Liver-related Events in Human Immunodeficiency Virus–infected Persons With Occult Cirrhosis

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Background. Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)–infected patients are at increased risk of liver-related mortality. The effect of occult cirrhosis (OcC), defined as preclinical compensated cirrhosis without any clinical findings, on liver-related events is unknown.

Methods. HIV-infected patients from 2 Canadian cohorts underwent transient elastography (TE) examination and were classified as (1) OcC (TE ≥ 13 kPa with no sign of cirrhosis, including absence of thrombocytopenia and signs of advanced liver disease on ultrasound or gastroscopy); (2) overt cirrhosis (OvC) (TE ≥ 13 kPa with signs of cirrhosis); or (3) noncirrhotic patients (TE < 13 kPa). Incidence and risk factors of liver-related events were investigated through Kaplan-Meier and Cox regression analyses, respectively. We estimated monitoring rates according to screening guidelines for hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) by OcC and OvC status.

Results. A total of 1092 HIV-infected patients (51% coinfecting with hepatitis C virus) were included. Prevalence of OcC and OvC at baseline was 2.7% and 10.7%, respectively. During a median follow-up of 1.8 (interquartile range, 1.5–2.8) years, the incidence of liver-related events in noncirrhosis, OcC, and OvC was 3.4 (95% confidence interval [CI], 1.2–7.3), 34.0 (95% CI, 6.0–104.0), and 37.0 (95% CI, 17.0–69.1) per 1000 person-years, respectively. Baseline OcC (adjusted hazard ratio [aHR], 7.1 [95% CI, 1.3–38.0]) and OvC (aHR, 8.5 [95% CI, 2.8–26.0]) were independently associated with liver-related events. Monitoring rates for HCC were lower in patients with OcC (24%) compared to those with OvC (40%).

Conclusions. HIV-infected patients with OcC have a high incidence of liver-related events. Greater surveillance and earlier recognition with appropriate screening strategies are necessary for improved outcomes.

Keywords. HIV; occult cirrhosis; transient elastography; liver-related events; HCC surveillance.

Liver disease is the leading cause of non-AIDS-related deaths in people living with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) [1]. HIV-infected individuals have multiple risk factors for liver injury, including coinfections with hepatitis C (HCV) and hepatitis B (HBV) viruses, metabolic conditions triggering nonalcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD), excessive alcohol intake, and antiretroviral therapy (ART) inducing hepatotoxicity [2, 3]. This hypothetical multihit process can then lead to cirrhosis, hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), and complications associated with end-stage liver disease (ESLD) such as ascites, hepatic encephalopathy, and variceal bleeding [4]. Up to 63% of patients with liver disease are diagnosed with liver cirrhosis only at the first episode of hepatic decompensation [5]. Therefore, identifying patients with underlying liver cirrhosis is critical as

surveillance for HCC and esophageal varices can be promptly initiated [6].

A major obstacle to the diagnosis of cirrhosis at the preclinical stage, also known as occult cirrhosis (OcC), is the lack of any clinical, laboratory, and imaging findings. Patients with OcC do not have thrombocytopenia and have no features consistent with cirrhosis on imaging. Nonetheless, OcC is identified in up to 12% of patients referred for transient elastography (TE) examination and accounts for up to 37% of all cirrhosis cases [7, 8]. HIV-negative patients with OcC are at risk of developing ESLD events, but they receive suboptimal surveillance for HCC when compared to patients with clinically overt cirrhosis (OvC) [7–9].

Liver biopsy is the gold standard for the diagnosis of liver cirrhosis, but it is invasive and prone to sampling errors leading to the misdiagnosis of cirrhosis [10–12]. As such, it is impractical as a screening tool or for the follow-up of HIV-infected patients, where the prevalence of liver disease is high [13]. The measurement of liver stiffness (LSM) by TE is a validated noninvasive method to diagnose liver cirrhosis, with a reported area under the curve of 0.94 [14]. TE is superior to simple fibrosis biomarkers, including the aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio

Received 27 August 2018; editorial decision 10 December 2018; accepted 14 December 2018; published online December 18, 2018.

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Clinical Infectious Diseases® 2019;69(8):1422–30

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index (APRI) and the Fibrosis-4 Index for Liver Fibrosis score (FIB-4), in HIV-infected patients [15–17].

