotherapy in patients with Hepatitis B surface antigen positivity to prevent reactivation/acute flare of disease (III).

14. Patients with known or suspected herpes virus or varicella zoster as the cause of acute liver failure should be treated with acyclovir (III).

Wilson disease

Wilson disease is an uncommon cause of ALF (2%-3% of cases in the US ALFSG). Early identification is critical because the fulminant presentation of Wilson disease is considered to be uniformly fatal without transplantation. The disease typically occurs in young patients, accompanied by the abrupt onset of hemolytic anemia with serum bilirubin levels >20 mg/dL. Due to the presence of hemolysis, the indirect-reacting bilirubin is often markedly elevated along with the total bilirubin. Kayser-Fleischer rings are present in about 50% of patients presenting with ALF due to Wilson disease.⁴⁰ Serum ceruloplasmin is typically low, but may be normal in up to 15% of cases and is often reduced in other forms of ALF; high serum and urinary copper levels as well as hepatic copper measurement may confirm the diagnosis. Very low serum alkaline phosphatase or uric acid levels are hints to suggest Wilson disease in the absence of other indicators. A high bilirubin (mg/dL) to alkaline phosphatase (IU/L) ratio (>2.0) is a reliable albeit indirect indicator of Wilson disease in this setting.^{40,41} Renal function is often impaired as the released copper can cause renal tubular damage. Treatment to acutely lower serum copper and to limit further hemolysis should include albumin dialysis, continuous hemofiltration, plasmapheresis or plasma exchange. Initiation of treatment with penicillamine is not recommended in ALF as there is a risk of hypersensitivity to this agent; acute lowering of the copper is more effectively accomplished using direct plasma copper reduction techniques, especially when renal function is impaired.⁴⁰ Although such copper lowering measures should be considered, recovery is infrequent without transplantation.^{40,42} Wilson disease is one of the special circumstances in which patients may already have evidence of cirrhosis and still be considered to have a diagnosis of ALF when rapid deterioration occurs. Please refer to the AASLD Practice Guideline on Wilson Disease for more detailed information regarding the diagnosis and management of patients with this condition.⁴⁰

Recommendations

15. Diagnostic tests for Wilson disease should include ceruloplasmin, serum and urinary copper levels, total bilirubin/alkaline phosphatase ratio, slit lamp examination for Kayser-Fleischer rings, and hepatic copper levels when liver biopsy is feasible (III).

16. Patients in whom Wilson disease is the likely cause of acute liver failure must be immediately placed on the liver transplant list (III).



Autoimmune hepatitis

With autoimmune hepatitis as with Wilson disease, patients may have unrecognized preexisting chronic disease and yet still be considered as having ALF. Such patients represent the most severe form of the disease, and would generally fall into the category of patients recommended for corticosteroid therapy as outlined by the AASLD Practice Guidelines for the Diagnosis and Treatment of Autoimmune Hepatitis (although ALF is not specifically discussed in that document).⁴³ Although some patients may be responsive to steroid therapy, others require transplantation.^{44,45} Autoantibodies may be absent making a definitive diagnosis difficult. Liver biopsy may be helpful if findings include presence of severe hepatic necrosis accompanied by interface hepatitis, plasma cell infiltration and hepatocyte rosettes. Initiation of steroid therapy may constitute a therapeutic trial for some patients (prednisone starting at 40-60 mg/day),⁴³ although placement on the transplant list is indicated.

Recommendations

17. When autoimmune hepatitis is suspected as the cause of acute liver failure, liver biopsy should be considered to establish this diagnosis (III).
18. Patients with acute liver failure due to autoimmune hepatitis should be treated with corticosteroids (prednisone, 40-60 mg/day) (I).
19. Patients should be placed on the list for transplantation even while corticosteroids are being administered (III).

Acute Fatty Liver of Pregnancy/HELLP (Hemolysis, Elevated Liver Enzymes, Low Platelets) Syndrome

A small number of women near the end of pregnancy will develop rapidly progressive hepatocyte failure that has been well characterized⁴⁶⁻⁴⁹ and associated with increased fetal or maternal mortality. A variety of presentations may be seen, generally confined to the last trimester. The triad of jaundice, coagulopathy, and low platelets may occasionally be associated with hypoglycemia. Features of pre-eclampsia such as hypertension and proteinuria are common. Steatosis documented by imaging studies supports the diagnosis. The Oil-red O staining technique best demonstrates hepatic steatosis on biopsy. Intrahepatic hemorrhage and/or hepatic rupture constitute rare emergent situations requiring rapid resuscitation and intervention. Early recognition of these syndromes and prompt delivery are critical in achieving good outcomes. Recovery is typically rapid after delivery, and supportive care is the only other treatment required. Postpartum transplantation has occasionally been necessary, however.⁵⁰ Pregnancy (especially in the third trimester)

appears to increase the risk of ALF due to herpes virus, which should be treated with acyclovir (see section on acute viral infection).³⁷ It is important to keep in mind that ALF in pregnant women may also be caused by entities not necessarily related to the pregnant state.

Recommendation

20. For acute fatty liver of pregnancy or the HELLP syndrome, consultation with obstetrical services and expeditious delivery are recommended (III).

Acute Ischemic Injury

A syndrome often referred to as "shock liver" occurs after cardiac arrest, a period of significant hypovolemia/hypotension, or in the setting of severe congestive heart failure.⁵¹ Documented hypotension is not always found. Drug-induced hypotension or hypoperfusion may be observed with long-acting niacin,⁵² or with cocaine,⁵³ or methamphetamine.⁵⁴ Other physical findings may be lacking, but evidence of cardiac dysfunction may be elicited via echocardiogram.⁵⁵ Aminotransferase levels will be markedly elevated and respond rapidly to stabilization of the circulatory problem. Simultaneous onset of renal dysfunction and muscle necrosis may be noted. The ability to manage heart failure or other causes of ischemia successfully will determine outcome for these patients, and transplantation is seldom indicated.

Recommendation

21. In ALF patients with evidence of ischemic injury cardiovascular support is the treatment of choice (III).

Budd-Chiari Syndrome

The Budd-Chiari syndrome (acute hepatic vein thrombosis) can also present as ALF. Abdominal pain, ascites and striking hepatomegaly are often present. The diagnosis should be confirmed with hepatic imaging studies (computed tomography, doppler ultrasonography, venography, magnetic resonance venography). In the presence of significant liver failure, transplantation may be required as opposed to venous decompression.⁵⁶ As malignancy-associated hypercoagulability is one of the causes of Budd-Chiari syndrome, it is important to rule out underlying cancer prior to transplantation of these patients.

Recommendation

22. Hepatic vein thrombosis with hepatic failure is an indication for liver transplantation, provided underlying malignancy is excluded (II-3).



Malignant Infiltration

Malignant infiltration of the liver may cause ALF. Massive hepatic enlargement may be seen. Diagnosis should be made by imaging and biopsy, and treatment appropriate for the underlying malignant condition is indicated. Transplantation is not an option for such patients.^{57,58} Acute severe hepatic infiltration occurs with breast cancer,^{59,60} small cell lung cancers,⁶¹ lymphoma⁵⁸ and melanoma.⁶²

Recommendations

23. In patients with acute liver failure who have a previous cancer history or massive hepatomegaly, consider underlying malignancy and obtain imaging and liver biopsy to confirm or exclude the diagnosis (III).

Indeterminate Etiology

When the etiology of ALF cannot be determined after routine evaluation, biopsy using a transjugular approach may be helpful in diagnosing malignant infiltration, autoimmune hepatitis, certain viral infections and Wilson disease. Lack of a clear diagnosis suggests that the history may have been inadequate regarding toxin or drug exposures.

Recommendation

24. If the etiological diagnosis remains elusive after extensive initial evaluation, liver biopsy may be appropriate to attempt to identify a specific etiology that might influence treatment strategy (III).

Therapy: General Considerations

Background

While patients with ALF represent a heterogeneous group, they have consistent clinical features, and share the common disease process of acute hepatocyte loss and its sequelae. Despite decades of research, however, no agent or therapy that is beneficial to all patients with ALF has been found. Systemic corticosteroids are ineffective in this condition.⁶³⁻⁶⁵

Because most patients with ALF tend to develop some degree of circulatory dysfunction, agents that may improve hemodynamics have been of particular interest. While prostacyclin and other prostaglandins have appeared promising in some reports,^{66,67} others have not supported their efficacy in ALF.⁶⁸ NAC may improve systemic circulation parameters in patients with ALF,⁶⁹ but this was not observed in all studies.⁷⁰ NAC has been shown to improve liver blood flow and function in patients with septic shock.⁷¹ Use of NAC in all forms of ALF cannot be justified based on current evidence. A large, multi-center, randomized, double-blind controlled trial

of intravenous NAC versus placebo for non-acetaminophen ALF is currently under way. Because there is no proven therapy for ALF in general, management consists of intensive care support once treatments for specific etiologies have been initiated. While some patients with evidence of acute liver injury but without significant coagulopathy or encephalopathy may be monitored on a medicine ward, any patient with altered mental status warrants admission to an ICU as the condition may deteriorate quickly. Careful attention must be paid to fluid management, hemodynamics and metabolic parameters as well as surveillance for and treatment of infection. Maintenance of nutrition and prompt recognition and resuscitation of gastrointestinal bleeding are crucial as well. Coagulation parameters, complete blood counts, metabolic panels (including glucose) and arterial blood gas should be checked frequently. Serum aminotransferases and bilirubin are generally measured daily to follow the course of the condition, however changes in aminotransferase levels correlate poorly with prognosis.

Specific Issues. See Table 4.

