Immunostaining for 8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine, an oxidative stress marker, was also done before and after treatment.

The study was approved by the ethics committee at our institution and complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and internationally recognized guidelines. Informed consent was obtained.

Statistical analysis

The analysis was performed using JMP version 9.0.1 software (SAS Institute Japan, Tokyo, Japan). Univariate and multivariate analyses of predictors of survival were assessed using the Cox proportional hazards model. A P value less than 0.05 was considered to be statistically significant.

Results

During the 12 months of treatment with vitamins C and E, body mass index remained unchanged (26.6 ± 3.1 kg/m^2 at baseline and 26.8 ± 3.1 kg/m^2 after treatment). Serum alanine aminotransferase and high-sensitivity C-reactive protein levels decreased significantly during the 12 months, respectively, from 96.5 ± 45.9 IU/L to 40.3 ± 17.6 IU/L ($P < 0.0001$, Figure 1) and from 133.5 ± 59.8 mg/L to 67.5 ± 47.5 mg/L ($P < 0.005$, Figure 1). Before therapy, serum thioredoxin levels were 43.5 ± 17.2 ng/mL, but remained below 35.7 ± 11.5 ng/mL by 12 months following vitamin C and E therapy ($P = 0.08$, Figure 1). In the liver, staging of fibrosis, grading of necroinflammatory activity, and steatosis were compared before and after treatment. Staging of fibrosis improved in four of 10 cases, grade of necroinflammatory activity decreased in eight of 10 cases, and grade of steatosis decreased in six of 10 cases. In four patients, the grade of steatosis remained unchanged, but the grade of necroinflammatory activity improved in all cases, and staging of fibrosis also improved in two cases (Table 2). Table 3 compares histological data for case 3 following treatment with vitamins C and E. Fibrosis stage improved from F3 to F1, while the grading of necroinflammatory activity decreased from A3 to A1. However, no change in fatty deposition was evident. Treatment with vitamins C and E also resulted in a decrease in 8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine levels (Table 4).

Discussion

The pathogenesis of NASH remains poorly understood. Obesity, type 2 diabetes mellitus, hyperinsulinemia, increased triglyceride levels, toxins, and medical conditions can lead to increased serum fatty acid levels, which are then presented to the liver. The multihit theory suggests that the first hit involves accumulation of excess fat in the hepatic parenchyma. The second hit involves oxidative stress resulting from an imbalance between pro-oxidant and antioxidant processes in the liver, which may result from induction of microsomal cytochrome P450 2E1, mitochondrial release of reactive oxygen species, release of hydrogen peroxide from peroxisomal-beta oxidation of fatty acids, release of cytokines from activated inflammatory cells, and insulin resistance.[1–5]

Optimal therapies for NASH have yet to be established. Maintenance of weight loss results in significant clinical and histological improvement.[9,10] However, adverse effects on liver histology, such as progression of fibrosis, have also been noted.[15]

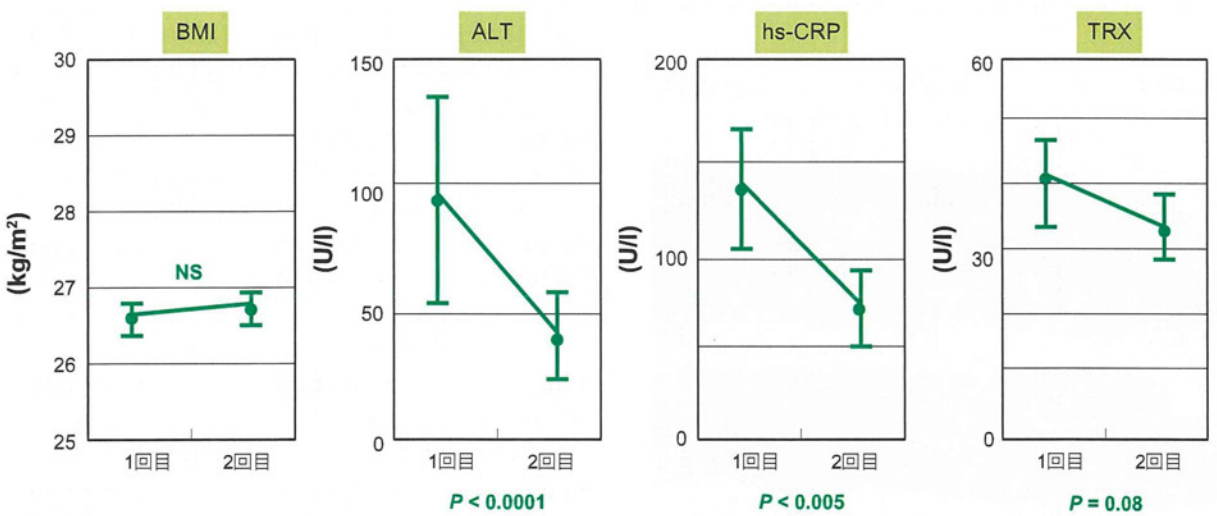


Figure 1 Body mass index remained unchanged, but changes were seen in serum alanine aminotransferase, thioredoxin, and high-sensitivity C-reactive protein levels in patients with nonalcoholic steatohepatitis before and 12 months following treatment with vitamins C and E.
Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; hs-CRP, high-sensitivity C-reactive protein; TRX, thioredoxin.