Thus far, the prevalence of OcC in HIV-infected patients and its impact on incident liver-related events has not been reported. We used data from 2 large clinical Canadian cohorts to fulfill the following aims: (1) determine the prevalence and associated factors of OcC diagnosed by TE; (2) evaluate the incidence of liver-related events in patients with OcC; and (3) investigate monitoring rates, according to guidelines, for screening of HCC in patients with OcC.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

Study Design and Population

We conducted a retrospective analysis of the Canadian Coinfection Cohort (CCC) and the LIVER disease in HIV (LIVEHIV) studies [18, 19]. The CCC is a prospective cohort of patients coinfecting with HIV and HCV enrolled at 18 centers across Canada where they are followed up every 6 months since 2003. Centers participating in the FibroScan substudy assessed LSM by TE examination every 6 months. The LIVEHIV Cohort is a prospective screening program for NAFLD and liver fibrosis established in 2013 at McGill University Health Centre (MUHC), Montreal, Canada. All patients underwent screening for liver disease with yearly TE examination.

Ethics

All participants provided informed written consent. The research ethics board of the Research Institute of MUHC approved the study (codes 14-182-BMD and 2006-1875), which was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Eligibility

All consecutive HIV-infected adults aged ≥ 18 years were eligible. Patients in the CCC who were enrolled in centers not participating in the FibroScan substudy were excluded. Patients with failure of TE examination or unreliable LSM were also excluded.

Clinical and Biological Parameters

Data collected included demographic information, HIV and medication history, body mass index (BMI), history of type 2 diabetes mellitus [20], liver biochemistries, and hematological and virological parameters. Alcohol intake was measured by the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C) questionnaire, with a score ≥ 4 for men and ≥ 3 for women considered as hazardous alcohol intake [21]. The following fibrosis biomarkers were computed: APRI (with a cutoff value ≥ 2 suggesting liver cirrhosis) and FIB-4 (with a cutoff value ≥ 3.25 suggesting advanced liver fibrosis) [17, 22]. Results of abdominal imaging and gastroscopies were recorded.

TE Examination

The TE examination was performed in patients fasting for at least 3 hours. The standard M probe was used in all patients. The XL probe was used in cases of failure of TE with the M probe or if the BMI was $>30 \text{ kg/m}^2$. The following criteria were applied to define the result of TE as reliable: at least 10 validated LSM and an interquartile range (IQR) $<30\%$ of the median LSM [23]. Hepatic steatosis measurement by controlled attenuation parameter was available in the LIVEHIV Cohort. Any grade hepatic steatosis ($>5\%$ of hepatocytes) was defined as controlled attenuation parameter ≥ 288 decibels per meter [24].

Definition of Study Groups

Patients were divided into 4 mutually exclusive subgroups. Patients with OcC had LSM $\geq 13 \text{ kPa}$ (10.1 kPa with the XL probe [25]) and no evidence of advanced liver disease or portal hypertension—namely, absence of thrombocytopenia ($<140 \times 10^9/\text{L}$), cirrhosis on abdominal imaging (liver nodularity, enlarged caudate lobe, splenomegaly $\geq 14 \text{ cm}$), esophageal varices or hypertensive portal gastropathy on gastroscopy, and ascites. Patients with OvC had LSM $\geq 13 \text{ kPa}$ with evidence of advanced liver disease or portal hypertension, as listed above. Patients classified as noncirrhotic had LSM $<13 \text{ kPa}$ and no evidence of advanced liver disease or portal hypertension. Finally, patients classified as noncirrhotic portal hypertension had LSM $<13 \text{ kPa}$ and evidence of advanced liver disease or portal hypertension. The 13-kPa cutoff has been chosen based on a meta-analysis [14].

Outcome Measures

Liver-related events were prospectively collected by means of a dedicated outcome measures form. Liver-related events included occurrence of de novo ascites, variceal bleeding or banding, spontaneous bacterial peritonitis, hepatorenal syndrome, hepatic encephalopathy, HCC, liver transplantation, and death from liver-related causes. Screening interval for HCC was defined as receiving abdominal imaging at least every 12 months during the study period [26, 27].

Follow-up

Patients were followed from their first TE examination (baseline, or time zero) until they had a liver-related event, died, withdrew consent, were lost to follow-up (no visits for more than 1.5 years), or until administrative censoring (31 March 2017 for the CCC and 14 January 2017 for the LIVEHIV Cohort). Non-liver-related deaths were censored. The decision to initiate surveillance for HCC was left to the treating physician.