Central Nervous System

Cerebral edema and intracranial hypertension (ICH) have long been recognized as the most serious complications of ALF.⁷² Uncal herniation may result and is uniformly fatal. Cerebral edema may also contribute to ischemic and hypoxic brain injury, which may result in long-term neurological deficits in survivors.⁷³ The pathogenic mechanisms leading to the development of cerebral edema and ICH in ALF are not entirely understood. It is likely that multiple factors are involved, including osmotic disturbances in the brain and heightened cerebral blood flow due to loss of cerebrovascular autoregulation. Inflammation and/or infection, as well as factors yet unidentified may also contribute to the phenomenon.⁷⁴ Several measures have been proposed and used with varying success to tackle the problem of cerebral edema and the associated ICH in patients with ALF. Some interventions are supported by more evidence than others; no uniform protocol has been established.

Prevention/Management of Elevated Intracranial Pressure (ICP). The occurrence of cerebral edema and ICH in ALF is related to severity of encephalopathy (Table 5). Cerebral edema is seldom observed in patients with grade I-II encephalopathy. The risk of edema increases to 25% to 35% with progression to grade III, and 65% to 75% or more in patients reaching grade IV coma.⁷⁵ A stepwise approach to management is therefore advised.⁷⁶

Grades I-II. Depending on the overall clinical picture, patients with only grade I encephalopathy may sometimes be safely managed on a medicine ward with

**Table 4. Intensive Care of Acute Liver Failure**

<i>Cerebral Edema/Intracranial Hypertension</i>	
Grade I/II Encephalopathy	Consider transfer to liver transplant facility and listing for transplantation Brain CT: rule out other causes of decreased mental status; little utility to identify cerebral edema Avoid stimulation, avoid sedation if possible Antibiotics: surveillance and treatment of infection required; prophylaxis possibly helpful Lactulose: possibly helpful
Grade III/IV Encephalopathy	Continue management strategies listed above Intubate trachea (may require sedation) Elevate head of bed Consider placement of ICP monitoring device Immediate treatment of seizures required; prophylaxis of unclear value Mannitol: use for severe elevation of ICP or first clinical signs of herniation Hyperventilation: effects short-lived; may use for impending herniation
<i>Infection</i>	Surveillance for and prompt antimicrobial treatment of infection required Antibiotic prophylaxis possibly helpful but not proven
<i>Coagulopathy</i>	Vitamin K: give at least one dose FFP: give only for invasive procedures or active bleeding Platelets: give for platelet counts <10,000/mm ³ or invasive procedures Recombinant activated factor VII: possibly effective for invasive procedures Prophylaxis for stress ulceration: give H2 blocker or PPI
<i>Hemodynamics/Renal Failure</i>	Pulmonary artery catheterization Volume replacement Pressor support (dopamine, epinephrine, norepinephrine) as needed to maintain adequate mean arterial pressure Avoid nephrotoxic agents Continuous modes of hemodialysis if needed NAC, prostacyclin: effectiveness unknown Vasopressin: not helpful in ALF; potentially harmful.
<i>Metabolic Concerns</i>	Follow closely: glucose, potassium, magnesium, phosphate Consider nutrition: enteral feedings if possible or total parenteral nutrition

skilled nursing in a quiet environment to minimize agitation, although management in an ICU is preferable. Frequent mental status checks should be performed with transfer to an ICU if level of consciousness declines. With progression to grade II encephalopathy, an ICU setting is indicated. Head imaging with computerized tomography (CT) is used to exclude other causes of decline in mental status such as intracranial hemorrhage. Sedation is to be avoided if possible; unmanageable agitation may be treated with short-acting benzodiazepines in small doses.

Lactulose. There is increasing evidence that ammonia may play a pathogenic role in the development of cerebral edema/ICH; ammonia infusion has been shown to cause brain edema in animal models.⁷⁷ Some human studies have supported these findings, with an arterial ammonia level >200 µg/dL being strongly associated with cerebral herniation.⁷ Based on such evidence and on prior experience with treatment of hepatic encephalopathy in patients

with cirrhosis, it has been suggested that reducing elevated ammonia levels with enteral administration of lactulose might help prevent or treat cerebral edema in ALF. A preliminary report from the United States Acute Liver Failure Study Group (US ALFSG), retrospectively comparing patients who received lactulose to a well-matched group of patients who did not, found that lactulose therapy was associated with a small increase in survival time, but with no difference in severity of encephalopathy or in overall outcome.⁷⁸ One concern regarding the use of lactulose in this setting is the potential for gaseous abdominal distension that could present technical difficulties in a subsequent transplantation procedure.

Grades III-IV. As patients progress to grade III or IV encephalopathy it is advisable to intubate the trachea for airway protection. Choice of sedation in this instance will vary according to clinician preference: propofol is often used because it may reduce cerebral blood flow⁷⁹; however, its effectiveness in this regard has not been shown in controlled studies. Small doses of propofol may be adequate, given its long half-life in patients with hepatic failure. Patients in advanced stages of encephalopathy require close follow-up. Monitoring and management of hemodynamic and renal parameters as well as glucose, electrolytes and acid/base status becomes critical, and frequent neurological evaluation for signs of elevated intracranial pressure should be conducted. Patients should be positioned with head elevated at 30 degrees.⁸⁰ Efforts should be made to avoid patient stimulation. Maneuvers that cause straining or Valsalva-like movements in particular may increase ICP; it may be advisable to use endotracheal lidocaine prior to endotracheal suctioning.

Seizures. Seizures, which may be seen as a manifestation of the process that leads to hepatic coma and ICH, should be controlled with phenytoin. Use of any sedative is discouraged in light of its effects on the evaluation of mental status. Only minimal doses of benzodiazepines should be used given their delayed clearance by the failing liver. Seizure activity may acutely elevate ICP⁸¹ and may also cause cerebral hypoxia and thus contribute to cerebral

Table 5. Grades of Encephalopathy

I	Changes in behavior with minimal change in level of consciousness
II	Gross disorientation, drowsiness, possibly asterixis, inappropriate behavior
III	Marked confusion, incoherent speech, sleeping most of the time but arousable to vocal stimuli
IV	Comatose, unresponsive to pain, decorticate or decerebrate posturing

Note: some patients will overlap grades; clinical judgment is required. Adapted from Conn HO, Leevy CM, Vlahcevic ZR, Rodgers JB, Maddrey WC, Seeff L, Levy LL. Comparison of lactulose and neomycin in the treatment of chronic portal-systemic encephalopathy. A double blind controlled trial. Gastroenterology 1977; 72:573-583.



edema. Some experts have advocated prophylactic use of phenytoin, especially as seizure activity may be inapparent. A small randomized controlled trial of prophylactic phenytoin in ALF showed no difference in overall survival, but a striking diminution in cerebral edema at autopsy in the treated group.⁸² A recent clinical trial did not show beneficial effects on the prevention of seizures, brain edema or survival.⁸³ Further studies may clarify the value of this treatment, but it cannot be recommended as a prophylactic measure at this time.

Intracranial Pressure Monitoring

The use of ICP monitoring devices in ALF is a subject of ongoing debate. ICP monitoring is used variably across the United States, with some centers not considering it useful and others using it regularly. A survey of the initial 14 transplant centers in the US ALFSG found ICP monitoring devices were used in 13 of these sites from 1998-2000⁸⁴; a more recent informal review of more than 20 sites found ICP monitors used in a little more than half (unpublished). Without the use of these monitoring devices, early recognition of cerebral edema cannot reliably be made. The clinical signs of elevated ICP including hypertension, bradycardia and irregular respirations (Cushing's triad) are not uniformly present; these and other neurological changes such as pupillary dilatation or signs of decerebration are typically evident only late in the course. CT of the brain does not reliably demonstrate evidence of edema especially at early stages.⁸⁵ Other methods of monitoring (such as transcranial doppler ultrasonography, near-infrared spectrophotometry, and measurement of serum S-100 beta and neuronal specific enolase) that are in various stages of evaluation have thus far not been proven reliable in estimating ICP.⁸⁶⁻⁸⁹ A primary purpose of ICP monitoring is to detect elevations in ICP and reductions in cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP; calculated as mean arterial pressure minus ICP) so that interventions can be made to prevent herniation while preserving brain perfusion. The ultimate goal of such measures is to maintain neurological integrity and prolong survival while awaiting receipt of a donor organ or recovery of sufficient functioning hepatocyte mass. ICP monitoring is particularly important during orthotopic liver transplantation, when shifts in hemodynamics can cause large fluctuations in cerebral pressure parameters.⁹⁰ Additionally, refractory ICH and/or decreased CPP is considered a contraindication to liver transplantation in many centers.^{90,91} Case reports of ALF patients demonstrating spontaneous and complete recovery after prolonged ICH and decreased CPP may call this practice into question,⁹² but there is no way of knowing whether these patients would have survived the rigors of transplantation

surgery. There are documented studies and reports of experience which indicate ICP monitoring devices can safely provide helpful information,^{76,90,93} and may even lengthen survival time,⁹⁴ but there are no controlled trials available to demonstrate an overall survival benefit. There is understandable concern over the risks (mainly infection and bleeding) involved in placing invasive intracranial devices in critically ill, coagulopathic patients, based on data on 262 patients at U.S. transplant centers that observed a complication rate of 3.8% (1% fatal hemorrhage) with epidural catheters. Reliability was improved but the risk of complications increased with the use of subdural or intraparenchymal instrumentation.⁹⁵ It is not known whether newer, smaller monitoring devices have decreased the risk of complications. More aggressive correction of coagulation parameters, perhaps with addition of recombinant activated factor VII, may further reduce bleeding risk, allowing wider use of ICP monitoring devices.⁹⁶ Indeed, preliminary results indicate a considerable reduction in the prevalence of bleeding complications (2/58 cases with the majority being subdural monitors).⁹⁷ Recent data did not show improved outcomes when ICP monitoring devices were used.⁹⁷

Specific Treatment of Elevated Intracranial Pressure. If patients develop increased ICP it may be necessary to perform immediate interventions beyond the general strategies outlined above. If an ICP monitor is placed, key parameters to follow are both ICP and CPP. ICP should be maintained below 20-25 mm Hg if possible, with CPP maintained above 50-60 mm Hg.^{4,98} Evidence from trauma patients with cerebral edema suggests that maintaining CPP above 70 mm Hg may further improve neurological outcomes, if this level can be achieved.⁹⁹ Support of systemic blood pressure may be required to maintain adequate CPP.