Table 2 Steatosis, grading and fibrosis score in NASH patients before and after 12 months of vitamin E and C (n = 10)

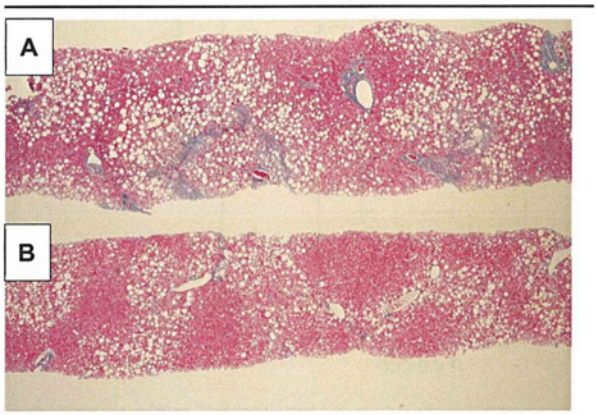
Case	Age/ gender	Grading of steatosis	Grading of activity	Grading of fibrosis
		Before/after	Before/after	Before/after
1	57/F	2→2	2→1	2→2
2	50/M	3→3	2→1	2→1
3	57/M	2→2	3→1	3→1
4	61/F	1→1	2→0	3→1
5	65/F	3→2	2→1	1→1
6	46/M	3→1	2→1	1→0
7	27/M	3→1	1→1	1→1
8	59/M	1→0	1→0	0→0
9	35/M	2→1	2→1	2→1
10	60/F	2→1	2→1	0→0

Abbreviation: NASH, Nonalcoholic steatohepatitis.

Furthermore, most obese patients find it virtually impossible to maintain weight loss. Other treatments include modification of the clinical conditions associated with NASH, in particular type 2 diabetes mellitus, hyperlipidemia, and obesity.

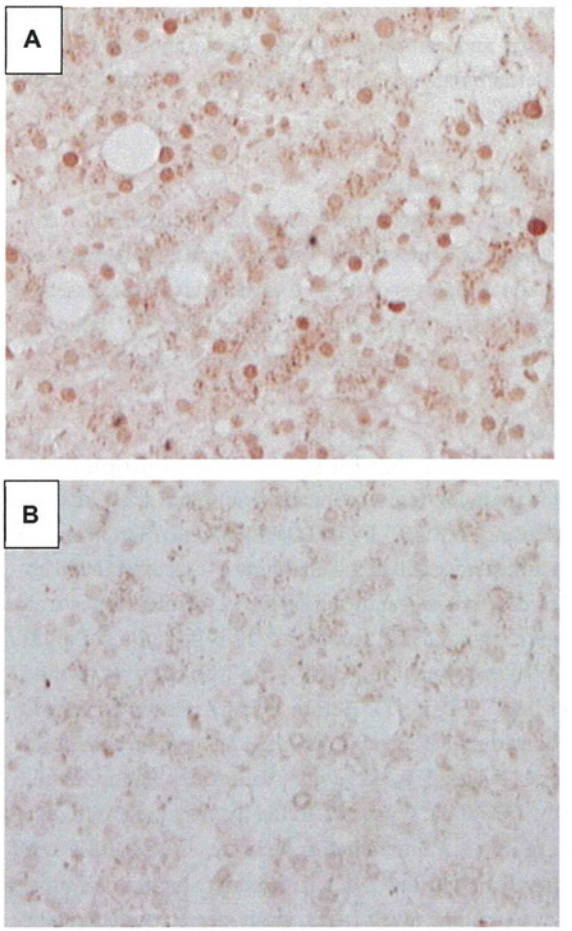
Medications that minimize oxidative stress may prove useful in the treatment of NASH. Vitamin E is a well known and potent antioxidant. A pilot study of vitamin E therapy has been done in a small, open-label study of 11 pediatric patients with presumed NASH.[6] These children were given 400–1200 IU of vitamin E for 4–10 months. The vitamin E was well tolerated and resulted in normalization of liver function tests during treatment. However, biochemical improvement was not sustained when vitamin E was discontinued. Hasegawa et al[16] did a study in patients with NASH receiving vitamin E 300 mg/day for one year. Serum alanine aminotransferase levels decreased, accompanied by decreases in plasma levels of transforming growth factor β1. We have also reported a pilot study of vitamin E treatment in NASH.[7] In this study, significant improvements were observed in both serum thioredoxin and thiobarbituric acid-reactive substance levels, which are believed to be clinically useful indicators of oxidative stress, along with a decrease in alanine aminotransferase. We have previously reported that liver damage induced by oxidative stress is reduced by vitamin E in patients with chronic hepatitis C.[17] A report investigating the effects of aerobic exercise in patients with NASH revealed no differences according to administration or nonadministration of vitamin E,[18] but this lack of apparent effect was probably due to the efficacy of treatment with diet and exercise alone. In a recent report, Sanyal reported that vitamin E (n = 84) and pioglitazone (n = 80) in patients with NASH significantly improved serum alanine aminotransferase levels, hepatic steatosis, and lobular inflammation, as compared with placebo, but with no improvement in fibrosis.[19]

Table 3 Histological interpretation of the effect of vitamin E and C on NASH (**A**) pretreatment (**B**) post treatment



Abbreviation: NASH, Nonalcoholic steatohepatitis.

Table 4 Change of 8OHdG expression of the effect of vitamin E and C on NASH (**A**) pretreatment (**B**) post treatment



Abbreviation: 8OHdG, 8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine.

Furthermore, significant improvements in liver fibrosis were reported in patients with NASH treated using a combination of vitamins C and E. When administered together with vitamin C, vitamin E can actively combat oxidative stress. Harrison et al reported that 21 patients with NASH were given vitamin E 1000 IU and vitamin C 1000 mg or placebo daily for six months, yielding a significant improvement in fibrosis score among treated patients.[8] In Japan, the approved daily doses of vitamin E and vitamin C (300 mg/day and 600 mg/day, respectively) are lower than those used by Harrison et al. Therefore, the present study investigated the utility of 300 mg vitamin E and 600 mg vitamin C for the treatment of NASH in Japanese patients. Furthermore, because previous studies of treatment with vitamin E for NASH have not evaluated the antioxidant potential of vitamin E, we also conducted immunostaining for the oxidative stress markers, thioredoxin and 8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine, in serum and hepatic tissue, respectively.

