Review article: test and treat or test and scope for Helicobacter pylori infection. Any change in gastric cancer prevention?

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SUMMARY
A ‘test and treat’ strategy is advocated for patients with dyspepsia under the age of 45 years, with endoscopy reserved for those with alarm symptoms or aged over 45 years. One of the consequences of this strategy will be a reduction in population infection rates of Helicobacter pylori. It is now clear that H. pylori is one of the prime initiators of gastric cancer with up to 70% of gastric cancers attributable to H. pylori. What remains unclear is if H. pylori reduction will lead to a reduction in gastric cancer.

INTRODUCTION
A ‘test and treat’ strategy was recently recommended by the European Helicobacter Pylori Study Group, as the clinical approach of choice for patients under 45 years of age with dyspepsia, in the absence of alarm symptoms or a family history of gastric cancer. These guidelines imply that endoscopy can be avoided in most young patients with uncomplicated dyspepsia. A recent large study demonstrated that this approach led to a dramatic reduction in the use of endoscopy in ‘test and treat’ patients over a 1-year period.

Gastric cancer remains a major public health issue. It is the second leading cause of cancer death world-wide with approximately 1000 000 deaths per year. The exact prevalence of Helicobacter pylori infection in gastric cancer patients is difficult to estimate because evidence of the infection can be lost with the development of gastric precancerous lesions or gastric cancer. Studies suggest that up to three-quarters of gastric cancers are attributable to H. pylori infection. It now seems appropriate to ask whether a ‘test and treat’ strategy might help prevent gastric cancer. A ‘test and treat’ strategy for young patients with dyspepsia may result in significant reductions in population infection rates. An unexpected outcome of this strategy may be a reduction in gastric cancer rates. The impact of H. pylori eradication on prevention of gastric cancer is uncertain. While the link between H. pylori and gastric cancer development has been established the reversibility of precancerous lesions is still controversial. Studies assessing the effect of H. pylori eradication in gastric premalignant lesions are equivocal.

HELOCIBACTER PYLORI AND GASTRIC CANCER
In 1994 H. pylori infection was classified as a definite carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer. The role of H. pylori infection in the genesis of gastric cancer, however, is still controversial because there is a high population prevalence of infection yet less than 1% of infected subjects will develop gastric cancer.

In 12 studies analysed by the Helicobacter and Cancer Collaborative Group involving 1228 patients with gastric cancer and over 3000 controls an overall Odd’s ratio of 2.36 for the development of gastric cancer was found for those who were H. pylori positive. Between 65 and 80% of noncardia gastric cancer was attributable to H. pylori infection. This study also showed an association between the duration of infection and gastric cancer, with those known to be infected for more than
10 years having an Odd’s ratio of 9.6 for the development of gastric cancer compared with those with a shorter duration of infection.\textsuperscript{12} In 1994 Forman et al. summarized all available case studies and found an increased relative risk of 3.8 for development of gastric cancer in patients with \textit{H. pylori} infection.\textsuperscript{13} More recently, Uemura \textit{et al.} in a prospective study of 1526 patients showed that the risk of gastric cancer in \textit{H. pylori} infected patients was 5\% at 10 years. Of the 1526 patients, gastric cancer developed in 36 (2.9\%) of the 1246 patients with \textit{H. pylori} and in none of the 280 who were negative for infection.\textsuperscript{14}

Diagnostic tests including culture, immunohistochemistry, rapid urease test, urea breath test and detection of \textit{H. pylori} in the stool all rely on the actual presence of \textit{H. pylori}. These tests therefore may give a false negative result when \textit{H. pylori} density in the gastric mucosa is low, as occurs in gastric atrophy, intestinal metaplasia and gastric cancer.\textsuperscript{15, 16} Serological tests on the other hand detect evidence of both past and current infections.

**PATHOGENESIS OF GASTRIC CANCER**

It is hypothesized that \textit{H. pylori} infection provokes a step-wise progression in gastric-mucosal pathology commencing with active gastritis and progressing to gastric atrophy, intestinal metaplasia, dysplasia and eventually gastric adenocarcinoma.\textsuperscript{17–19} This pathway was initially proposed by Correa\textsuperscript{17} before the discovery of \textit{H. pylori} and over the past decade \textit{H. pylori} has become established as the prime initiator. It is still not clear if there is always a sequential progression or if some stages can proceed more directly to gastric cancer.