Mannitol. If ICH develops, either as seen on ICP monitoring or by obvious neurological signs (decerebrate posturing, pupillary abnormalities), osmotic diuresis with intravenous mannitol is effective in the short term in decreasing cerebral edema.¹⁰⁰ Mannitol has been shown in controlled trials to correct episodes of elevated ICP in ALF patients; its use has also been associated with improved survival.¹⁰¹ Administration of intravenous mannitol (in a bolus dose of 0.5-1g/kg) is therefore recommended to treat ICH in ALF. The dose may be repeated once or twice as needed, provided serum osmolality has not exceeded 320 mosm/L. Volume overload is a risk with mannitol use in patients with renal impairment, and may necessitate use of dialysis to remove excess fluid. Hyperosmolarity or hypernatremia also may result from overzealous use. Prophylactic administration of mannitol is not indicated.



Hyperventilation. Hyperventilation to reduce PaCO₂ to 25–30 mm Hg is known to quickly lower ICP via vasoconstriction causing decreased cerebral blood flow (CBF), but this effect is short-lived.¹⁰² In a small series of patients with ALF, loss of auto-regulation of CBF appeared to be restored after several minutes of hyperventilation.¹⁰³ Restoration of CBF auto-regulation should theoretically be beneficial if cerebral hyperemia is contributing to cerebral edema and ICH; this study did not evaluate effect on ICP or survival, however. A randomized controlled trial of prophylactic continuous hyperventilation in ALF patients showed no reduction in incidence of cerebral edema/ICH and no survival benefit, although onset of cerebral herniation did appear delayed in the hyperventilated group.¹⁰⁴ There has been some concern that cerebral vasoconstriction with hyperventilation could potentially worsen cerebral edema by causing cerebral hypoxia.¹⁰⁵ Based on available evidence, there is no role for prophylactic hyperventilation in patients with ALF. If life-threatening ICH is not controlled with mannitol infusion and other general management outlined above, hyperventilation may be instituted temporarily in an attempt to acutely lower ICP and prevent impending herniation; beyond this acute situation it cannot be recommended as routine management.

Hypertonic Sodium Chloride. A recent controlled trial of administration of 30% hypertonic saline to maintain serum sodium levels of 145–155 in patients with ALF and severe encephalopathy suggests that induction and maintenance of hypernatremia may be used to prevent the rise in ICP values.¹⁰⁶ Survival benefit could not be demonstrated in this small trial. The role of hypertonic saline as a prophylactic measure requires confirmation in larger studies.

Barbiturate. Barbiturate agents (thiopental or pentobarbital) may also be considered when severe ICH does not respond to other measures; administration has been shown to effectively decrease ICP. Significant systemic hypotension frequently limits their use, and may necessitate additional measures to maintain adequate mean arterial pressure (MAP).¹⁰⁷

Corticosteroids. Corticosteroids, which are often used in the prevention and management of ICH caused by brain tumors and some infections of the central nervous system, have been shown in a controlled trial to confer no benefit in patients with ALF with respect to controlling cerebral edema or improving survival.¹⁰¹

Hypothermia. Moderate hypothermia (32–34°C) may prevent or control ICH in patients with ALF. It has been shown in experimental animal models to prevent development of brain edema,^{108–110} possibly by preventing hyperemia, altering brain ammonia or glucose metabolism, or by a combined effect. Some limited experience

has supported a beneficial effect of hypothermia in patients with ALF as well,^{111,112} but hypothermia has not been subjected to a controlled trial. Potential deleterious effects of hypothermia include increased risk of infection, coagulation disturbance, and cardiac arrhythmias.¹¹³

Recommendations

25. *In early stages of encephalopathy, sedation should be avoided if possible. Lactulose may be used, but concern has been raised about increasing bowel distention during the subsequent transplant procedure (II-2, III).*

26. *In patients progressing to grade III or IV encephalopathy, the head should be elevated to 30 degrees, and endotracheal intubation should be performed (III).*

27. *Seizure activity should be treated with phenytoin and low-dose benzodiazepines. (III).*

28. *Although there is no consensus among the centers and experts, intracranial pressure monitoring is mainly considered for patients who are listed for transplantation (III).*

29. *In the absence of ICP monitoring, frequent evaluation for signs of intracranial hypertension are needed to identify early evidence of uncal herniation (III).*

30. *In the event of intracranial hypertension, mannitol should be given and hyperventilation may be considered in order to temporarily reduce the ICP, but prophylactic use of these interventions is not helpful and therefore not recommended (I).*

31. *Short-acting barbiturates may be considered for refractory intracranial hypertension (III).*

32. *Corticosteroids should not be used to control elevated ICP in patients with acute liver failure (I).*

Infection

All patients with ALF are at risk for acquisition of bacterial¹¹⁴ or fungal¹¹⁵ infection or sepsis, which may preclude transplantation or complicate the post-operative course. Prophylactic antimicrobial therapy reduces the incidence of infection in certain groups of patients with ALF, but no actual survival benefit has been shown,^{116,117} making it difficult to recommend antibiotic prophylaxis uniformly. Although often given, poorly absorbable antibiotics for selective bowel decontamination have not been shown to impact survival either.¹¹⁶ Deterioration of mental status in hospital, particularly in patients with acetaminophen toxicity, may represent the onset of infection. If antibiotics are not given prophylactically, surveillance for infection (including chest radiography and periodic cultures of sputum, urine and blood for fungal and bac-



terial organisms) should be undertaken, while maintaining a low threshold for starting appropriate anti-bacterial or anti-fungal therapy. There are no controlled trials available to confirm whether the use of prophylactic antimicrobials decreases the likelihood of progression of encephalopathy and/or development of cerebral edema in ALF. Recent studies have suggested an association between infection and/or the systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS) and progression to deeper stages of encephalopathy.^{117,118} Given that prophylactic antibiotics have been shown to reduce the risk of infection, that later stages of encephalopathy are associated with increased incidence of cerebral edema, and that fever may worsen ICH,¹¹⁹ it is possible that antibiotic and anti-fungal prophylaxis may decrease the risk of cerebral edema and ICH. This hypothesis is yet to be proven, however.

Recommendations

33. Periodic surveillance cultures should be performed to detect bacterial and fungal infections as early as possible and prompt treatment should be initiated accordingly (II-2, III).

34. Prophylactic antibiotics and anti-fungals may be considered but have not been shown to improve overall outcomes (II-2, III).

Coagulopathy

Clotting abnormalities are uniform in patients with ALF as previously discussed, leaving patients at increased risk for bleeding complications. While synthesis of coagulation factors is decreased, consumption of clotting factors and platelets also may occur, so that platelet levels are often $\leq 100,000/\text{mm}^3$. In the absence of bleeding it is not necessary to correct clotting abnormalities with fresh frozen plasma (FFP).¹²⁰ An exception is when an invasive procedure is planned and perhaps in the setting of profound coagulopathy (*e.g.*, INR >7). In addition to the risks associated with transfusion of blood products, use of plasma supplementation limits the value of coagulation parameters as a means of following the progress of ALF patients and can also lead to volume overload which may exacerbate ICH. Vitamin K is routinely given in a dose of 5–10 mg subcutaneously, regardless of whether poor nutritional status appears to be contributing to the coagulopathy.

Experts differ regarding prophylactic use of platelets in thrombocytopenic patients or use of FFP for evidence of severe coagulopathy. Platelet transfusions are not generally used until a low threshold value is observed. In the absence of bleeding, it is safe to use a threshold platelet count of $10,000/\text{mm}^3$, although some experts recom-

mend more conservative levels of $15\text{--}20,000/\text{mm}^3$ especially in patients with infection or sepsis.¹²¹ Experience in other conditions of thrombocytopenia suggests that values $\geq 10,000/\text{mm}^3$ are generally well tolerated.¹²² When invasive procedures must be performed, platelet counts of $50\text{--}70,000/\text{mm}^3$ are usually considered adequate.¹²¹ Patients who develop significant bleeding with platelet levels below approximately $50,000/\text{mm}^3$ should generally be transfused with platelets provided no contraindication exists. Likewise, bleeding in the setting of a prolonged prothrombin time (INR ≥ 1.5) warrants administration of FFP. Recombinant activated factor VII (rFVIIa) may be used in treating coagulopathy in patients with liver disease. A recent small nonrandomized trial of fifteen patients with ALF found that administration of rFVIIa in combination with FFP produced more effective temporary correction of coagulopathy and thus might be useful in facilitating performance of invasive procedures in these patients particularly in the setting of renal insufficiency in which volume overload is a concern.⁹⁶ This agent will require further study and analysis of cost-benefit ratio (current cost for one dose is approximately \$4,000) before it can be broadly recommended, however.

Recommendation

35. Replacement therapy for thrombocytopenia and/or prolonged prothrombin time is recommended only in the setting of hemorrhage or prior to invasive procedures (III).