In the present study, serum alanine aminotransferase levels improved, accompanied by decreases in serum thioredoxin, high-sensitivity C-reactive protein, and 8-hydroxydeoxyguanosine levels, on combination therapy using vitamins C and E. In both arteriosclerosis and metabolic syndrome, high-sensitivity C-reactive protein offers a sensitive marker of chronic low-grade inflammation. Targher et al reported that the severity of liver histology in patients with NASH was strongly associated with increasing plasma levels of high-sensitivity C-reactive protein, plasminogen activator inhibitor-1, and fibrinogen, and decreasing plasma adiponectin concentrations. In addition, NASH and visceral adiposity predicted cardiovascular risk biomarkers independent of potential confounders, and NASH can predict a more atherogenic risk profile in a manner that is partly independent of the contribution of visceral adiposity in adult men.[20]

Our histological study found that grade of necroinflammatory activity improved in eight of ten treated patients, and fibrosis stage in four treated patients. The grade of steatosis improved in five of ten cases, indicating that the effects of combination therapy are not associated with weight loss. Although the mechanism is not clear, it may be that if liver inflammation is improved for a long time, liver fibrosis may also be improved.

Based on our experience in this pilot study, we conclude that treatment of NASH for 12 months with vitamins C and E results in significant improvement in alanine aminotransferase, thioredoxin, and high-sensitivity C-reactive protein levels, as well as in liver cell damage and inflammation. Given that no proven treatments for NASH are known, the possible benefits of vitamins C and E should be investigated further in a randomized controlled trial.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

References

1. Neuschwander-Tetri BA, Caldwell SH. Nonalcholic steatohepatitis. Summary of an AASLD single topic conference. *Hepatology*. 2003; 37:1202–1219.
2. Day C, James O. Steatohepatitis: a tale of two hits? *Gastroenterology*. 1998;114:842–845.
3. Chitturis S, Farrell GC. Etiopathogenesis of non alcoholic steatohepatitis. *Semin Liver Dis*. 2001;21:27–41.
4. Reid AE. Nonalcoholic steatohepatitis. *Gastroenterology*. 2001;121: 710–723.
5. Tilq H, Diehl AM. Cytokines in alcoholic and nonalcoholic steatohepatitis. *N Engl J Med*. 2000;343:1467–1476.
6. Lavin JE. Vitamin E treatment of nonalcoholic steatohepatitis in children: a pilot study. *J Pediatr*. 2000;136:734–738.
7. Kawanaka M, Mahmood S, Niiyama G, et al. Control of oxidative stress and reduction in biochemical markers by vitamin E treatment in patients with nonalcoholic steatohepatitis: a pilot study. *Hepatol Res*. 2004;29:39–41.
8. Harrison SA, Torgerson S, Hayashi P, Ward J, Schenker S. Vitamin E and vitamin C treatment improved fibrosis in patients with nonalcoholic steatohepatitis. *Am J Gastroenterol*. 2003;11:2485–2490.
9. Okita M, Hayashi M, Sasagawa T, et al. Effect of moderately energy restricted diet on obese patients with fatty liver. *Nutrition*. 2001;17: 542–547.
10. Huang MA, Greenson JK, Chao C, et al. One-year intense nutritional counseling result in histological improvement in patients with nonalcoholic steatohepatitis: a pilot study. *Am J Gastroenterol*. 2005;100:1072–1081.
11. Matteoni CA, Younossi ZA, Gramlich T, et al. Nonalcoholic fatty liver disease: a spectrum of clinical and pathological severity. *Gastroenterology*. 1999;116:1413–1419.
12. Brunt EM, Janney CG, Di Bisceglie AM, et al. Nonalcoholic steatohepatitis: a proposal for grading and staging the histological lesions. *Am J Gastroenterol*. 1999;94:2467–2474.
13. Nakamura H, De Rossa S, Roederer M, et al. Elevation of plasma thioredoxin levels in HIV-infected individuals. *Int Immunol*. 1996;8:603–611.
14. Danesh J, Muir J, Wong YK, et al. Risk factor for coronary heart disease and acute-phase proteins. A population-based study. *Eur Heart J*. 1999;20:954–958.
15. Andersen T, Gluud C, Franzmann MB, Christoffersen P. Hepatic effects of dietary weight loss in morbidly obese subjects. *J Hepatol*. 1991; 12:224–229.
16. Hasegawa T, Yoneda M, Nakamura K, Makino I, Terano A. Plasma transforming growth factor-β1 level and efficacy of α-tocopherol in patients with non alcoholic steatohepatitis: a pilot study. *Aliment Pharmacol Ther*. 2001;15:1667–1672.
17. Mahmood S, Yamada G, Niiyama G, et al. Effect of vitamin E on serum aminotransferase and thioredoxin levels in patients with viral hepatitis C. *Free Radic Res*. 2003;37:781–785.
18. Kugelmas M, Hill DB, Vivian B, et al. Cytokines and NASH: a pilot study of the effects of lifestyle modification and vitamin E. *Hepatology*. 2003;38:413–419.
19. Sanyal A, Chalasani N, Koedley KV, et al. Pioglitazone, vitamin E, or placebo for nonalcoholic steatohepatitis. *N Engl J Med*. 2010;362: 1675–1685.
20. Targher G, Bertolini L, Rodella S, et al. NASH predicts plasma inflammatory biomarkers independently of visceral fat in men. *Obesity*. 2008;16: 1394–1399.

J Gastroenterol
DOI 10.1007/s00535-012-0641-9

ORIGINAL ARTICLE—LIVER, PANCREAS, AND BILIARY TRACT

Inhibition of hepatocellular carcinoma by PegIFNα-2a in patients with chronic hepatitis C: a nationwide multicenter cooperative study

Namiki Izumi · Yasuhiro Asahina · Masayuki Kurosaki · Gotaro Yamada · Tsutomu Kawai · Eiji Kajiwara · Yukishige Okamura · Takayuki Takeuchi · Osamu Yokosuka · Kazuya Kariyama · Joji Toyoda · Mie Inao · Eiji Tanaka · Hisataka Moriwaki · Hiroshi Adachi · Shinji Katsushima · Masatoshi Kudo · Kouichi Takaguchi · Yoichi Hiasa · Kazuaki Chayama · Hiroshi Yatsuhashi · Makoto Oketani · Hiromitsu Kumada

