The frequency of hepatitis D virus in patients with hepatitis B in Iran: an increasing rate?

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SUMMARY This study sought to determine the seroprevalence of the hepatitis D virus (HDV), the risk factors and its association with the severity of liver disease. Continuous patients at Tabriz and Tehran Hepatitis Clinics were enrolled during 2007–2008 in a cross-sectional study. Demographic data and possible risk factors for infection were recorded for all hepatitis B surface antigen positive patients. The blood samples of 847 patients infected with the hepatitis B virus were evaluated. The seroprevalence of HDV was 9.3%. This rate was significantly higher after reaching 40 years of age. The rate was 12.7% in patients with chronic hepatitis B and 4.7% in patients with in-active hepatitis B; the difference was statistically significant. A history of dental interventions and several trips abroad were good predictors of HDV infection in logistic regression. No significant difference in liver function tests was found. The seroprevalence of HDV was higher than in...
some other studies from Iran but a decrease was noted in younger age.

**Introduction**

The hepatitis D virus (HDV) was diagnosed in 1977 in patients with a more severe hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection. The chronicity following co-infection of HBV and HDV is associated with an increased risk of cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma. HDV infection has a worldwide but heterogeneous distribution. It is endemic in Middle Eastern countries but epidemiologic studies in Central Asian countries are limited. The prevalence of HDV infection in patients with chronic liver disease is reported to be as low as 2% in Yemen and up to 32.7% in Turkey. In Iran, this rate varies from 2.4% in blood donors to 10% in patients with chronic liver disease.4–5

The incidence and prevalence data are restricted due to inaccurate reporting and delayed detection. Despite the reported decline in the prevalence of both acute and chronic HDV infection in Southern Europe and Southeast Asia, a slow trend of increase has been obvious in studies from Iran over the years. Therefore, this multi-centre study was carried out in order to determine the seroprevalence of the HDV virus among a large sample of patients infected with HBV and to estimate the risk factors in Iran.

**Materials and methods**

A cross-sectional study was performed in two referral centres for liver diseases in Iran during 2007–2008. Research centres for liver and gastrointestinal diseases in the Tabriz and Baqiyatallah Medical Universities (in the northwest and the centre of Iran, respectively) register most of the patients with liver disease, including patients with various ethnic backgrounds such as Turkish, Kurdish and Fars patients. Socio-demographic data and potential risk factors were obtained by using a standardized questionnaire. The data of all patients were divided to ‘patients with chronic hepatitis’ and ‘inactive carriers’ by ultrasonography and/or histopathology and liver function tests.

Serum samples were collected from a total of 847 patients with chronic liver disease (mean age ± standard deviation: 38.9 ± 14.6 years) including those with chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis (n = 547) and inactive carriers (n = 300). Patients infected with the hepatitis C virus, with alcohol-induced liver disease or evidence of non-alcoholic steatohepatitis and on medication were excluded.

All serological tests were performed as instructed by the manufacturers (ELISA kit, DiaSorin, Italy, for the viral markers and Pars Amzoun, Iran, for the liver function tests). Fisher’s exact, chi-square and the Student’s t-test were used where appropriate. To assess the independent predictive role of the risk factors, multiple logistic regressions were carried out. P < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**Results**

Among the study population, patients with chronic hepatitis or cirrhosis (39.9 ± 15.3 years) were significantly older than inactive carriers (37.3 ± 13.1, P = 0.012).

Anti-HDV antibodies were detected in the serum samples of 79 patients: a prevalence rate of 9.3% for HDV/HBV infection was noted, predominantly in patients at the Tabriz Hepatitis Clinic (13.2% versus 7.7%, P = 0.012). This rate was significantly higher among patients with chronic hepatitis (12.7%) compared to inactive carriers (4.7%), but not statistically different between men and women. The examinations representing the function of the liver in the two groups (inactive and chronic hepatitis B) are described in Table 1. Despite patients having liver disease, the rate of HDV infection was significantly higher in those over 40 year of age (P = 0.025). It was 5% under 30 years, 7.2% in the third decade, 13.1% in the fourth decade, 13.7% in the fifth decade, 11.8% in the sixth decade and 12.2% in the seventh and over decades.

On a linear model for logistic regression, a history of dental treatment (P = 0.001) and several trips abroad (P = 0.014) were associated with infection with HDV. Surgical interventions, blood transfusion, needle sticks, tattooing, hajamut, extramarital sexual contacts, intravenous drug abuse, a family history of hepatitis, place of residence (rural/urban) and war injuries were not good predictors of infection with HDV in our hepatitis B surface antigen (HBs-Ag) positive patients.

**Discussion**

We investigated the distribution of HDV infection and the associated risk factors for its transmission in a large sample of HBs-Ag positive patients in Iran. The overall prevalence of seropositivity of anti-HDV was 9.3% and higher in comparison to some earlier studies. On the other hand, the significant decrease of infection which was observed in younger patients agrees with the decrease in rates of infection compatible with other parts of the world. The high
prevalence of HDV infection in this study compared with previous reports may be due to a better sample collection and may not necessarily be a true indication of an increasing rate of infection. The significant relation between the age of patients with a prevalence to infection in this study corresponds with cohorts who were infected decades ago but who survived acute HDV infection which correlates with studies from other countries.  

We believe that the widespread use of disposable needles for injections may be the main reasons for a decrease in the rate of HBV infection. HBV vaccination should ultimately control HDV in parallel. However, reducing risk behaviour is still a major preventive method because individuals chronically infected with HBV continue to be at risk of contracting HD.  

While co-infection of HBV and HDV usually results in a more severe disease, a superinfection of HDV can manifest as a severe acute hepatitis in previously asymptomatic HBV carriers. This almost always results in chronic infection with both viruses and, as a consequence, it may appear as a higher prevalence of HDV in chronic HB (compared to inactive carriers) in cross-sectional studies such as this. The high rate of HBV/HDV co-infection in our patients indicates a need for a close survey of potential adverse events.  

In the present study, dental intervention and several trips abroad were seen as good predictors for HDV infection. It is expected that some risk behaviors (e.g. intravenous drug use and extra marital sexual contact) are underestimated in retrospective and self-reported surveys according to the cultural and legal concerns of our population. Sufficient education about risk behaviors and explanation of being super-infected by HDV continue to be at risk of contracting HD.  

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Conclusion  
A decline in the prevalence of HBsAg carriers due to universal HBV vaccination, the improvement in socioeconomic conditions and changes in the behaviour of intravenous drug users, and in sexual practice, in response to HIV infection have probably contributed to the declining incidence of HDV infection in Iran as in the rest of the world.  

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References  

The incidence of selected congenital malformations during a two-year period in Tehran, Iran  

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SUMMARY  
In this descriptive cross-sectional study carried out from March 2005 to March 2007, 410 congenital malformations were recorded among 61,112 live births in