Gastrointestinal Bleeding

Gastrointestinal (GI) bleeding is a recognized complication of ALF. A large prospective multi-center cohort study found that mechanical ventilation for more than 48 hours and coagulopathy were the only significant risk factors for bleeding in critically ill patients of all types.¹²³ Additional risk factors for bleeding reported in smaller studies have included hepatic and renal failure, sepsis, shock and others.¹²⁴ Patients with acute liver failure are thus at high risk for gastrointestinal hemorrhage. Histamine-2 receptor (H2) blocking agents such as ranitidine have long been used in the prophylaxis of GI bleeding in critically ill patients; their efficacy has been supported in several trials.^{125–128} Sucralfate has also been found to be effective in many studies, and there have been smaller randomized trials and a meta-analysis which suggested that sucralfate may be as effective in preventing gastrointestinal bleeding and might be associated with lower risk of nosocomial pneumonia than H2 blockers which lower gastric pH.^{129,130} More recently, however, a much larger (1,200 patients), well-designed trial comparing ranitidine to sucralfate in mechanically-ventilated patients found



that ranitidine but not sucralfate decreased the risk of clinically significant bleeding; the incidence of pneumonia was similar for the two groups.¹²⁸ Limited studies of proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) as bleeding prophylaxis have demonstrated their effectiveness in maintaining elevated intragastric pH.¹³¹⁻¹³³ Two trials found no significant bleeding in PPI-treated patients on mechanical ventilation,^{131,132} but study size may have precluded detection of significant bleeding. H₂ blockers have been proven to be effective and PPIs are almost certainly effective as well. PPIs may provide superior protection but this remains to be proven. Sucralfate may be acceptable as second-line treatment.

Recommendation

36. Patients with ALF in the ICU should receive prophylaxis with H₂ blocking agents or PPIs (or sucralfate as a second-line agent) for acid-related gastrointestinal bleeding associated with stress (I, III).

Hemodynamics/Renal Failure

Hemodynamic derangements consistent with multiple organ failure occur in ALF; the underlying mechanisms are complex and incompletely understood. Management of hemodynamic balance becomes increasingly important and difficult in the face of elevated ICP and/or compromised renal function. Preservation of renal function is imperative in this setting. In many ways patients with ALF resemble physiologically the patient with cirrhosis and hepatorenal syndrome. Intravascular volume deficits may be present on admission due to decreased oral intake resulting from altered mental status, transudation of fluid into the extravascular space, and possibly GI blood loss. Most patients will require fluid resuscitation initially. Low systemic vascular resistance results in low blood pressures even in the fluid-resuscitated patient, and placement of a pulmonary artery catheter may aid in assessing volume status and guiding further management. Fluid replacement with colloid (such as albumin) is preferred rather than crystalloid (such as saline); all solutions should contain dextrose to maintain euglycemia.

While adequate fluid replacement and treatment of potential infection and sepsis may help to correct hypotension, inotropic or pressor support may be required in order to maintain mean arterial pressures of at least 50-60 mm Hg. There has been debate over which agents are best used to support blood pressure in ALF and whether they are useful at all. Alpha-adrenergic agents such as epinephrine and norepinephrine have been thought to potentially worsen peripheral oxygen delivery.⁶⁶ On the other hand, dopamine has actually been associated with increased systemic delivery of oxygen.¹³⁴ In any case, the hypotension

and vasodilatation associated with ALF will generally respond to these agents, and they should be used if needed to maintain perfusion of vital organs. Agents that promote vasoconstriction are generally avoided unless significant systemic hypotension is present, and therefore should not be used in the setting of decreased intracranial perfusion with normal systemic blood pressure.

Acute renal failure is a frequent complication in patients with ALF¹³⁵ and may be due to dehydration, hepatorenal syndrome or acute tubular necrosis.¹³⁶ The frequency of renal failure may be even greater with acetaminophen overdose or other toxins, where direct renal toxicity is seen.¹³⁷ Although few patients die of renal failure alone, it often contributes to mortality and may portend a poorer prognosis.^{9,138} Every effort should be made to protect renal function by maintaining adequate hemodynamics, avoiding nephrotoxic agents such as aminoglycosides and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and by the prompt identification and treatment of infection. When dialysis is needed, continuous rather than intermittent modes of renal replacement therapy (*e.g.*, continuous venovenous hemodialysis [CVVHD]) should be used, as they have been shown in randomized trials to result in improved stability in cardiovascular and intracranial parameters compared with intermittent modes of hemodialysis.¹³⁹ Intravenous contrast agents are associated with nephrotoxicity in the setting of compromised hepatic function, and should be used with caution. If contrast must be administered, pretreatment with NAC may be of value, although this remains controversial.¹⁴⁰⁻¹⁴²

The potential utility of prostaglandins and NAC in improving hemodynamics and renal function was discussed previously; neither has sufficient evidence to be recommended as part of the management of hemodynamic derangements in ALF at this time, although NAC may have other benefits as discussed above. Evidence that terlipressin or vasopressin may be useful in patients with cirrhosis and hepatorenal syndrome has raised the question of whether this agent might benefit patients with ALF as well. A recent small study of terlipressin in patients with ALF found that even in very small doses, the drug was associated with increased cerebral blood flow and ICH.¹⁴³ Such results indicate that at this time the risks associated with vasopressin use appear to outweigh its benefits in patients with ALF.

The observation that hemodynamic status as well as ICH tends to improve after removal of the native liver during transplantation for ALF led to a recommendation of hepatectomy as a "last resort" means of improving severe circulatory dysfunction in these patients. This option is based on uncontrolled studies and case reports, where successful outcomes have occasionally been reported even



with patients who remained anhepatic for more than 48 hours.¹⁴⁴⁻¹⁴⁶ Despite these reports, hepatectomy to control hemodynamics cannot be recommended.

Recommendations

37. Careful attention must be paid to fluid resuscitation and maintenance of adequate intravascular volume in patients with acute liver failure (III).

38. If dialysis support is needed for acute renal failure, it is recommended that a continuous mode rather than an intermittent mode be used (I).

39. Pulmonary artery catheterization should be considered in a hemodynamically unstable patient to ensure that appropriate volume replacement has occurred (III).

40. Systemic vasopressor support with agents such as epinephrine, norepinephrine, or dopamine but not vasopressin should be used if fluid replacement fails to maintain MAP of 50-60 mm Hg (III, II-1).

Metabolic Concerns

A number of metabolic derangements are common in ALF. Alkalosis and acidosis may both occur and are best managed by identifying and treating the underlying cause. Hypoglycemia should be managed with continuous glucose infusions, because symptoms may be obscured in the presence of encephalopathy. Phosphate, magnesium, and potassium levels are frequently low and may require repeated supplementation throughout the hospital course. Nutrition is also important. Enteral feedings should be initiated early. Severe restrictions of protein should be avoided; 60 grams per day of protein is reasonable in most cases. Branched-chain amino acids have not been shown to be superior to other enteral preparations.¹⁴⁷ If enteral feedings are contraindicated (*e.g.*, severe pancreatitis), parenteral nutrition is an option, although the risks of infection, particularly with fungal pathogens, should be considered. Enteral¹⁴⁸ and parenteral nutrition¹⁴⁹ may reduce the risk of gastrointestinal bleeding due to stress ulceration in critically ill patients.

Recommendation

41. Metabolic homeostasis must be carefully maintained in patients with acute liver failure. Overall nutritional status as well as glucose, phosphate, potassium and magnesium levels should be monitored frequently, with expeditious correction of derangements (III).

Transplantation and Prognosis

Transplantation

Orthotopic liver transplantation remains the only definitive therapy for patients who are unable to achieve

regeneration of sufficient hepatocyte mass to sustain life. As mentioned previously, the advent of transplantation has coincided with improvement in overall survival rates from as low as 15% in the pre-transplant era to ≥60% presently.⁵ Advances in critical care and changing trends toward more benign etiologies such as acetaminophen (having a better overall outcome) have likely helped. Spontaneous survival rates are now around 40%,⁵ compared to 15% in the pre-transplant era. Post-transplant survival rates for ALF have been reported to be as high as 80% to 90%,^{5,93} but accurate long-term outcome data are not yet available. In the largest U.S. study, only 29% of patients received a liver graft, while 10% of the overall group (1/4 of patients listed for transplantation) died on the waiting list.⁵ Other series have reported death rates of those listed for transplant as high as 40%,^{150,151} despite the fact that ALF remains the one condition for which the most urgent (UNOS status 1) listing is reserved. Developing effective methods of liver support or other alternatives to transplantation and better prognostic scoring systems remain key goals to further improve overall survival rates for the condition. Living-related donor liver transplantation may help address the shortage of available organs, but its use has thus far been very limited probably as a result of time constraints for evaluating donors and ethical concerns in this setting.

Recommendation

42. Urgent hepatic transplantation is indicated in acute liver failure where prognostic indicators suggest a high likelihood of death (II-3).

Liver Support Systems

A support device to replace the acutely failing liver seems a reasonable but elusive goal. The ideal replacement for the failing liver would detoxify, metabolize and synthesize; in short, perform all the liver's many functions. A variety of systems have been tested to date, with no certain evidence of efficacy. Sorbent systems embody only detoxification and no hepatocyte replacement. Such systems, employing charcoal or other adherent particles in a capsule or column device placed in an extracorporeal circuit, may show loss of platelets and worsening of coagulation parameters across the device.^{152,153} Transient improvement of hepatic encephalopathy may be observed but no improvement in hepatic function or long-term benefit has been shown. Hepatocytes, whether of human or other mammalian origin, have been used in cartridges in extracorporeal circuits, either with or without sorbent columns. Few controlled trials have been published, and some preliminary reports suggest no benefit to outcome, with or without transplantation.¹⁵⁴ One recent multi-



center trial did report improved short-term survival for a subgroup of patients with ALF who were treated with a porcine hepatocyte-based bioartificial liver,¹⁵⁵ but corroboration of these results by further studies will likely be required before the true utility of this device can be established. All such trials are difficult to perform and to control properly due to the rarity of well-characterized patients, the heterogeneity of etiologies, varying levels of disease severity and varying access to transplantation. A recent meta-analysis, considering all forms of devices together, demonstrated no efficacy for bio-artificial liver devices for the treatment of ALF.¹⁵⁶ A variety of other strategies have been employed including exchange transfusion, charcoal hemoperfusion, extracorporeal liver perfusions, and intra-portal hepatocyte infusions.¹⁵⁷⁻¹⁵⁹ To date, none can be recommended, and their use remains experimental. Efforts to improve hepatocyte regeneration have likewise been futile thus far.¹⁶⁰ When heterotopic or partial replacement transplantations have been performed it appears that the native liver can recover in some but not all situations, but this may require weeks or months to occur, underscoring the real challenge to liver replacement devices, that is, that liver assist devices might well be required for long periods of time.