Received: 23 April 2012 / Accepted: 25 June 2012

Abstract
Background We investigated whether the administration of maintenance doses of interferon prevented hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) in patients with chronic hepatitis C.
Methods Study 1: A multicenter, retrospective, cooperative study was carried out to determine whether long-term administration of low-dose peginterferon alpha-2a (PegIFNα-2a) prevented HCC development in patients with chronic hepatitis C. In total, 594 chronic hepatitis C patients without a history of HCC were enrolled and treated with 90 μg PegIFNα-2a administered weekly or bi-weekly for at least 1 year. Study 2: HCC developed in 16 of 99 additional patients without PegIFNα-2a treatment during 3.8 years of observation. A propensity-matched control study was then carried out to compare the incidence of

N. Izumi (✉) · Y. Asahina · M. Kurosaki
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Musashino Red-Cross Hospital, Musashino, Japan
e-mail: nizumi@musashino.jrc.or.jp

G. Yamada
Department of Internal Medicine, Kawasaki Hospital of Kawasaki Medical University, Okayama, Japan

T. Kawai
Department of Gastroenterology, Kanbara General Hospital, Fuji, Japan

E. Kajiwara
Department of Gastroenterology, Shinnittetsu Yahata Memorial Hospital, Kitakyushu, Japan

Y. Okamura
Department of Gastroenterology, Sano Kousei Hospital, Kitakyushu, Japan

T. Takeuchi
Department of Gastroenterology, Notogawa Hospital, Higashioumi, Japan

O. Yokosuka
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Chiba University, Chiba, Japan

K. Kariyama
Department of Hepatology, Okayama Citizens' Hospital, Okayama, Japan

J. Toyoda
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Sapporo Kousei Hospital, Sapporo, Japan

M. Inao
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Saitama Medical University, Moroyama, Japan

E. Tanaka
Second Department of Internal Medicine, Shinshu University, Matsumoto, Japan

H. Moriwaki
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Gifu University, Gifu, Japan

H. Adachi
Department of Hepatology, Tonami General Hospital, Tonami, Japan

S. Katsushima
Department of Gastroenterology, Kyoto Medical Center, Kyoto, Japan

M. Kudo
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Kinki University, Higashiosaka, Japan

K. Takaguchi
Department of Gastroenterology, Kagawa Central Hospital, Takamatsu, Japan

Published online: 09 August 2012

HCC between the 59 patients who received low-dose PegIFNα-2a (PegIFNα-2a group) and 59 patients who did not receive PegIFNα-2a treatment (control group), matched for sex, age, platelet count, and total bilirubin levels.

Results Study 1: HCC developed in 49 patients. The risk of HCC was lower in patients with undetectable hepatitis C virus RNA, ≤40 IU/L alanine aminotransferase (ALT), or ≤10 ng/L alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) 24 weeks after the start of therapy. Study 2: The incidence of HCC was significantly lower in the PegIFNα-2a group than in the control group.

Conclusions Low-dose and long-term maintenance administration of PegIFNα-2a decreased the incidence of HCC in patients with normalized ALT and AFP levels at 24 weeks compared with patients without normal ALT and AFP levels.

Keywords Chronic hepatitis C · Hepatocellular carcinoma · Peginterferon

Introduction

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), the sixth most common cancer worldwide, often develops because of long-term hepatitis B or C virus infection [1, 2]. In particular, chronic hepatitis C and hepatic cirrhosis increase the risk of HCC; the annual incidence of tumor development in such patients may be as high as 2–4 % [3–5]. The incidence of HCC decreases in patients who achieve a sustained virological response (SVR) to interferon (IFN) treatment, although the incidence remains high in non-SVR patients [6–9]. A detailed analysis of HCC development revealed that chronic hepatitis C patients aged 65 years or more, especially those with advanced fibrosis of the liver, were at an increased risk of developing HCC [10]. For patients 65 years or older with advanced liver fibrosis, the dose of ribavirin is often reduced or the agent is discontinued, resulting in lower SVR rates in those with discontinuation of ribavirin. Establishing an effective treatment strategy for preventing the development of HCC is important for these high-risk patients.

Factors related to the development of HCC have been analyzed in patients who did not achieve an SVR even after IFN treatment; advanced fibrosis of the liver and high levels of serum alanine aminotransferase (ALT), and alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) are risk factors for HCC development [11, 12]. A randomized controlled trial was conducted in Western countries to determine whether combined peginterferon and ribavirin treatment with weekly administration of 90 μg peginterferon alpha-2a (PegIFNα-2a) could prevent HCC in non-responders. A 3.5-year follow up showed that administration of a maintenance dose of PegIFNα-2a did not reduce tumor incidence in these patients [13]. However, after 8.5 years of observation, the incidence of HCC was decreased among those in the PegIFNα-2a group with cirrhosis [14]. Meanwhile, Bruix et al. [15] reported that maintenance therapy with PegIFNα-2b did not prevent HCC in chronic hepatitis C patients with cirrhosis. In Japan, long-term low-dose administration of natural IFN has been reported to decrease the incidence of HCC [16]. In light of these conflicting results, investigations should be carried out in a large number of patients with chronic hepatitis C to resolve the question of whether IFN treatment prevents the development of HCC.

We carried out a multicenter retrospective cooperative study of patients with chronic hepatitis C to determine whether those treated with 90 μg PegIFNα-2a without ribavirin had a reduced incidence of HCC compared with those not treated with IFN.