Almost all \textit{H. pylori} infected individuals develop chronic active gastritis that persists unless treated. Chronic gastritis is associated with excessive production of reactive oxygen metabolites and \textit{H. pylori} infection is also associated with decreased intragastric ascorbic acid levels, a critical antioxidant.\textsuperscript{20} \textit{H. pylori} causes increased mucosal proliferation.\textsuperscript{21, 22} Increased cell proliferation is associated with an increased risk of somatic mutations due to replication errors and inadequate DNA repair. Cell proliferation may also lead to selective growth advantage of mutated cells. \textit{H. pylori} also decreases apoptosis.\textsuperscript{23} The disturbed equilibrium of apoptosis and cell proliferation associated with \textit{H. pylori} infection may lead to an overall increase in cellular turnover and persistence of mutated cells, which may in turn favour the development of neoplasia.

The reasons why only a small minority of patients with \textit{H. pylori} develop gastric cancer may be related to differences in host susceptibility, environmental factors and genetic diversity of \textit{H. pylori}.

**HOST FACTORS**

Subjects with a family history of gastric cancer have a 1.5–3-fold increased risk of developing gastric cancer.\textsuperscript{24} This may be due to inherited factors. Interleukin-1beta is a potent pro-inflammatory cytokine and a powerful inhibitor of gastric acid secretion. Interleukin-1beta

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**Table 1. Non-invasive screening tools for \textit{H. pylori}**

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<tr>
<th>Screening for \textit{H. pylori}</th>
<th>Additional screening</th>
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<td>\textit{H. pylori} stool antigen</td>
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**Figure 1. Pathogenesis of gastric cancer.**
polymorphisms are associated with an increased risk of hypochlorhydria and of gastric cancer.\textsuperscript{25} Transforming growth factor beta controls cell growth, cell differentiation and migration. Increased expression of transforming growth factor beta has been demonstrated in patients with gastric cancer and in their first degree relatives.\textsuperscript{26} The HLA-DQA1 locus is another risk factor for gastric cancer with the absence of the haplotype DQA1*0102 being associated with an increased risk of atrophic gastritis and adenocarcinoma.\textsuperscript{27} Microsatellite instability is also reported in patients with a family history of gastric cancer.\textsuperscript{28} The apparent increased inherited risk of gastric cancer may, however, be due to intrafamilial clustering of \textit{H. pylori} infection, which is increased in relatives of gastric cancer patients.\textsuperscript{29}

**BACTERIAL FACTORS**

\textit{H. pylori} virulence associated genes are associated with an increased risk of gastric cancer. The \textit{Cag-A} gene increases cellular proliferation but not apoptosis,\textsuperscript{30} and \textit{Cag-A} positive \textit{H. pylori} infection has been reported to carry an increased risk of neoplasia compared with \textit{Cag-A} negative infection. Several studies have shown that \textit{Cag-A} positive \textit{H. pylori} strains are associated with higher degrees of acute and chronic inflammation.\textsuperscript{31–34} Parsonnet \textit{et al.} reported an Odd’s ratio for gastric cancer development of 3.3 for \textit{H. pylori} positive, \textit{Cag-A} positive strains vs. 2.2 for \textit{H. pylori} positive, \textit{Cag-A} negative strains.\textsuperscript{35} Interestingly Papa \textit{et al.} showed that \textit{CagA} positive infection is associated with increased production of reactive oxygen species in the gastric mucosa leading to severe oxidative DNA damage.\textsuperscript{36} The vacA and iceA genes are associated with an increased risk of gastric cancer.\textsuperscript{37, 38} Aside from these bacterial toxins, bacterial adherence factors such as the blood group antigen binding adhesion (babA) genes have recently been implicated in the development of gastric cancer.\textsuperscript{39}

Multiple molecular and genetic alterations have been identified in gastric cancer, including activated oncogenes, growth factors and growth factor receptors.\textsuperscript{40, 41} Inactivated tumour suppressor genes p53, APC and k-ras are seen in 30–40\%, 30\% and 8\% of gastric cancers, respectively.\textsuperscript{42–44} Reactivation of telomerases such that the cells do not undergo physiological senescence has been described.\textsuperscript{45} Other abnormalities seen in gastric cancer are up-regulation of transcription factors\textsuperscript{46} and mutations of the E-cadherin gene or hypermethylation of the E-cadherin promoter region thus blocking the expression of E-cadherin and so affecting cell adhesion.\textsuperscript{28, 47} Microsatellite instability due to hypermethylation, rather than mutation of the mismatch repair genes,\textsuperscript{48} has also been described in gastric cancer.

**H. PYLORI ERADICATION AND GASTRIC CANCER**

Although evidence for the role of \textit{H. pylori} in gastric carcinogenesis is compelling, it is not known whether eradication of infection might effectively prevent gastric cancer. There is conflicting evidence on the effect of \textit{H. pylori} eradication on gastric atrophy and intestinal metaplasia. Some studies of \textit{H. pylori} eradication have shown a beneficial effect on both lesions, whereas other studies have not observed any significant improvement.