Recommendation

43. Currently available liver support systems are not recommended outside of clinical trials; their future in the management of acute liver failure remains unclear (I, II-1).

Prognosis

See Table 6.

Given limited organ availability, lack of good alternatives to transplantation, and potential complications of lifelong immunosuppression, accurate prognosis in ALF is a paramount goal. Prognostic scoring systems, although derived from data on relatively large numbers of patients, still fail to achieve success, given the wide variety of etiologies that lead to this end stage syndrome. The traditional King's College Hospital criteria have been the most commonly utilized and most frequently tested of the numerous proposed prognostic criteria for ALF.⁹ Several studies evaluating these criteria have shown positive predictive values ranging from just below 70% to nearly 100% and negative predictive values ranging from 25% to 94%.¹⁶¹⁻¹⁶⁵ Overall, such prognostic scores have proven to have acceptable specificity but low sensitivity to determine outcome. Criteria based on decreased levels of factor V in patients with encephalopathy predicted death in acute viral hepatitis cases with a positive predictive value of 82% and a negative predictive value of 98%,¹⁶⁶ but

Table 6. Potentially Helpful Indicators* of Poor (Transplant-free) Prognosis in Patients With ALF

Etiology
Idiosyncratic drug injury
Acute hepatitis B (and other non-hepatitis A viral infections)
Autoimmune hepatitis
Mushroom poisoning
Wilson disease
Budd-Chiari syndrome
Indeterminate cause
Coma grade on admission
III
IV
King's College Criteria:
Acetaminophen-induced ALF:
Arterial pH <7.3 (following adequate volume resuscitation) irrespective of coma grade OR
PT >100 seconds (INR · 6.5) + serum creatinine >300 µmol/L (3.4 mg/dL) in patients in grade III/IV coma
Non-acetaminophen-induced ALF:
PT >100 seconds irrespective of coma grade OR
Any three of the following, irrespective of coma grade:
- Drug toxicity, indeterminate cause of ALF
- Age <10 years or >40 years‡
- Jaundice to coma interval >7 days‡
- PT >50 seconds (INR ≥3.5)
- Serum bilirubin >300 µmol/L (17.5 mg/dL)

*Please note: None of these factors, with the exception of Wilson disease and possibly mushroom poisoning, are either necessary or sufficient to indicate the need for immediate liver transplantation.

†These criteria, in particular, have not been found to be predictive of outcome in recent analyses.⁵

subsequent studies in both acetaminophen¹⁶⁷ and non-acetaminophen ALF¹⁶⁵ have shown these criteria to be less accurate than King's College Hospital criteria in predicting outcome.

In a recent meta-analysis, Bailey et al.¹⁶⁸ compared various prognostic criteria in patients with ALF due to acetaminophen, including King's College Hospital criteria, various combinations of elevated serum creatinine, encephalopathy, and prothrombin time elevations (both single and serial measurements), decreased factor V levels, the Acute Physiology and Chronic Health Evaluation (APACHE) II scores¹⁶⁹ and Gc globulin (vitamin D binding protein, a liver-derived component of the actin-scavenging system¹⁷⁰). The analysis found that King's College Hospital criteria and pH <7.30 alone were both fairly specific in predicting a poor outcome. While the King's College Hospital criteria were more sensitive than pH alone (69% versus 57% sensitivity), use of both criteria was still likely to miss many patients who would ultimately require transplantation. The authors also found that an APACHE II score of >15 on admission had a specificity of 92% (comparable to King's College Hospital criteria) with a much better sensitivity of 81%, but this measure was only examined in one limited study.¹⁶⁹



Other factors such as age and the length of time between onset of illness and onset of encephalopathy have previously been proposed as important prognostic indicators in ALF,^{9,171} these parameters did not affect outcome in the largest U.S. multi-center study of ALF to date.⁵ Patients presenting in grade III or IV encephalopathy were less likely than those patients presenting in grade I or II encephalopathy to survive without receiving a liver graft. The most significant predictor of outcome in this study was etiology of ALF, as patients with ALF due to acetaminophen, hepatitis A, shock liver, or pregnancy-related disease showed $\geq 50\%$ transplant free survival, while all other etiologies showed $< 25\%$ transplant-free survival.

Other prognostic criteria have been proposed including severity of SIRS,^{117,118} Alpha fetoprotein (AFP) levels,¹⁷² ratios of factor VIII and factor V,¹⁷³ liver histology,¹⁷⁴ CT scanning of the liver,^{174,175} cytokine levels,¹⁷⁶ serum phosphate levels,^{163,177} and adrenal insufficiency.¹⁷⁸ Evaluations of these criteria have had varied results; while some appear promising, more research is needed to determine their reliability. The Model for End-stage Liver Disease (MELD) score, now widely used to predict mortality among patients with chronic liver disease who are under consideration for liver transplantation,¹⁷⁹ cannot currently be recommended as applicable to ALF, a different condition from cirrhosis.

Recommendation

44. Currently available prognostic scoring systems do not adequately predict outcome and determine candidacy for liver transplantation. Reliance entirely upon these guidelines is thus not recommended. (II-2, II-3, III).

Summary

Management of ALF challenges our best skills as physicians and intensivists. Treatments for specific etiologies and consideration of transplantation should be undertaken urgently in all patients that demonstrate evidence of encephalopathy. Because patients may deteriorate rapidly, arranging care in a center with experience and expertise in managing patients with ALF will secure the best possible outcomes for these patients.

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REFERENCE TO THE LECTURE ENTITLED: EVALUATION OF SURGICAL RISK IN PATIENTS WITH LIVER DISEASES

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Preoperative Risk Assessment for Patients with Liver Disease

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KEYWORDS

- Operative risk • Liver disease • Cirrhosis
- CTP score • MELD

Underlying liver disease has effects on the risk of morbidity and mortality after surgery. The magnitude of the risk depends on several factors, including the etiology and severity of liver disease, the surgical procedure, and the type of anesthesia used.

In patients with cirrhosis, nontransplant surgery can lead to worsening of underlying liver disease or even liver failure. The reasons for this are unclear but may reflect circulatory changes brought on by surgery or anesthesia, resulting in impaired hepatic vascular flow.

The number of patients with advanced liver disease is on the increase, and so the number of patients with liver disease who will require surgery will likely increase. It is not uncommon for patients with liver disease to undergo surgical interventions other than liver transplant. Up to 10% of patients with advanced liver disease require a surgical procedure in the final 2 years of their life.¹

Identification of the surgical risk is important in every patient; however, the risk assessment in patients with liver disease is imperative and can be lifesaving. Gastroenterologists and hepatologists are frequently asked to evaluate patients with liver disease and determine their risk of undergoing surgical procedures and to help make recommendations that may optimize outcomes.

PREOPERATIVE SCREENING FOR LIVER DISEASE

The primary goal of preoperative screening is to determine the presence of preexisting liver disease using the least invasive means possible.

The value of a thorough history and physical examination cannot be overestimated. It is crucial in providing clues as to whether a patient has liver disease or is at an increased risk of having liver disease. All patients should be questioned regarding prior

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remote blood transfusions, tattoos, illicit drug use, alcohol intake, sexual history, personal history of jaundice, and family history of liver disease. A complete review of medications, including over-the-counter analgesics and complementary or alternative medications should also be sought. Complaints of excessive fatigue, pruritus, and easy bruising may be indicators of underlying liver dysfunction. Physical examination can identify signs that are consistent with chronic underlying liver disease, such as the presence of jaundice, palmar erythema, spider telangiectasia, parotid gland enlargement, Dupuytren contracture, hepatosplenomegaly, ascites, dilated abdominal veins, lower extremity edema, gynecomastia, testicular atrophy, temporal wasting, or loss of muscle mass.

Patients who are deemed healthy without clinical suspicion for underlying liver disease generally do not require laboratory testing of liver function. A study from 1976, in which 7620 subjects undergoing elective surgery were screened with blood work, revealed that only 11 had abnormal liver tests.² Although this study preceded the current epidemics in viral hepatitis and fatty liver disease, it supports the notion that routine screening without clinical suspicion of underlying liver disease is of low yield and would likely not improve outcomes.

If the liver function tests are found to be abnormal, then it is prudent to defer elective surgery until a more thorough investigation can be performed to determine the nature, chronicity, and severity of the biochemical abnormalities. For those patients who are asymptomatic with only mild elevations in aminotransferases and normal total bilirubin concentration, cancellation of surgery is rarely required. If, however, patients are found to have elevated aminotransferase levels greater than 3 times the upper limits of normal or abnormalities in parameters of synthetic function (namely bilirubin and prothrombin time), further investigation is warranted. The incidence of underlying cirrhosis in patients with abnormal liver function tests has been reported to be anywhere from 6% to 34%.^{3,4} Further investigation in this subgroup of patients should proceed along standard pathways for the workup of chronic liver disease. Investigations should include viral hepatitis serology for hepatitis B and C, specific tests for metabolic liver disease, such as iron studies for hemochromatosis, ceruloplasmin level for Wilson disease, α_1 -antitrypsin level and phenotyping, serum markers for autoimmune liver disease, and imaging, such as a right upper quadrant ultrasound with Doppler to evaluate the hepatic parenchyma, biliary system, and flow within the portal venous vasculature, and CT or MRI scan for evidence of cirrhosis or portal hypertension (**Fig. 1**).