Patients and methods

Study 1: analysis of risk factors for HCC in patients treated with long-term low-dose-PegIFNα-2a

In total, at 21 hepatitis centers throughout Japan, 743 patients with hepatitis C who had received 90 μg of PegIFNα-2a therapy weekly or bi-weekly for 1 year or more without having received the full dose (180 μg) since December 2003 were examined retrospectively for the development of HCC. The end of enrollment in this study was the end of December 2008 and the end of follow up was the end of December 2010. Patients with a history of HCC before the start of therapy and those with a therapy period of less than 48 weeks were excluded, leaving 594 patients who had undergone long-term administration of PegIFNα-2a for analysis. At the 21 centers involved in this

Y. Hiasa
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Ehime University, Matsuyama, Japan

K. Chayama
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan

H. Yatsuhashi
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Nagasaki Medical Center, Nagasaki, Japan

M. Oketani
Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Kagoshima University, Kagoshima, Japan

H. Kumada
Department of Hepatology, Toranomon Hospital, Tokyo, Japan

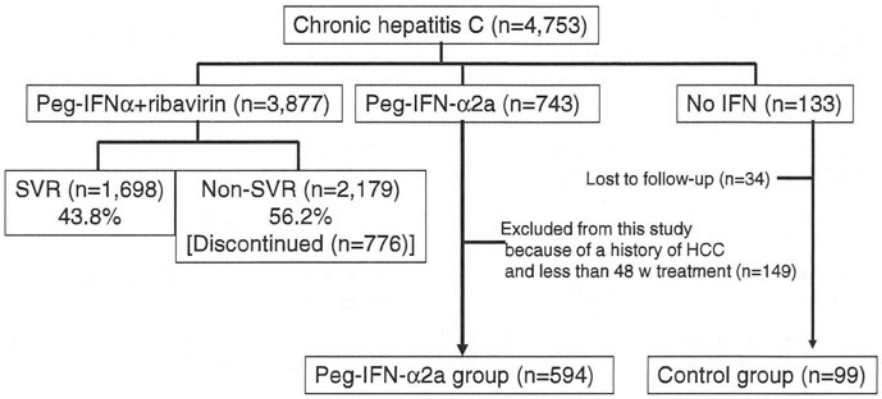


Fig. 1 Flow diagram of the patients' enrollment in the study. *Peg-IFNα* pegylated interferon α, *SVR* sustained viral response, *HCC* hepatocellular carcinoma, *w* week

study, 4,753 patients with chronic hepatitis C had been treated; Peg-IFN and ribavirin combination treatment had been administered to 3,877 patients, 743 patients had received Peg-IFN alone, and 133 patients had not agreed to receive IFN (a flow diagram of the enrollment of patients in this study is shown in Fig. 1). In the patients with Peg-IFN and ribavirin combination treatment, the SVR rate was 43.8 %; SVR was not achieved in 2,179 patients, and in 776 of these patients, the combination therapy was discontinued owing to adverse events or the patient's choice. Patients who failed to achieve an SVR were not included in this study, because the incidence of HCC is known to be reduced even in non-responders to IFN [17].

The backgrounds of the 594 patients studied are shown in Table 1. Findings from the liver biopsies of the patients were classified according to international standards [18]. Long-term PegIFNα-2a treatment is approved by the Japanese Medical Insurance system. Written informed consent was obtained from all patients prior to participation in this study. The study design was approved by the regional ethics committees of the 21 centers involved in this study, including the Musashino Red Cross Hospital, in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. The 743 patients treated with PegIFNα-2a alone were not indicated for Peg-IFNα and ribavirin combination therapy because of anemia or heart disease. The 133 patients who did not agree to receive IFN served as the control group (see Fig. 1). A large proportion of the 594 study patients had advanced fibrosis of the liver and active inflammation. A dose of 90 μg PegIFNα-2a was administered to 512 and 82 patients weekly and biweekly, respectively, according to the patients' wishes. There were no significant differences between the weekly and biweekly groups in the patients' background data (data not shown).

The median duration of follow up in the PegIFNα-2a group was 1,273 days (range 228–2,768 days) and HCC was observed in 49 of the 594 patients (Table 1). Pretreatment and on-treatment factors associated with the development of HCC were analyzed by Student's *t*-test, the Mann–Whitney *U*-test, and the χ^2 test (Table 2). Independent factors for the development of HCC were assessed by multivariate analysis using logistic regression. The

Table 1 Background data of patients treated with PegIFNα-2a ($n = 594$)

	$n = 594$
Age (years)	61.7 ± 11.7
Sex (male/female)	258/336
BMI	23.2 ± 3.3
Genotype (1/2)	443/151
Diagnosis (ASC/CH/LC)	4/460/130
History of excess alcohol consumption (≥60 g/day; yes/no)	118/376
Fibrosis (F0, 1, 2/F3, 4)	443/151
Inflammatory activity (A0, 1/A2, 3)	469/125
Diabetes mellitus (no/yes)	499/95
LDL cholesterol (mg/dL)	94.2 ± 31.1
Fasting blood sugar (mg/dL)	106.3 ± 28.5
White blood cell count (/mm^3)	4,360 ± 1,470
Red blood cell count ($\times 10^6$/μL)	423.8 ± 56.4
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	13.3 ± 1.8
Platelet count ($\times 10^3$/μL)	137 ± 56
Albumin (g/dL)	4.0 ± 0.5
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	0.8 ± 0.6
AST (IU/L)	65.8 ± 47.8
ALT (IU/L)	72.1 ± 68.0
Gamma-GTP (IU/L)	55.2 ± 51.3
Esophageal varices (no/yes)	344/31
Alpha fetoprotein (ng/L)	6.9 (4.2–13.8)
Once weekly or biweekly PegIFNα-2a	512:82
Baseline HCV RNA (KIU/mL)	1,024 (73–2,130)
Development of HCC (no/yes)	545/49

PegIFN pegylated interferon, *BMI* body mass index, *ASC* asymtomatic carrier, *CH* chronic hepatitis, *LC* liver cirrhosis, *LDL* low-density lipoprotein, *AST* aspartate aminotransferase, *ALT* alanine aminotransferase, *GTP* guanosine triphosphate, *HCV* hepatitis C virus, *HCC* hepatocellular carcinoma

Values are means ± SD, with ranges in parentheses

incidence of HCC was analyzed according to the ALT, AFP, and hepatitis C virus (HCV) RNA levels 24 weeks after the start of PegIFNα-2a administration by using the Kaplan–Meier method. The risk of HCC was analyzed, using the Kaplan–Meier method, only in the non-responders with detectable HCV RNA during PegIFNα-2a administration by dividing them according to the ALT and AFP levels 24 weeks after the start of therapy. The incidence of HCC was compared between the patients with ALT levels of <41 IU/L and those with levels of ≥41 IU/L, and between patients with serum AFP levels of <10 ng/L and those with levels of ≥10 ng/mL at 24 weeks after starting treatment, because at most of the centers participating in the this study, the upper normal range of serum ALT is set at 40 IU/L, and the most significant difference in the incidence of HCC was observed between the PegIFNα-2a and control group with the cut-off serum ALT set at 41 IU/L and cutoff serum AFP set at 10 ng/mL, 24 weeks after starting treatment. The HCV RNA level was measured using the Amplicor Monitor method with a lower detection limit of 50 IU/L (Roche Diagnostics, Tokyo, Japan). A history of excess alcohol consumption was determined as >60 g alcohol per day in order to exclude alcoholic liver disease.