Statistical Analysis

Cross-sectional Component

The period prevalence was reported as the ratio of the total number of prevalent and incident cases to the total number of

patients included in the study. The associations between various risk factors at inclusion and prevalent or incident OcC—among patients at risk for OcC—were assessed using a cross-sectional approach with unadjusted and adjusted logistic regression models. We reported results as adjusted odds ratios. Due to the cross-sectional nature of any such measured associations, we made no causal claims from these analyses.

Longitudinal Component

Kaplan-Meier plots were used to show the cumulative incidences over time, as stratified by study group and coinfection status, using the log-rank test to test for differences between groups. The association between various risk factors and the incidence of de novo liver-related events were assessed with unadjusted and adjusted Cox proportional hazards models. Results were reported as adjusted hazard ratios with 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Finally, as an exploratory analysis, the proportion of patients—among those at risk for HCC—with adequate cirrhosis surveillance were reported descriptively and stratified by study group. The same analysis was stratified by source cohort and by HCV coinfection status. A 2-sided level of significance of 5% was used for all statistical inferences.

Covariates

All adjusted regression models included covariates that were determined a priori to be clinically important; this list was further restricted due to limited event counts. The following baseline covariates were chosen: age, sex, aboriginal ethnicity, hazardous alcohol intake in past year, BMI, diabetes in past year, lipid-lowering therapy in the past year, nadir CD4 cell count, detectable HIV RNA in the past year, HCV RNA positive, HIV duration, and ART duration. Where multiple models were estimated for the same outcome, the model with the best goodness-to-fit measure, based on the Akaike information criterion, was chosen.

RESULTS

After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 1092 HIV-infected individuals were included, of whom 499 were HIV monoinfected, 556 were HIV/HCV coinfecting, and 37 were HIV/HBV coinfecting (Figure 1). Failed or unreliable LSM comprised 7.0% of patients from the CCC and 5.8% of patients from the LIVEHIV Cohort.

Prevalence, Incidence, and Factors Associated With Occult Cirrhosis

OcC and OvC represented 2.7% and 10.7% of our study population, respectively. OcC patients represented 19.9% of all patients with cirrhosis. The main characteristics by study group status at baseline are presented in Table 1. Figure 2 and Supplementary Table 1 report the distribution of study groups and the main characteristics by HCV and HBV coinfection status, respectively. The prevalence of OcC increased during the study period

Figure 1. Flowchart displaying the selection of study participants, stratified by study cohort. ^aAdministrative censoring was applied on 31 March 2017 for the CCC and on 14 January 2017 for the LIVE HIV Cohort. ^bLiver stiffness measurements by transient elastography were considered reliable if the ratio of the interquartile range over the median of the 10 measures was no more than 30%. Abbreviations: CCC, Canadian Coinfection Cohort; LIVEHIV, LIVEr disease in HIV study.

with 14 new cases, for an overall pooled period prevalence of 3.9%. Furthermore, over a median follow-up time of 1.8 (IQR, 1.5–2.8) years, the incidence rate of OcC was 10.0 (95% CI, 5.7–16.3) per 1000 person-years (PY). HIV-monoinfected patients showed similar incidence of OcC compared with HCV-coinfecting patients. Conversely, those coinfecting with HCV were more likely to develop OvC during follow-up compared to monoinfected patients (Figure 3A and 3B). Logistic regression identified HIV duration as an independent factor associated with the presence of OcC as compared to noncirrhotic patients (adjusted odds ratio, 1.44 [95% CI, 1.18–1.77]; Table 2). We also observed a tendency for higher BMI to be a factor associated with OcC.

Incidence and Risk Factors of Liver-related Events

The overall incidence of liver-related events was 8.6 (95% CI, 4.9–14.0) per 1000 PY, mainly driven by the occurrence of de novo ascites and HCC (Table 3). The incidence rate of liver-related events was similar between patients with OcC and OvC (Table 3; Figure 3C). Conversely, noncirrhotic patients had

Table 1. Patient Characteristics at Baseline by Study Group Status (N = 1092)