Once it has been determined that a patient has liver disease, the next step is estimating the risk of surgery. Patients with liver disease are at a greater risk for surgical and anesthetic complications than those without liver disease.^{5–7} The degree of risk associated with the surgery and postoperative outcomes is largely dependent on 3 factors: the etiology and severity of the liver disease, the specific surgery planned, and the type of anesthesia (**Fig. 2**).

NATURE OF THE UNDERLYING LIVER DISEASE

Because of the high perioperative morbidity and mortality, acute hepatitis is regarded as a contraindication to elective surgery (**Box 1**). This recommendation is largely based upon older literature, in which patients with icteric hepatitis had a 10% to 13% mortality following laparotomy.^{8,9} The increased risk is likely the result of acute hepatocellular injury, inflammation, and associated hepatic dysfunction. If the degree of liver injury is severe, consideration should be given to delay even urgent surgery. Most cases of acute hepatitis are self-limited and so surgery should be postponed

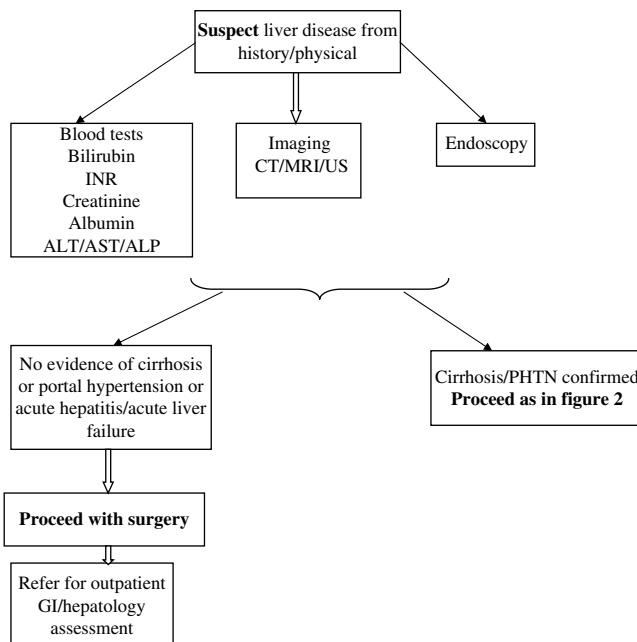


Fig. 1. Algorithm for preoperative assessment in patients with suspected liver disease.

until the patient's clinical, biochemical, and histological parameters return to normal. Improvement in the underlying condition, whether it is viral, toxic, drug induced, thrombotic, or hypoxic, will likely reduce postoperative risk.

The specific case of acute alcoholic hepatitis deserves special mention. The presentation of acute alcoholic hepatitis (jaundice, right upper quadrant pain, elevated liver function tests, and leukocytosis) can many times mimic an acute biliary process, and lead to misdiagnosis and subsequent "therapeutic misadventures," namely, cholecystectomy or endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography, with devastating postoperative results.¹⁰ All elective surgeries should be delayed in patients with acute alcoholic hepatitis until clinical and laboratory parameters return to normal.

Patients with mild chronic hepatitis without evidence of portal hypertension and well-preserved hepatic function generally tolerate surgery well.¹¹ However, when the disease is considered active, evidenced by clinical, biochemical, and histological measures, surgical risk increases.⁶ When a patient with chronic hepatitis has evidence of clinical decompensation (impaired hepatic synthesis, altered excretion, portal hypertension), the perioperative risk is higher.¹¹⁻¹³ It is unclear whether interventions aimed at improving active disease in these patients will help to improve outcomes after surgery.

Patients with well-compensated cirrhosis, but significant portal hypertension, may still be at increased risk of postoperative decompensation, particularly if the surgery involves the liver, such as resection of a tumor.¹⁴ Limited data suggest that correction of the portal pressure by transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt (TIPS) may reduce this risk in patients undergoing abdominal surgery.¹⁵

With the epidemic rise in the metabolic syndrome, more patients are presenting for surgery with nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD). In one study, which included patients with alcoholic and nonalcoholic steatohepatitis with moderate steatosis

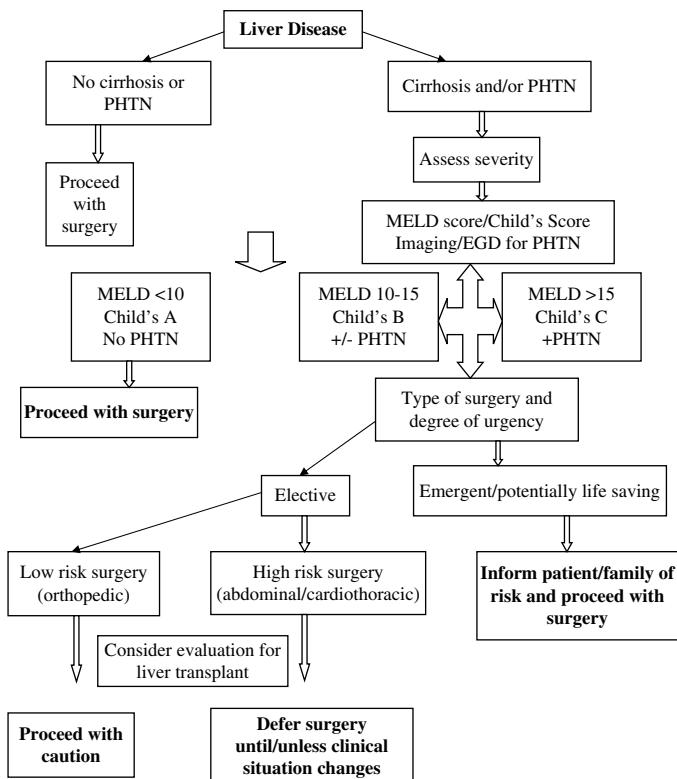


Fig. 2. Algorithm for preoperative assessment in patients with known liver disease.

(defined by >30% fat on liver biopsy) undergoing major hepatic resection, there was a trend towards increased morbidity and mortality following major hepatic resection.¹⁶ These patients tended to be obese (mean body mass index >30 kg/m²) with elevated total bilirubin levels (mean 2.2 mg/dL), indicating a degree of hepatic dysfunction. How much the steatosis alone contributed to the increased risk is unclear.

NAFLD is a common finding in patients undergoing bariatric surgery and typically improves after significant weight loss. Occasionally cirrhosis is found at the time of surgery, and increased perioperative mortality has been observed in this situation,¹⁷ leading some surgeons to abort gastric bypass if frank cirrhosis is noted.

Box 1
High-risk patients with liver disease for any type of surgery

- Child's C
- MELD score greater than 15
- Acute liver failure
- Acute alcoholic hepatitis
- High serum bilirubin (>11 mg/dL)



Obstructive jaundice has been shown to markedly increase perioperative mortality. Studies have suggested that patients with obstructive jaundice and risk factors including total bilirubin level greater than 11mg/dL, presence of malignancy, serum creatinine 1.4 mg/dL or more, blood urea nitrogen concentration greater than 10 mg/dL, albumin concentration less than 3 g/dL, initial hematocrit less than 30%, aspartate aminotransferase greater than 90 IU/L, and age more than 65 years, portend worse outcome following surgery.^{18–20} Efforts to improve the jaundice either with endoscopic or percutaneous biliary drainage do not appear to improve mortality.^{21–25} This suggests that severe underlying disease (cirrhosis or malignancy) is present in most patients, and relieving the jaundice does not change the natural history of the disease process.

CIRRHOSIS AND PREDICTIVE MODELS

Of patients with liver disease, the outcomes of those with cirrhosis have been studied most extensively. Once a patient has developed cirrhosis, grading the severity of the liver disease is of crucial importance in determining their perioperative risk.

Two scoring systems, the Model for End-Stage Liver Disease (MELD) (**Box 2**) and the Child-Turcotte-Pugh (CTP) classification (**Table 1**) have been adapted and evaluated to help clinicians determine perioperative morbidity and mortality in patients with cirrhosis undergoing surgical procedures.

The CTP was originally formulated by Child and Turcotte in 1964 to help predict mortality following portacaval shunt surgery.²⁶ This was modified a decade later by Pugh and colleagues,²⁷ who replaced nutritional status with prothrombin time and devised a scoring system for patients undergoing esophageal transections for bleeding varices.

The CTP score was the first-used predictor of surgical risk in patients with liver disease. Although the scoring system has never been prospectively validated, it is regarded to be an accurate predictor and is still widely used today to predict perioperative morbidity and mortality for elective and emergency surgeries in patients with cirrhosis.

The commonly quoted percentages linking perioperative mortality and CTP class are based largely upon two retrospective studies of patients with cirrhosis. Garrison and colleagues¹ studied 100 patients with cirrhosis who underwent abdominal surgery. Thirty patients died and major complications occurred in another 30 patients. Fifty-two variables were analyzed and in multivariate analysis, the CTP classification was the best predictor of morbidity and mortality with CTP class A, B, and C

Box 2**MELD score equation**

$$\text{MELD score} = (9.6 \times \log_e[\text{creatinine}]) + (3.8 \times \log_e[\text{bilirubin}]) + (11.2 \times \log_e[\text{INR}]) + 6.4$$

Value of creatinine, bilirubin, or INR cannot be less than 1.0 for the equation.