An asymptomatic carrier was defined as a patient with a serum ALT level within the normal range and minimal inflammation or fibrosis in the biopsied tissues of the liver. Chronic hepatitis was defined as mild-to-severe fibrosis of the liver according to liver biopsy [18]. The diagnosis of liver cirrhosis was based on the results of histological examination of the biopsied liver tissues.

Study 2: incidence of HCC in the PegIFNα-2a therapy and non-administration (control) groups in comparison with propensity-matched controls

Ninety-nine of the 133 chronic hepatitis C patients who had not received IFN were examined as controls; patients in this group received liver-protective agents such as glycyrrhizin or were untreated, and the group was observed for more than 1 year. None of the individuals in the control groups had received IFN alone or PegIFNα and ribavirin combination treatment. They were treated for a median of 1,395 days (range 75–6,556 days). Fifty-nine of these patients underwent liver biopsy before the treatment and were considered the control group for the propensity-matched study. For the propensity-matched study, 59 patients were selected from the PegIFNα-2a group according to their age, sex, platelet count, and total bilirubin levels, which had been identified as independent pretreatment risk factors for the development of HCC in Study 1. The rates of HCC were analyzed using the Kaplan–Meier method, and the risk of HCC was analyzed particularly in patients with advanced fibrosis of the liver (F3 and F4).

Table 2 Comparison of HCC and non-HCC patients with long-term PegIFNα-2a administration ($n = 594$)

	Patients with or without development of HCC		p value
	With HCC ($n = 49$)	Without HCC ($n = 545$)	
Pretreatment parameters			
Age (years)	63.8 ± 1.7	61.3 ± 0.5	<0.05
Sex (male/female)	32/17	226/319	<0.01
BMI	24.0 ± 0.5	23.1 ± 0.2	n.s.
Genotype (1/2)	47/6	397/148	n.s.
History of excess alcohol consumption (≥60 g/day; yes/no)	11/38	107/338	n.s.
Fibrosis (F0, 1, 2/F3, 4)	25/24	418/127	<0.001
Inflammatory activity (A0, 1/A2, 3)	7/42	462/83	<0.001
Diabetes mellitus (no/yes)	38/11	461/84	n.s.
LDL cholesterol (mg/dL)	88.2 ± 9.0	94.7 ± 2.6	n.s.
White blood cell count (/mm^3)	4,355 ± 210	4,360 ± 64	n.s.
Red blood cell count (×10^6/μL)	420.8 ± 8.1	424.1 ± 2.6	n.s.
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	13.6 ± 0.3	13.3 ± 0.1	n.s.
Platelet count (×10^3/μL)	106 ± 8	140 ± 2	<0.001
Albumin (g/dL)	3.8 ± 0.1	4.0 ± 0.1	<0.001
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	1.2 ± 0.1	0.8 ± 0.1	<0.001
AST (IU/L)	78.1 ± 6.8	64.6 ± 2.1	n.s.
ALT (IU/L)	72.8 ± 9.7	72.0 ± 2.9	n.s.
Gamma-GTP (IU/L)	68.7 ± 7.5	53.9 ± 2.3	n.s.
Alpha fetoprotein (ng/L)	17.1 (4.4–36.8)	16.7 (4.1–23.1)	n.s.
Esophageal varices	29.0 % (9/31)	6.4 % (22/344)	<0.01
On-treatment parameters			
ALT (IU/L)	59.4 ± 5.7	44.6 ± 1.8	<0.05
Alpha fetoprotein (ng/L)	9.8 (4.6–17.4)	5.5 (3.7–11.1)	<0.01
HCV RNA level (KIU/mL)	236 (<0.5–2,210)	21 (<0.5–1,780)	<0.05

n.s. not significant

Statistical analysis

Categorical data were compared using the χ^2 test or Fisher's exact test. The distributions of continuous variables were analyzed using Student's t-test and the Mann–Whitney U-test for two groups. Multivariate analysis was

conducted using logistic regression. The cumulative incidence curve was determined using the Kaplan–Meier method and differences between groups were assessed by the log-rank test. For all methods, the level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$. Multivariate analysis of the risk of HCC was carried out using the Cox proportional hazard model. Statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software version 11.0 (SPSS, Chicago, IL, USA). In Study 1, age, sex, platelet count, and total bilirubin levels were identified as independent factors for the development of HCC; therefore, these factors were selected for the propensity-matched control study (Study 2) in which 59 patients from the PegIFNα-2a group were included.

Results

Study 1

We analyzed the factors involved in the development of HCC in patients who received 90 μg PegIFNα-2a weekly or biweekly for more than a year. The incidence of HCC did not differ significantly between the groups treated with PegIFNα-2a weekly and biweekly (34 of 512 vs. 15 of 82, respectively). As shown in Table 2, univariate analysis revealed statistically significant differences in the pretreatment parameters including age, sex, fibrosis of the liver, platelet count, albumin level, and total bilirubin, between patients who developed HCC and those who did not. Endoscopy was carried out in 375 patients, and esophageal varices were noted in 31 of them. The incidence of HCC was higher in patients with esophageal varices than in those without varices [29.0 % (9 of 31) vs. 6.4 % (22 of 344)]. Assessment of on-treatment factors by univariate analysis revealed statistically significant differences in serum ALT, AFP, and HCV RNA levels 24 weeks after the start of PegIFNα-2a maintenance treatment (Table 2).