Van der Hulst \textit{et al.} in an uncontrolled study of 155 patients followed up for 1 year after \textit{H. pylori} eradication revealed no change in gastric atrophy or in intestinal metaplasia.\textsuperscript{49} Forbes \textit{et al.} followed up 54 patients for 7 years, of whom 32 had successful \textit{H. pylori} eradication. There was no significant difference in gastric atrophy or in intestinal metaplasia between the two patient groups.\textsuperscript{50} Annibale \textit{et al.} successfully eradicated \textit{H. pylori} in 25 of 32 patients. After a year there was no improvement in gastric atrophy or intestinal metaplasia.\textsuperscript{51} In a large randomized controlled study Correa \textit{et al.} followed up 631 patients for 6 years. Patients were randomized to eight different treatments and only 79 received \textit{H. pylori} eradication. Intestinal metaplasia progressed at the same rate in both the placebo (23\%) and the eradicated group (17\%).\textsuperscript{52}

Ohkusa \textit{et al.} in an uncontrolled prospective trial, followed up 115 patients with dyspepsia and successful \textit{H. pylori} eradication over 12–15 months. Glandular atrophy improved in 34 of the 38 (89\%) affected patients and intestinal metaplasia improved in 21 of the 46 (61\%) affected patients.\textsuperscript{53} Sung \textit{et al.} undertook a large scale prospective placebo-controlled trial in which 226 patients with \textit{H. pylori} eradicated and 245 patients who remained infected with \textit{H. pylori} were followed up for 1 year. Over that time a slight regression of intestinal metaplasia in the antrum was seen in the \textit{H. pylori} negative group but this was not significant. Patients with persisting infection, however, had significant progression of corpus atrophy.\textsuperscript{54} Kokkola \textit{et al.} followed up 22 patients with \textit{H. pylori} infection and moderate or severe corpus gastric atrophy for 7.5 years.
and found no significant change in atrophy or intestinal metaplasia. \textit{H. pylori} was then eradicated in all 22 patients and after 2.5 years follow up there was a significant improvement in both atrophy and intestinal metaplasia.\textsuperscript{55} In a longer post-eradication follow up, Ito et al. in a study of 54 patients over 5 years, showed that \textit{H. pylori} eradication led to a significant decrease in both gastric atrophy and intestinal metaplasia in the corpus and antrum.\textsuperscript{56}

One reason for the apparent discrepancies in the impact of \textit{H. pylori} eradication on gastric atrophy or intestinal metaplasia may be the small numbers involved in most of the studies listed and the relatively short follow-up period. Those studies showing a significant improvement in gastric preneoplastic lesions following \textit{H. pylori} eradication had follow up for 2–5 years. The patchy distribution of both gastric atrophy and intestinal metaplasia may also jeopardize the reliability of endoscopic and biopsy-based follow-up studies.\textsuperscript{57}

**SCREENING FOR GASTRIC CANCER**

Fendrik et al. using a decision analysis model, have shown that the cost-effectiveness of \textit{H. pylori} screening strategies for gastric cancer depends on the cancer reduction rate. The strategy, however, remains cost-effective even at moderate rates (< 30%) of risk reduction.\textsuperscript{58}

Studies on \textit{H. pylori} and gastric cancer have shown Odd’s ratios for increased cancer risk varying from 2.2 to 6. This variation can be attributed to differences in the subjects enrolled, the prevalence of \textit{H. pylori} infection in the population and the method of detection used. The magnitude of Odd’s ratios is affected by the background prevalence of \textit{H. pylori}, so that where \textit{H. pylori} is highly prevalent the Odd’s ratio will be lowered although the incidence of cancer will be high.\textsuperscript{59} In addition, the diagnostic method used influences the apparent prevalence of \textit{H. pylori} infection and hence the Odd’s ratio of \textit{H. pylori} and gastric cancer will vary depending on the tests.\textsuperscript{60}

**SCREENING FOR \textit{H. PYLORI}**

The effectiveness of any screening programme is dependent on the accuracy and reliability of the screening tools used.

The urea breath test is considered the most accurate noninvasive method of diagnosing \textit{H. pylori} infection. Urea breath test results, expressed as the delta value, are affected by the density of \textit{H. pylori} infection and by the severity of atrophic gastritis. As a result urea breath test delta values in gastric cancer patients tend to be significantly lower than in patients with gastritis, duodenal ulcer or gastric ulcer.\textsuperscript{61} In addition the urea breath test is expensive and may not be readily available for population studies.