Values greater than 40 assigned a value of 40.

MELD less than 10—consider low risk

MELD 10 to 15—intermediate risk

MELD greater than 15—high risk

Creatinine in mg/dL

Bilirubin in mg/dL



Table 1
Child-Turcotte-Pugh classification of cirrhosis

Clinical Trait	1 Point	2 Points	3 Points
Ascites	None	Present	Moderate/severe
Encephalopathy	None	Grade 1–2	Grade 3–4
Bilirubin (mg/dL)	<2	2–3	>3
Albumin (g/dL)	>3.5	2.8–3.5	<2.8
INR	<1.7	1.7–2.3	>2.3

The CTP score uses 5 variables and assigns point values according to severity. The composite score is between 5 (well compensated disease) and 15 (severe decompensation).

Child's A 5–6 points.

Child's B 7–9 points.

Child's C 10–15 points.

corresponding to postoperative mortality of 10%, 31%, and 76% (**Table 2**). In another study involving 92 cirrhotic patients, Mansour and colleagues²⁸ commented that the most accurate predictor of outcomes in patients with cirrhosis was Child's class with mortality percentages nearly identical to those quoted by Garrison and colleagues¹ with CTP A, B, and C corresponding to 10%, 30%, and 82%. In a larger review, spanning nearly 10 years, it was determined that cirrhotic patients undergoing any surgical procedure under anesthesia had perioperative mortality rates of 11.6% and complication rates of 30.1%. Mortality and complication rates correlated directly with the Child score.²⁹

One of the drawbacks of the CTP classification is its partly subjective nature. Parameters such as grades of encephalopathy and degree of ascites are left to the discrepancy of the clinician. The need for a more accurate model to assess patients with liver disease was highlighted by Malinchoc and colleagues to predict outcome following TIPS. In this landmark study, the investigators formulated the MELD scoring system to help predict short-term mortality in patients with cirrhosis undergoing TIPS.³⁰ The MELD score incorporates three biochemical measurements into a complex logarithmic formula—the total bilirubin concentration, serum creatinine, and the international normalized ratio (INR). Patient scores range from 6 to 40, with 6 reflecting “early” disease and 40 “severe” disease. In 2002, the MELD score was adopted by the United Network for Organ Sharing as a means of more fairly allocating donor organs to ensure priority to the “sickest” recipients.

Table 2
CTP score and MELD score and risk of mortality after surgery

Type of Surgery	CTP/MELD Score	Mortality (%)
Abdominal	A	10
	B	30–31
	C	76–82
Cardiac	A	0–11
	B	18–50
	C	67–100
Abdominal/cardiac/orthopedic (30-d mortality)	<8 >20	5.7 >50



The MELD score has been validated in a number of prospective studies as a prognostic score in determining mortality in patients with cirrhosis, acute variceal bleeding, acute alcoholic hepatitis, and acute liver failure.^{31–36} The MELD score has also been examined as a prognostic tool in determining mortality following surgery.

One of the first studies to evaluate MELD score and postoperative outcomes involved 33 patients with cirrhosis undergoing laparoscopic cholecystectomy.³⁷ Two patients died in the study group versus none in noncirrhotic controls. The authors concluded that a MELD score of 8 or more identified patients at risk for postoperative morbidity following cholecystectomy. Several studies have since evaluated the usefulness of the MELD score in predicting perioperative morbidity and mortality.^{38–41} These studies involved elective and emergent surgeries including abdominal, cardiac, and hepatic resection and orthopedic procedures. The type of surgery performed plays a large role in determining outcome, and so it is difficult to apply such studies to individual patients. A recent large study of almost 800 cirrhotic patients undergoing major digestive, orthopedic, or cardiac surgery demonstrated that the MELD score correlated with short-term and long-term mortality extending out to 20 years. For each point increase in the MELD score above 8, there was a 14% increase in 30- and 90-day mortality.⁴² Overall, the MELD score correlates well with postoperative mortality and in some cases is superior to CTP class.

It has been recommended that patients with MELD scores below 10 can undergo elective surgery, whereas caution needs to be taken for patients with MELD scores between 10 and 15. For patients with MELD scores above 15, elective surgery should be avoided. It is most prudent in this group of patients to consider evaluation for liver transplant listing, in case the patient should decompensate post procedure.⁴³

TYPE OF SURGERY

Studies have shown that patients with cirrhosis who undergo any type of emergency surgery (especially abdominal) have a higher mortality than patients with normal liver function (**Box 3**).

Emergency surgeries obviously do not permit for delays in the decision to intervene. Emergent surgeries, as the name implies, are life-threatening and many times must be undertaken irrespective of the patient's comorbidities. Patients with cirrhosis who require emergent surgical procedures have extremely high mortality rates. One study in which 14 patients with cirrhosis underwent emergent surgical procedures under general anesthesia showed a 1- and 3-month mortality of 19% and 44%, respectively,

Box 3
High-risk surgery in patients with liver disease

- Abdominal surgery
- Cholecystectomy
- Colectomy
- Gastric surgery
- Liver resection
- Cardiac surgery
- Emergent surgery (any type)
- Surgery with high anticipated blood loss



which was significantly higher than that in cirrhotic patients undergoing elective surgical procedures.³⁹

Abdominal surgical procedures, including cholecystectomy, gastric bypass, biliary procedures, ulcer surgery, and colonic resection, result in an increased morbidity and mortality in patients with cirrhosis. In a 2007 study by Teh and colleagues,⁴² 586 cirrhotic patients underwent major digestive system surgery including esophageal, gastric, intestinal, hepatic, and splenic procedures. The type of procedure did not affect the outcome, but older age and higher MELD score predicted an increased risk of short-term and long-term mortality, with a median survival of almost 5 years for a MELD score of less than 8, but only 14-day median survival if the MELD score was greater than 26.

Three small studies^{15,44,45} have evaluated the role of preoperative TIPS insertion in patients with cirrhosis and portal hypertension undergoing extrahepatic abdominal operations. Although the premise of reducing portal hypertension before a major abdominal operation makes sense, the results were mixed, and so no recommendations can be made in support of preoperative TIPS placement.

Cardiac surgery involving cardiopulmonary bypass also carries an increased perioperative risk in patients with cirrhosis. One of the largest studies reviewed 44 cirrhotic patients undergoing either cardiac bypass grafting, valve replacement, or pericardectomy.³⁸ Twelve patients developed hepatic decompensation and 7 patients died. The authors concluded that cardiac surgery could be conducted safely if the CTP score was 7 or less. Two additional studies^{46,47} confirmed the results of the aforementioned study and support the findings that Child's class is an accurate predictor of hepatic decompensation and mortality following cardiac surgery. Mortality tends to be related to gastrointestinal complications, hemorrhage, and sepsis, as opposed to cardiac failure. Thus, whenever possible, major cardiac operations should be avoided in patients with cirrhosis and the least invasive means of treating coronary disease should be sought.⁴⁸

Patients sustaining trauma who are found to have cirrhosis at the time of laparotomy are at an increased risk of morbidity and mortality following surgery. In one study, 40 cirrhotic patients undergoing laparotomy following trauma had a significantly higher mortality of 45% versus 24% in matched noncirrhotic controls. The increased morbidity and mortality was even true in cirrhotic patients who suffered minor trauma.⁴⁹

Surgical resection in patients with liver disease raises concerns about the adequacy of residual hepatic mass in patients who have compromised function to begin with. Most patients with hepatocellular carcinoma have significant underlying liver disease, and so it is not surprising therefore that such patients have high rates of postsurgical complications, hepatic decompensation, and death.⁵⁰ Although cirrhosis is no longer considered a contraindication to hepatic resection, morbidity and mortality are still substantial, with mortality rates quoted as high as 16% and morbidity as high as 60%.^{51–57} The improvement in outcomes over the years is likely multifactorial, related to better patient selection, improved intra- and postoperative monitoring, and advancements in surgical techniques.^{58,59}

ANESTHESIA

Liver disease can significantly impair the metabolism of anesthetics and certain medications used during surgery. Hepatic dysfunction can affect the distribution, metabolism, and excretion of drugs. Caution must be taken in deciding which drugs to use.



The clinician should also be mindful of the class of drugs, drug doses, and scheduling when confronting postoperative decompensation.

Of the volatile anesthetics, isoflurane is generally recommended as it undergoes the least amount of hepatic metabolism and does not affect hepatic blood flow.⁶⁰ Halothane, in contrast, undergoes significant hepatic metabolism and reduces hepatic blood flow. Halothane is a known culprit of severe hepatic injury and has been reported to be the cause of acute liver failure.^{61,62} The incidence of acute liver failure is approximately 1 case in 6,000 to 35,000 patients after exposure.⁶³ This concern has all but eliminated the use of halothane in the United States.

Hepatic dysfunction can result in a longer half-life of many drugs as a result of impairment of the cytochrome P450 enzymes. The perioperative use of certain narcotic opioids, such as morphine and oxycodone, should be avoided in patients with cirrhosis or significant hepatic impairment. The bioavailability of such drugs is markedly increased and their half-life prolonged.⁶⁴ Fentanyl, however, does not seem to be affected by hepatic dysfunction.⁶⁵

The metabolism of certain benzodiazepines such as diazepam and midazolam may be slowed in patients with cirrhosis and impaired liver function. Because of their ability to undergo conjugation without hepatic metabolism, benzodiazepines such as oxazepam and temazepam are not affected.^{66–68} The increased duration of action of benzodiazepines and narcotics in patients with cirrhosis and liver dysfunction can lead to prolonged depression of the central nervous system and may act as precipitants of hepatic encephalopathy.