Characteristic	Noncirrhotic (n = 795)	Occult Cirrhosis (n = 29)	Overt Cirrhosis (n = 117)	Noncirrhotic Portal Hypertension (n = 151)	P Value
Follow-up time, y	1.53 (1.44–2.60)	2.62 (1.50–2.96)	2.48 (1.55–3.09)	2.36 (1.50–2.96)	<.001
Age, y	48.7 (40.7–54.8)	50.5 (45.2–54.8)	52.6 (48.1–57.5)	51.5 (45.6–56.6)	<.001
Female sex	206 (26)	8 (28)	25 (21)	37 (25)	.742
MSM	258 (32)	14 (48)	51 (44)	54 (36)	.04
Ethnicity					
White	339 (43)	15 (52)	88 (75)	97 (64)	<.001
Black	166 (21)	3 (10)	9 (8)	15 (10)	<.001
Latino	58 (7)	1 (3)	0	6 (4)	.01
Asian	20 (3)	3 (10)	3 (3)	3 (2)	.073
Indigenous	125 (16)	5 (17)	12 (10)	17 (11)	.251
Unknown	93 (12)	3 (10)	5 (4)	15 (10)	.111
BMI, kg/m ²	25.1 (22.7–28.4)	26.8 (24.1–30.7)	25.2 (22.1–27.5)	24.3 (21.0–26.8)	.005
Obesity (BMI >30 kg/m ²)	106 (13)	6 (21)	15 (13)	12 (8)	.17
Hazardous alcohol intake	104 (13)	4 (14)	23 (20)	33 (22)	.02
Active tobacco smoker	266 (33)	11 (38)	62 (53)	80 (53)	<.001
Active IDU	197 (25)	5 (17)	44 (38)	64 (42)	<.001
HIV duration, y	11 (6–19)	19 (14–26)	19 (12–24)	16 (9–22)	<.001
CD4 nadir, cells/μL	209 (99–350)	121 (28–290)	153 (89–277)	180 (105–302)	.039
CD4 cell count, cells/μL	514 (340–720)	526 (416–673)	406 (272–606)	536 (367–719)	.004
HIV viral load, units, log ₁₀	1.59 (1.59–1.63)	1.59 (1.59–1.60)	1.59 (1.59–1.59)	1.59 (1.59–1.59)	.434
Undetectable HIV viral load (≤50 copies/mL)	590 (74)	22 (76)	90 (77)	118 (78)	.949
Duration of ART, y	7.2 (3.2–12.9)	11.4 (4.6–15.8)	11.1 (5.9–17.2)	9.0 (4.8–16.2)	<.001
Current ART used	655 (82)	20 (69)	103 (88)	134 (89)	.019
NRTI	617 (78)	19 (66)	97 (83)	123 (81)	.147
NNRTI	212 (27)	6 (21)	30 (26)	31 (21)	.410
PI	329 (41)	10 (34)	49 (42)	71 (47)	.501
Integrase inhibitors	237 (30)	8 (28)	44 (38)	59 (39)	.066
Other	59 (7)	1 (3)	7 (6)	11 (7)	.818
Exposure to didanosine, y, mean ± SD	0.26 ± 1.58	0.32 ± 1.17	0.26 ± 1.55	0.37 ± 1.49	.648
Exposure to stavudine, y, mean ± SD	0.56 ± 1.95	0.29 ± 0.95	0.23 ± 1.09	0.69 ± 2.26	.266
HCV coinfection	337 (42)	18 (62)	99 (85)	102 (68)	<.001
HBsAg positive	16 (2)	1 (3)	6 (5)	14 (9)	<.001
Hypertension	125 (16)	9 (31)	25 (21)	24 (16)	.082
Diabetes	145 (18)	7 (24)	27 (23)	31 (21)	.526
INR	1.00 (0.93–1.03)	1.02 (1.00–1.13)	1.09 (1.00–1.15)	1.00 (0.98–1.07)	<.001
Platelets, 10 ⁹ /L	212 (182–259)	208 (171–241)	130 (98.8–189)	133 (113–180)	<.001
Total cholesterol, mmol/L	4.5 (3.8–5.2)	3.8 (3.5–4.5)	3.9 (3.1–4.4)	4.1 (3.6–4.9)	<.001
LDLC, mmol/L	2.6 (2.0–3.2)	1.7 (1.2–2.7)	2.0 (1.5–2.5)	2.3 (1.8–2.8)	<.001
HDL-C, mmol/L	1.2 (1.0–1.4)	0.9 (0.7–1.2)	1.1 (0.9–1.3)	1.1 (0.9–1.3)	<.001
Triglycerides, mmol/L	1.3 (0.9–2.0)	1.7 (1.1–2.5)	1.3 (0.9–1.7)	1.3 (0.9–2.1)	.300
Creatinine, μmol/L	80 (68–93)	78.0 (66.0–104)	82.5 (68.8–94.8)	77 (68–89)	.794
Insulin, pmol/L	75 (47–137)	148 (112–262)	92 (60–190)	66 (42–145)	<.001
ALT, IU/L	29 (20–47)	41 (29–84)	45 (29–79)	33 (20–52)	<.001
AST, IU/L	28 (21–39)	46 (29–55.2)	51 (32–80)	32 (23–48)	<.001
Total bilirubin, μmol/L	10 (7–15)	12 (9.35–18.5)	14 (9–20.1)	11 (8–17)	<.001
Albumin, g/L	41 (39–44)	41 (37–44)	40.5 (36.2–43)	42 (39–45)	.007
APRI ≥2	13 (2)	4 (14)	33 (28)	10 (7)	<.001
FIB-4 ≥3.25	16 (2)	4 (14)	47 (40)	27 (18)	<.001
CAP, dB/m	228 (192–259)	248 (212–292)	208 (172–237)	218 (174–259)	.006
CAP ≥288	82/558 (15)	6/22 (27)	5/56 (9)	16/97 (16)	.217