The HpSA test detects the presence of \textit{H. pylori} antigens in the stool, and similar to the urea breath test, the sensitivity of the HpSA test is affected by the density of \textit{H. pylori} infection. The sensitivity and specificity of the HpSA test is at least as good as the urea breath test\textsuperscript{62, 63} and the HpSA is less expensive than the urea breath test. One of its drawbacks is the acceptability of the test. A new stool test using monoclonal antibodies appears similar to the polyclonal HpSA.\textsuperscript{64}

Serological detection of IgG antibody against \textit{H. pylori} provides a reliable assessment of current or past \textit{H. pylori} infection. \textit{H. pylori} infection is usually lifelong therefore a positive test usually denotes active infection unless the patient has received eradication therapy. Serology testing for \textit{H. pylori} infection is sensitive and specific, approaching 95% in some studies. It is noteworthy that Cag A antibodies persist longer after \textit{H. pylori} eradication than surface antibodies and so studies that used Cag A antibodies, rather than \textit{H. pylori} surface antibodies, for diagnosis have raised the Odd’s ratio of \textit{H. pylori} leading to gastric cancer development from 2.0 to 21.\textsuperscript{5}

There are other serological tests that may prove helpful in predicting those who are at a higher risk of developing gastric cancer, including pepsinogen ratios, antiparietal cell antibodies and gastrin levels.

As atrophic gastritis becomes more extensive and severe normal gastric gland function is progressively diminished. Pepsinogen exists as two types, I and II, which are both produced by the chief and mucus neck cells in the gastric fundus. Pepsinogen II is also produced by the pyloric glands in the antrum and in the proximal duodenum. With gastritis and mild inflammation both Pepsinogen I and II are increased. With more severe atrophy Pepsinogen I decreases as the chief cells are destroyed but Pepsinogen II remains elevated. When measurement of serum Pepsinogen concentrations are used as a screening test for gastric cancer, they achieve a sensitivity of >80% and specificity of >70%.\textsuperscript{65}
Anti-parietal cell antibody is well known as an autoantibody in pernicious anaemia. Anti-parietal cell antibody is also an auto-antibody in *H. pylori* associated gastritis. The level of anti-parietal cell antibody expression is associated with the histological degree of atrophic gastritis and maybe useful in predicting those who will progress to gastric atrophy.56

Fundic atrophic gastritis leads to hypochlorhydria, which in turn leads to rebound hypergastrinaemia. Levels of serum gastrin have been used to screen for gastric cancer. In a recent case control study, Konturek et al. found elevated gastrin levels in 48% of gastric cancer patients compared with 8% of controls and found a significant correlation between the rise in serum gastrin and the rise in intragastric pH.67

TEST AND SCOPE

Endoscopy is a more expensive screening tool and not as well tolerated by patients. In a study of 169 patients diagnosed with gastric cancer under the age of 55 years, Gillen & Mc Coll showed that only five presented without alarm symptoms and that all five of these patients had evidence of metastasis at presentation.68 This study suggests that, in the absence of alarm symptoms, dyspeptic symptoms in patients less than 55 years may be an appropriate age cut-off for non-invasive testing.

Across Europe there is a wide variation in the national incidence of gastric cancer (per 100 000) with Portugal (31.9), Austria (21.6) and Italy (20.7) having the highest incidence and the lowest incidence in Denmark (8.9), France (10.3) and Sweden (10.6).69 In countries with a high prevalence of *H. pylori* infection where the incidence of gastric cancer is also high it may be necessary to recommend endoscopy at a younger age as suggested by Dzuba et al. who proposed screening with endoscopy in those over 30 years of age in Russia.70

One of the benefits of endoscopy is that it allows detection of precancerous lesions and also permits continued surveillance thereafter. Uemura et al. showed that among patients infected with *H. pylori*, those with severe gastric atrophy, intestinal metaplasia and corpus predominant gastritis were at the highest risk of developing gastric cancer.14 Whiting et al. have recently shown, in a study of 1753 patients attending for open access endoscopy where 166 patients were subsequently selected to undergo annual endoscopic surveillance, that the risk of malignancy was 11% in those patients who had atrophic gastritis or intestinal metaplasia at their initial endoscopy. Furthermore annual endoscopic surveillance allows the detection of most new cancers at an early stage with improvement in the 5-year survival from 10% to 50%.71

RECOMMENDATIONS

Current European guidelines suggest that in areas of low prevalence of *H. pylori* infection, and in the absence of alarm symptoms or a family history of gastric cancer, a ‘test and treat’ approach is suitable for patients aged <45 years. In areas of high prevalence of *H. pylori* the age cut-off for endoscopy may need to be reduced to minimize the risk of missing early gastric cancer.

*H. pylori* infection is a major public health issue and gastric cancer remains an important disease with a high mortality once diagnosed. Widespread population screening and eradication of *H. pylori* may have the potential to reduce the incidence of gastric cancer but further large scale studies are warranted to answer this question. Targeted screening and eradication of *H. pylori* infection, apart from alleviation of dyspepsia may have other beneficial effects and should be promoted as an important public health issue.

REFERENCES


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