Anesthesia can lead to changes in blood flow to the liver that can occur with general or regional anesthesia, meaning the risk of decompensation after surgery is not reduced even if local or spinal anesthesia is used.^{60,69} Advanced liver disease is typically associated with systemic and splanchnic vasodilation that leads to activation of the sympathetic nervous system in an attempt to maintain arterial perfusion.⁷⁰ The normal cardiac inotropic and chronotropic response to stress may be decreased in cirrhotic patients,⁷¹ and the combination of a hyperdynamic circulation without compensatory mechanisms can lead to hepatic hypoperfusion during surgery. This can be exacerbated by the type of surgery (particularly laparotomy or cardiac surgery), hemorrhage, vasoactive medications, and even patient positioning.⁷²

SUMMARY

Preexisting liver disease can lead to significant mortality after surgery. The severity of liver disease measured by the CTP score and the MELD score are relatively accurate predictors of outcome after surgery but are influenced by the type of surgery and the urgency. The algorithms shown in **Figs. 1** and **2** summarize our recommendations using the available literature. In general, Child's class A or MELD score less than 10 are at low risk for death after elective surgery; Child's B or MELD 10 to 15 are at moderate risk, and surgery should be considered depending on the indication and urgency; Child's C or MELD greater than 15 are at high risk, and surgery should be avoided or deferred until the clinical situation changes.

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MANAGEMENT OF RARE LIVER TUMOURS (GESTIONE DEI TUMORI EPATICI RARI)

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Malignant rare liver tumors include cholangiocarcinoma, cystoadenocarcinoma, angiosarcoma, sarcoma and neuroendocrine neoplasms.

Most of these tumors are diagnosed in late phases of the disease, thus rendering impossible any kind of therapy.

When the tumors are found incidentally or due to the presence of early symptoms, their management is more intriguing. Reaching a full diagnosis can be a very difficult task, in the absence of defined risk factors and because the absence of specific radiological findings.

The presence of an unusual mass in an otherwise healthy person should pose the suspect of the presence of a malignant tumor. But it must be said that the widespread diffusion of imaging technique has led to the finding of very tiny lesion within the liver, making the possibility to reach a diagnosis difficult even for very small benign lesion.

The role of biopsy remains controversial.

In most instances surgery remains the only possible therapy.



MANAGEMENT OF SIDE EFFECTS OF ANTI ANGIOGENETIC INHIBITORS IN TREATING HEPATOCELLULAR CARCINOMA (GESTIONE DEGLI EFFETTI COLLATERALI DEGLI INIBITORI DELLA ANGIOGENESI NEL TRATTAMENTO DEL CARCINOMA EPATOCELLULARE)

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Introduzione: l'efficacia di sorafenib nel trattamento dell'HCC avanzato

I pazienti con epatocarcinoma (HCC) non suscettibile di trattamento loco-regionale con intento curativo (malattia in stadio iniziale), né suscettibile di trattamento loco-regionale con intento palliativo (chemio-embolizzazione transarteriosa), necessitano di trattamento sistematico. Peraltro, prima dei recenti studi randomizzati condotti con il sorafenib, piccola molecola inibitore di chinasi *multitarget*, nessun farmaco aveva dimostrato efficacia per questi pazienti, per i quali la miglior terapia di supporto rimaneva l'unica opzione terapeutica valida.

L'efficacia di sorafenib nel trattamento dell'epatocarcinoma in stadio avanzato è stata dimostrata in 2 studi randomizzati di fase III: lo studio SHARP e lo studio Asia-Pacific. Entrambi gli studi prevedevano l'inclusione di pazienti che non risultassero eleggibili per alcun trattamento loco-regionale (già alla diagnosi oppure dopo fallimento di eventuali precedenti trattamenti), con una buona funzionalità epatica (classe A secondo la classificazione di Child-Pugh). I due studi erano significativamente diversi in termini di caratteristiche dei pazienti, in quanto lo studio SHARP era condotto nel mondo occidentale (Europa, America, Israele, Australia), mentre l'altro studio era condotto in nazioni dell'Asia orientale (Cina, Taiwan e Corea). La casistica asiatica si caratterizzava, rispetto alla popolazione dello studio SHARP, per una maggiore proporzione di casi positivi per HBV, un'età mediamente più giovane, una maggiore incidenza di Performance Status scaduto, un maggior numero di siti di malattia, con una prognosi nel complesso peggiore. In entrambi gli studi randomizzati, il trattamento con sorafenib (sommministrato alla dose di 400 mg 2 volte al giorno, fino a progressione strumentale e clinica o fino a insorgenza di tossicità inaccettabile), ha determinato un significativo prolungamento della sopravvivenza globale, e un significativo prolungamento del *time-to-progression*. In termini assoluti, il prolungamento della sopravvivenza è stato pari a circa 3 mesi nello studio SHARP, e a circa 2 mesi nello studio asiatico, caratterizzati però da un sovrapponibile risultato in termini relativi (Hazard Ratio 0.69 e 0.68, rispettivamente). Al contrario, nei due studi considerati, il trattamento con sorafenib non ha dimostrato, rispetto al placebo, un significativo beneficio in termini di prolungamento di tempo allo scadimento sintomatico.

Sulla base dei risultati ottenuti, nell'Ottobre 2007, il sorafenib è stato approvato dall'EMEA per il trattamento dell'epatocarcinoma. Il trattamento è rimborsabile in Italia, limitatamente ai pazienti in classe A di Child, a partire dal giugno 2008.



Sorafenib e funzionalità epatica

I due suddetti studi randomizzati che hanno dimostrato l'efficacia di sorafenib prevedevano l'inclusione dei soli pazienti con funzionalità epatica conservata (classe A secondo la classificazione di Child-Pugh). L'evidenza relativa all'efficacia del farmaco nei pazienti in classe Child-Pugh B è limitata alla minoranza di pazienti inseriti nel precedente studio di fase II, all'esiguo numero di pazienti inseriti in violazione al protocollo nello studio SHARP, e a una serie di casistiche non controllate, successivamente pubblicate. Nel complesso, tale evidenza conferma la prognosi più scadente per i pazienti in classe Child-Pugh B, in quanto condizionata dal più rapido peggioramento della funzionalità epatica, che determina una durata del trattamento con sorafenib inferiore rispetto alla durata media nei pazienti in classe Child-Pugh A. L'assenza di un braccio di confronto, naturalmente, impedisce di attribuire il verificarsi di eventi avversi (legati in massima parte al deterioramento della funzionalità epatica) al trattamento con sorafenib o alla storia naturale dell'epatopatia in sé.

Tollerabilità del sorafenib

Negli studi randomizzati, il trattamento con sorafenib si è dimostrato, nel complesso, ben tollerato. Gli eventi avversi più comunemente riportati consistono nella tossicità cutanea (HFSR, *hand foot skin reaction*), nella diarrea, nell'astenia. L'ipertensione può verificarsi, ma risulta essere meno frequente nei pazienti con HCC, rispetto all'incidenza nei pazienti che ricevono sorafenib per il carcinoma renale. L'astenia può essere presente nei pazienti con HCC indipendentemente dal trattamento con sorafenib, essendo potenzialmente legata all'epatopatia di base.

Un'adeguata informazione al paziente relativamente alla possibile insorgenza di effetti collaterali, al loro pronto riconoscimento e alla loro tempestiva gestione è molto importante per non compromettere la compliance al trattamento con sorafenib.

L'insorgenza di effetti collaterali (in particolare HFSR e diarrea) durante il trattamento con sorafenib, può essere gestita con interruzione temporanea del trattamento e/o con riduzioni di dose, in base alla severità della tossicità osservata.

Questi provvedimenti, insieme con il tempestivo trattamento degli effetti collaterali, possono consentire di evitare l'interruzione definitiva della terapia, peraltro necessaria in una minoranza di pazienti, in caso di tossicità severa e inaccettabile.

Le riduzioni di dose possono basarsi sul dimezzamento della dose quotidianamente assunta (400 mg al giorno invece che 800 mg al giorno), e la dose può essere ulteriormente ridotta di un livello (400 mg a giorni alterni):

La seguente tabella riassume le riduzioni di dose e le interruzioni del trattamento in base alla tossicità registrata in corso di trattamento con sorafenib, adottate nello studio randomizzato BOOST, coordinato dall'Unità Sperimentazioni Cliniche dell'Istituto Nazionale Tumori di Napoli:



Tipo di tossicità e grado	Modifica dei tempi di somministrazione	Modifiche della dose
Diarrea		
Grado 1	Nessuna modifica	Nessuna modifica
Grado 2 - 1° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Nessuna modifica
2° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di un livello di dose
3° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di due livelli di dose
4° occorrenza	Sospensione definitiva del trattamento	
Grado 3 - 1° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di un livello di dose
2° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di due livelli di dose
3° occorrenza	Sospensione definitiva	
Grado 4 - 1° occorrenza	Sospensione definitiva	
Tossicità cutanea		
Grado 1	Nessuna modifica	Nessuna modifica
Grado 2 - 1° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Nessuna modifica
2° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di un livello di dose
3° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di due livelli di dose
4° occorrenza	Sospensione definitiva del trattamento	
Grado 3 - 1° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di un livello di dose
2° occorrenza	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di due livelli di dose
3° occorrenza	Sospensione definitiva	
Altre tossicità non ematologiche		
Grado 0-2	Nessuna modifica	Nessuna modifica
Grado 3	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di un livello di dose
Grado 4	Sospensione definitiva	
Tossicità ematologica		
Grado 0-2	Nessuna modifica	Nessuna modifica
Grado 3	Nessuna modifica	Riduzione di un livello di dose
Grado 4	Interruzione del trattamento fino al raggiungimento del grado 0-1	Riduzione di un livello di dose



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