Continuous variables are expressed as median (interquartile range) and categorical variables are expressed as frequencies (%), unless otherwise specified. For the 3-way comparison of patients with no cirrhosis, occult cirrhosis, or overt cirrhosis, *P* values were computed using Fisher exact test for dichotomous variables, χ^2 test for categorical variables, and a Kruskal-Wallis test for continuous variables, and are considered significant when <.05. CAP was available in 733 of 1092 patients.

Abbreviations: ALT, alanine aminotransferase; APRI, aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio index; ART, antiretroviral therapy; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; BMI, body mass index; CAP, controlled attenuation parameter; FIB-4, Fibrosis-4 Index for Liver Fibrosis score; HBsAg, hepatitis B surface antigen; HCV, hepatitis C virus; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; HDL-C, high-density lipoprotein cholesterol; IDU, injection drug use; INR, international normalized ratio; LDLC, low-density lipoprotein cholesterol; MSM, men who have sex with men; NNRTI, nonnucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor; NRTI, nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor; PI, protease inhibitor; SD, standard deviation.

Figure 2. Distribution of study groups according to hepatitis C virus and hepatitis B virus coinfection status. Abbreviations: HBV, hepatitis B virus; HCV, hepatitis C virus; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; OcC, occult cirrhosis; OvC, overt cirrhosis.

Figure 3. Survival curves. *A*, Incidence of occult cirrhosis by hepatitis C virus (HCV) coinfection status. *B*, Incidence of overt cirrhosis by HCV coinfection status. *C*, Probability of liver-related events by study group category. *D*, Probability of liver-related events by HCV coinfection category. Log-rank *P* values are shown. Abbreviation: HIV, human immunodeficiency virus.

Table 2. Factors Associated With Occult Cirrhosis by Logistic Regression Analysis

Variable	OR (95% CI)	Model 1 aOR (95% CI)	Model 2 aOR (95% CI)
Age (per 10 years)	1.36 (.99–1.88)	1.45 (1.03–2.06)	...
Female sex (yes vs no)	0.97 (.42–2.03)	1.07 (.46–2.28)	1.19 (.51–2.57)
Indigenous ethnicity (yes vs no)	0.51 (.12–1.46)	...	...
Hazardous alcohol intake in past year (yes vs no)	1.04 (.35–2.51)	...	...
BMI (per 5 units)	1.19 (.9–1.5)	1.20 (.92–1.52)	1.25 (.95–1.58)
Diabetes in past year (yes vs no)	1.67 (.73–3.52)	...	...
Lipid-lowering therapy in past year (yes vs no)	1.12 (.41–2.57)	...	...
Nadir CD4 count (per 100 cells)	0.94 (.77–1.12)	...	...
Detectable HIV RNA in past year (yes vs no)	0.69 (.2–1.79)	...	...
HCV coinfection (yes vs no)	1.21 (.61–2.36)	1.46 (.72–2.94)	1.30 (.65–2.56)
HIV duration (per 5 years)	1.39 (1.15–1.69)	...	1.44 (1.18–1.77)
ART duration (per 5 years)	1.14 (.88–1.47)	...	...
AIC	...	296.55	288.33

Occult cirrhosis patients (n = 29) are compared to noncirrhotic patients (n = 795).