Multivariate analysis including pretreatment parameters revealed that age, sex, fibrosis of the liver, platelet count, and total bilirubin were independent risk factors for HCC development (Table 3). Multivariate analysis including on-treatment parameters identified ALT levels of ≥41 IU/L and AFP levels of ≥10 ng/L 24 weeks after the start of the PegIFNα-2a therapy as independent risk factors for HCC development (Table 3).

The incidence of HCC was significantly lower in patients with ALT levels of ≤40 IU/L than in those with ALT levels of ≥41 IU/L 24 weeks after the start of observation (Fig. 2). The incidence of HCC was also significantly lower in patients with AFP concentrations of <10 ng/mL at 24 weeks after the start of observation than in those with AFP concentrations of ≥10 ng/mL (Fig. 3). The dose of PegIFNα-2a was reduced to 45 μg in 16 patients because of neutropenia and thrombocytopenia. In addition, PegIFNα-2a was discontinued in 18 patients because of adverse events, including depression (7 patients), interstitial pneumonitis (3 patients), thrombocytopenia (3 patients), neutropenia (1 patient), itching (1 patient), and ascites (3 patients). No statistically significant differences were found between the patients with reduced dosage or treatment interruption and those without treatment modifications with respect to overall survival, HCC incidence, ascites formation, variceal bleeding, hepatic encephalopathy, and 2-point increases in the Child-Pugh score. No patients underwent liver transplantation.

Table 3 Independent risk factors for HCC development in patients treated with 90 μg PegIFNα-2a weekly or bi-weekly, evaluated by multivariate analysis (logistic regression analysis)

	Multivariate analysis		
	Odds ratio	95 % Confidence interval (CI)	*p*
Age (years) (every 5 years)	2.24	1.76–9.33	<0.005
Sex (male/female)	3.16	1.56–10.7	<0.005
Fibrosis (F3, 4/F0, 1, 2)	1.69	1.18–5.2	<0.01
Platelet count (<120 × 10^3/μL vs. ≥120 × 10^3/μL)	3.24	1.44–27.6	<0.01
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	1.59	1.09–2.58	<0.05
ALT (at 24 weeks) (≥41 vs. <40 IU/L)	2.49	1.51–8.28	<0.05
AFP (at 24 weeks) (≥10 vs. <10 ng/L)	3.78	1.92–11.8	<0.01

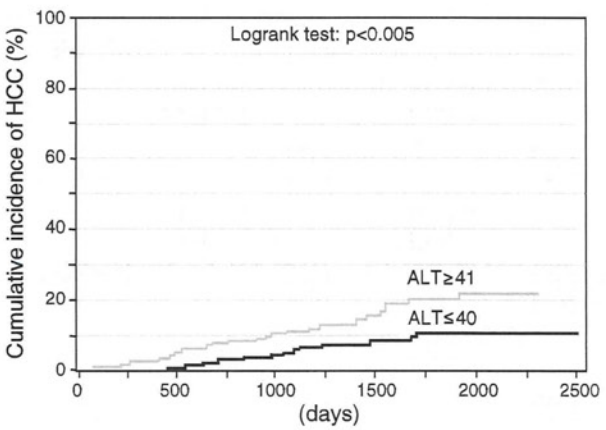


Fig. 2 Comparison of HCC rates in patients administered with PegIFNα-2a ($n = 594$) with respect to alanine aminotransferase (*ALT*) levels 24 weeks after the start of therapy. *Black line* patients with ALT ≥41 IU/L in the first 24 weeks, *gray line* patients with ALT ≤40 IU/L in the first 24 weeks

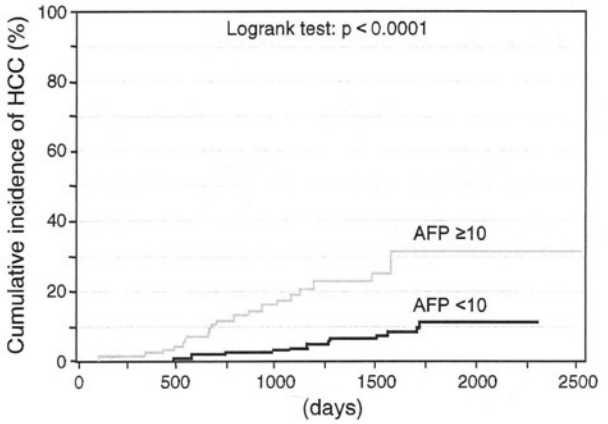


Fig. 3 Comparison of HCC rates in patients administered PegIFNα-2a ($n = 594$) with respect to alpha-fetoprotein (*AFP*) levels in the first 24 weeks after the start of therapy. *Black line* patients with AFP ≥10 ng/mL at 24 weeks, *gray line* patients with AFP <10 ng/mL at 24 weeks

Study 2

We compared the incidence of HCC between 59 patients in the control group and the same number of patients in the PegIFNα-2a group using the matched-pair test. The backgrounds of the patients are shown in Table 4. The PegIFNα-2a group had higher rates of advanced fibrosis (F3 and F4) and active inflammation (A2 and A3). No other differences were found between the two groups, except for the white blood cell count (Table 4).

Development of HCC was observed in 2 patients in the PegIFNα-2a group and 8 in the control group. The incidence of HCC was compared between the two groups, using the Kaplan–Meier method. The incidence of HCC in the PegIFNα-2a group was significantly lower than that in the control group (log-rank test, $p = 0.0187$; Fig. 4). Among the patients with advanced fibrosis of the liver (F3 and F4), those in the PegIFNα-2a group had a lower incidence of HCC than those in the control group. The independent risk factors for the development of HCC were analyzed using the stepwise Cox proportional hazard model. Only PegIFNα-2a administration and age were identified as independent risk factors for the development of HCC (Table 5).