Abbreviations: AIC, Akaike information criterion; aOR, adjusted odds ratio; ART, antiretroviral therapy; BMI, body mass index; CI, confidence interval; HCV, hepatitis C virus; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; OR, odds ratio.

a very low incidence of liver-related events, whereas patients with noncirrhotic portal hypertension had an intermediate incidence. HCV coinfection showed a tendency to be associated with an increased incidence of liver-related events (Figure 3D). The presence of OcC and OvC at baseline, as well as longer HIV duration, were independent risk factors for liver-related events, with adjusted hazard ratios of 7.12 (95% CI, 1.33–37.99), 8.5 (95% CI, 2.83–25.53), and 1.37 (95% CI, 1.09–1.73), respectively (Table 4).

Surveillance for HCC

Patients with OcC received 0.70 (95% CI, .51–.92) abdominal imaging visits per PY, compared to 0.87 (95% CI, .76–.98) for those with OvC. Furthermore, the monitoring rate of HCC according to screening guidelines [26, 27] was 24% (95% CI, 10%–44%) and 40% (95% CI, 30%–49%) in those with OcC and OvC, respectively ($P = .06$; Supplementary Table 2). In patients with at least 1 HCC screening imaging, the annual rate of imaging was 0.97 (95% CI, .72–1.28) and 1.33 (95% CI, 1.16–1.51) per patient in those with OcC and OvC, respectively. One patient (HIV/HBV coinfecting) with OcC developed HCC during the follow-up, accounting for an incidence of 15 per 1000 PY. At diagnosis, there were 2 lesions consistent with HCC, with the largest one measuring 6 cm and the smaller one 3 cm. This tumor was beyond any transplant criteria, including Milan criteria, total tumor volume, up-to-7 criteria, and University of California, San Francisco criteria [28]. The patient was offered transarterial chemoembolization and Sorafenib but declined. He died 7.8 months after the diagnosis. In the OvC group, the 3 patients who developed HCC were HIV/HCV coinfecting and were diagnosed at an earlier stage (single lesion ranging from 1.7 to 3.2 cm). They were offered transarterial chemoembolization (n = 1) or liver transplant (n = 2) and are still alive.

DISCUSSION

In this well-characterized clinical cohort, we showed that OcC is a frequent occurrence, representing nearly 20% of all patients with liver cirrhosis in HIV-infected individuals. We also showed that liver-related events had similar incidence rates in HIV-infected patients with OcC and OvC, rendering it essential for the HIV clinician to be aware of this clinical entity. Finally, patients with OcC do not receive screening at recommended intervals for detection of important ESLD complications, specifically HCC, which may result in a late diagnosis.

Until recently, the description of a liver as “cirrhotic” was sufficient to define patients’ prognosis. Garcia-Tsao et al suggested that cirrhosis is rather a dynamic condition encompassing a more complex clinicopathological spectrum [29]. Given the lack of any clinical sign, patients at the preclinical stage of compensated cirrhosis represent a diagnostic challenge for clinicians, and often remain undiagnosed. The diagnosis of OcC based on LSM and the absence of clinical signs has previously been shown, in different patient populations, to be an indicator of poor prognosis [7, 9]. Individuals living with HIV are known to be at increased risk of liver cirrhosis and ESLD [1]. Our study is the first to report on the prevalence of OcC and its impact on liver-related events in HIV-infected patients.

In our large combined cohort of 1092 HIV-infected patients, OcC was found in 2.7% of cases, a prevalence similar to that reported in other populations [7, 9]. Although seemingly comprising only a small proportion of patients at baseline TE, the prevalence of OcC increased to 3.9% during the follow-up period, with an annual incidence rate of 10 per 1000 PY. These changes in LSM may herald a poor prognosis, as reported in other patient populations [30–32].

Table 3. Incidence Rate of Liver-related Events During Follow-up

Event	Noncirrhotic (n = 795)		Occult Cirrhosis (n = 29)		Overt Cirrhosis (n = 117)		Noncirrhotic Portal Hypertension (n = 151)	
	Cases	Incidence rate (95% CI)	Cases	Incidence rate (95% CI)	Cases	Incidence rate (95% CI)	Cases	Incidence rate (95% CI)
Any liver event	5	3.4 (1.2–7.3)	2	34.0 (6.0–104.0)	8	37.0 (17.0–69.1)	4	12.7 (3.94–29.5)
Ascites	1	0.68 (0.4–2.97)	2	33.34 (5.54–102.89)	5	21.48 (7.7–46.16)	3	9.51 (2.37–24.66)
Varices with bleeding or banding	2	1.35 (0.22–4.16)	0	...	0	...	1	3.08 (1.18–13.55)
Spontaneous bacterial peritonitis	1	0.67 (0.4–2.96)	0	...	1	3.83 (2.2–16.85)	0	...
Hepatic encephalopathy	0	...	0	...	3	11.56 (2.87–29.97)	0	...
Hepatorenal syndrome	0	...	0	...	1	3.71 (2.1–16.32)	0	...
HCC	1	0.67 (0.4–2.96)	1	15.49 (8.8–68.13)	3	11.61 (2.89–30.08)	1	3.08 (1.18–13.55)
ESLD-related death	0	...	1	15.33 (8.7–67.44)	1	3.71 (2.1–16.31)	0	...

Incidence rates are presented as 1000 person-years.

Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; ESLD, end-stage liver disease; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma.

Table 4. Risk Factors Associated With Any Liver Event by Cox Proportional Hazards Regression Analysis

Variable	HR (95% CI)	aHR (95% CI)
Occult cirrhosis at baseline (yes vs no)	4.45 (.96–20.62)	7.12 (1.33–37.99)
Overt cirrhosis at baseline (yes vs no)	8.49 (3.03–23.75)	8.5 (2.83–25.53)
Age (per year)	1.04 (1.01–1.07)	...
Female sex (yes vs no)	0.79 (.22–2.78)	...
Hazardous alcohol intake in the past year (yes vs no)	2.97 (1.05–8.39)	...
BMI ≥ 30 kg/m ² in past year (yes vs no)	0.95 (.22–4.17)	...
Diabetes in past year (yes vs no)	1.92 (.61–5.98)	...
Lipid-lowering therapy in past year (yes vs no)	0.46 (.06–3.47)	...
Nadir CD4 count (per 100 cells)	0.79 (.59–1.06)	...
Detectable HIV RNA in past year (yes vs no)	1.71 (.54–5.38)	1.55 (.51–4.67)
HCV coinfection (yes vs no)	1.83 (.65–5.18)	...
HIV duration (per 5 years)	1.55 (1.23–1.96)	1.37 (1.09–1.73)
ART duration (per 5 years)	1.63 (1.14–2.32)	...

Abbreviations: aHR, adjusted hazard ratio; ART, antiretroviral therapy; BMI, body mass index; CI, confidence interval; HCV, hepatitis C virus; HIV, human immunodeficiency virus; HR, hazard ratio.

The only independent factor associated with OcC at baseline vs noncirrhotic subgroup was longer duration of HIV infection, which is a proxy for exposure to multiple hepatotoxic hits [18]. Interestingly, HCV coinfection was not associated with an increased prevalence or incidence of OcC, but rather with the development of OvC. This could be explained by either a faster progression of HCV-coinfected patients from earlier stage of liver disease to OvC [33] or because they are more frequently monitored with TE, and thus diagnosed more often. Higher BMI had a trend in being an independent risk factor for OcC, thus confirming the emerging concern around NAFLD in HIV-infected patients [18, 34]. Accordingly, hepatic steatosis diagnosed by controlled attenuation parameter had the highest frequency in the OcC group (27%). Taken together, our findings suggest that clinicians should suspect OcC in patients with longer HIV infection and higher BMI even in the absence of any sign of liver cirrhosis. Moreover, screening for liver cirrhosis should not be limited to HIV patients coinfecting with HCV, as multiple risk factors may still be driving progressive liver fibrosis and we would miss important opportunities to prevent liver decompensation.

Patients with OcC were more likely to develop a liver-related event when compared to patients without cirrhosis, with a 10 times higher incidence rate. On the other hand, the incidence of a liver-related event was similar between those with OcC and OvC. Our findings are similar to a previous study by Merchante and colleagues where patients with cirrhosis had an incidence of hepatic decompensation of 46 per 1000 PY [32]. Similarly, Macías et al reported that patients with LSM <14.6 kPa have a lower risk of decompensation [35]. However, these studies did not differentiate between patients with and without clinical evidence of liver cirrhosis. Furthermore, they only

included HIV/HCV-coinfected cases, so information about dynamics and evolution of OcC in HIV-monoinfected patients was missing. In our study, the diagnosis of OcC at baseline was independently associated with the development of liver-related events. These findings underline that HIV-infected patients with OcC, whether or not HCV coinfecting, constitute a group of patients beyond the traditional subset of patients with OvC, who are at high-risk of liver-related events.

Despite a high incidence of liver-related events, our cohort study shows that HIV-infected patients with OcC appear to be less frequently monitored with abdominal ultrasounds when compared to those with OvC. Guidelines advocate regular screening ultrasounds for HCC in patients with a known diagnosis of cirrhosis and in HBV/HIV-coinfected patients. Adherence to HCC screening guidelines remains low in HIV-infected patients, with reported rates between 20% and 35% [36, 37]. Underrecognition of cirrhosis at its preclinical stage, lack of awareness of liver-related complications, and potential patient-related factors may explain this low adherence [36]. Importantly, HIV-infected patients with HCC have a shorter expected survival when compared to HIV-negative patients [38, 39]. Our findings suggest that HIV-infected patients should be screened for OcC with noninvasive diagnostic tools, such as TE, and that those with OcC should be considered for HCC surveillance.

Our study has several strengths. To our knowledge, it is the first study characterizing risk factors and dynamics of liver cirrhosis in its preclinical stage in HIV-infected patients. It relies on 2 prospectively maintained large cohorts of consecutive individuals living with HIV. We employed an accurate and validated noninvasive tool to diagnose liver cirrhosis [13, 40]. We also acknowledge several limitations of our study. First, although we included a large number of patients, the follow-up period was relatively short. We observed a limited number of clinical outcomes and thus our estimates of incidence rates are imprecise. However, our findings showed that OcC patients behave as those with OvC in cases of HIV infection. Second, because a cross-sectional approach was used to determine factors associated with OcC, no inferential conclusions can be derived. However, these associated factors could help identify who might be prioritized for screening. Third, we did not have data about the indication for ultrasound, which could have been performed for reasons other than HCC screening. Fourth, there is a potential for competing risk from death from other causes. Fifth, liver biopsy was not available in our study. However, we validated our findings longitudinally by demonstrating that the OcC group had worse clinical outcomes than the noncirrhotic group. Using liver biopsy in our cohort of >1000 patients would not have been feasible.

In conclusion, OcC accounts for 1 in 5 cases of cirrhosis in HIV-infected patients. These patients, whether HCV coinfecting or not, constitute a high-risk group prone to liver-related events. We advocate that HIV-infected patients with OcC

should receive surveillance for HCC to the same degree as patients with OvC. Screening for cirrhosis with point-of-care noninvasive diagnostic tools, such as TE, should be considered in HIV-infected patients, especially in case of long duration of HIV infection and higher BMI.

Supplementary Data

Supplementary materials are available at *Clinical Infectious Diseases* online. Consisting of data provided by the authors to benefit the reader, the posted materials are not copyedited and are the sole responsibility of the authors, so questions or comments should be addressed to the corresponding author.

Notes

Author contributions. A. B. contributed to study design, data, interpretation of the data, and first draft of the manuscript. R. N. contributed to study design, statistical analysis, and interpretation of data. T. P., A. S. H., P. W., and M. D. contributed to data and interpretation of data. P. G. and M. B. K. contributed to conception, study design, data, and interpretation of the data. G. S. contributed to conception, study design, data, and interpretation of the data, and first draft of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the article.

Disclaimer. The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript. G. S. is supported by a research salary from the Department of Medicine of McGill University.

Financial support. The Canadian Coinfection Cohort was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (HOP-90182 to M. B. K.). ViiV and Merck provided a grant to establish the diagnostic center for hepatic fibrosis and steatosis at the McGill University Health Centre, which is in use for the LIVER disease in HIV Cohort.

Potential conflicts of interest. P. G. has acted as consultant for Merck and Gilead. M. B. K. has acted as a consultant for ViiV, Gilead, Janssen, and Merck, and has received research funding from Réseau sida et maladies infectieuses du Fonds de la recherche santé du Québec, the National Institutes of Health, Merck, Gilead, and ViiV Healthcare. M. D. has served as an advisory board member for Merck, Janssen, and Gilead. P. W. has acted as a consultant for Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS), Gilead, Merck, and Novartis. G. S. has received speaker's fees from Merck, BMS, Gilead, AbbVie, and ViiV; has served as an advisory board member for Merck, BMS, and Novartis and has received research funding from Merck, ViiV, and Echosens. All other authors report no potential conflicts. All authors have submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. Conflicts that the editors consider relevant to the content of the manuscript have been disclosed.

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