Discussion

The number of HCC cases resulting from HCV infection continues to increase worldwide [19]. To date, IFN therapy is the most effective preventive measure against HCC in patients with chronic hepatitis C; furthermore, the incidence of HCC is reduced in patients who achieve an SVR to IFN [6–9] Therefore, achieving an SVR is the most effective approach for reducing the risk of developing HCC. In Japan, the incidence of HCC is elevated in older patients with hepatitis C. Corroborating this finding, the results of a Japanese study show a higher risk of HCC in patients aged 65 years and more [10]. Therefore, prevention of HCC in aged patients is an important challenge.

In the present multicenter, cooperative, retrospective study conducted in Japan, the incidence of HCC was reduced in patients who received 90 μg PegIFNα-2a weekly or biweekly and had AFP values of <10 ng/mL and ALT values of ≤40 IU/L 24 weeks after the start of the treatment. The results of the matched case–control study of the PegIFNα-2a group and the non-IFN control group show that the incidence of HCC was significantly lower in the PegIFNα-2a group than in the control group, especially in patients with advanced fibrosis of the liver (F3 and F4). However, there could have been a selection bias between

Table 4 Backgrounds of the patients in the propensity-matched control study (PegIFNα-2a group, $n = 59$; control group, $n = 59$)

	PegIFNα-2a group ($n = 59$)	Control group ($n = 59$)	p value
Age (years)	60.5 ± 13.0	63.3 ± 10.5	n.s.
Gender (male/female)	24/35	25/34	n.s.
BMI	22.9 ± 3.6	22.9 ± 3.4	n.s.
Genotype (1/2)	49/10	46/13	n.s.
History of excess alcohol consumption (60 g/day; yes/no)	10/49	4/55	n.s.
Fibrosis (F0, 1, 2/F3, 4)	37/22	43/16	<0.05
Development of HCC (F0–2/F3, 4)	1/1	1/7	n.s.
Inflammatory activity (A0,1/A2, 3)	19/40	30/29	<0.05
Diabetes mellitus (no/yes)	57/2	56/3	n.s.
LDL cholesterol (mg/dL)	95.3 ± 23.8	117.0 ± 4.2	n.s.
White blood cell count (/mm^3)	4,260 ± 1,239	5,193 ± 2,078	<0.05
Red blood cell count ($\times 10^{-4}$/μL)	430 ± 57.8	441 ± 44.9	n.s.
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	13.6 ± 1.5	13.6 ± 1.9	n.s.
Platelet count ($\times 10^{-3}$/μL)	14.5 ± 5.7	15.8 ± 5.7	n.s.
Albumin (g/dL)	4.1 ± 0.5	4.1 ± 0.4	n.s.
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	0.7 ± 0.5	0.9 ± 0.7	n.s.
AST (IU/L)	58.3 ± 47.7	49.7 ± 26.6	n.s.
ALT (IU/L)	63.6 ± 68.7	58.0 ± 39.2	n.s.
Gamma-GTP (IU/L)	78.3 ± 81.3	55.3 ± 75.1	n.s.
Baseline alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) (ng/L)	7.2 (4.3–14.2)	7.7 (3.9–13.8)	n.s.
Baseline HCV RNA level (KIU/mL)	1,230 (24–3,870)	1,024 (38–3,110)	n.s.

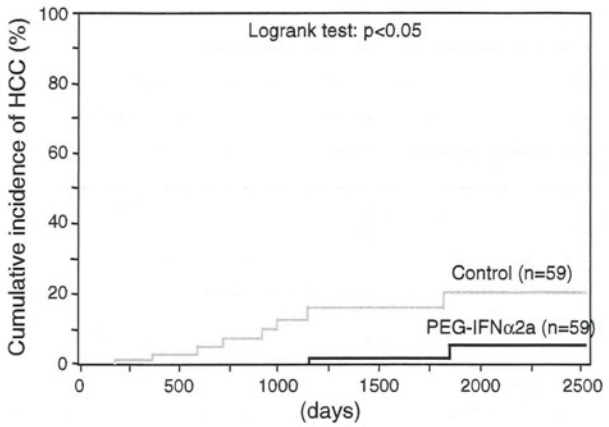


Fig. 4 Comparison of HCC rates between the long-term PegIFNα-2a administration group ($n = 59$) and non-administration group ($n = 59$) in the propensity-matched control study (Kaplan–Meier log-rank test, $p = 0.019$)

Table 5 Risk factors for HCC in the propensity-matched control study (Cox proportional hazard model)

Variables	Risk ratio	95 % CI	p value
PegIFN versus control	0.17	0.03–0.75	<0.05
Age (every 1 year)	1.12	1.02–1.25	<0.05
Fibrosis (F3, 4 vs. F0, 1, 2)	1.70	0.75–4.16	n.s.
Platelet count (every $10 \times 10^3/\mu L$)	0.89	0.73–1.09	n.s.
Albumin (every 1.0 g/dL)	0.80	0.10–6.68	n.s.
On-treatment AFP (<10 vs. ≥10 ng/L)	4.07	0.59–40.12	n.s.

the PegIFNα-2a group and the control group (patients who did not agree to receive IFN treatment), because this was a retrospective and non-randomized study. However, concordant with the findings of the HALT-C study [14], the present results show that PegIFNα-2a inhibits the development of HCC in patients with advanced fibrosis of the liver.

Recent studies show that polymorphisms in the host *IL28B* gene are important factors in the response to PegIFNα and ribavirin combination therapy [20, 21]. However, the mechanism of IL28B involvement in the response to PegIFNα and ribavirin has not been elucidated completely. A recent report has shown that IL28B is a significant factor in the development of HCC as well as in the response to IFN therapy [22]. Further studies are warranted to analyze the relationship between IL28B and inhibition of the development of HCC by PegIFNα in chronic hepatitis C.

Risk factors for the development of HCC have been discussed previously. Increased intrahepatic fat is involved in the development of HCC in chronic hepatitis C patients [23, 24]. In addition, diabetes-associated fat disorder [25, 26], hepatic iron overload [27], advanced fibrosis, older age, and fatty deposits in the liver are risk factors for HCC development [4]. Therefore, it is important to establish strategies to mitigate these risk factors to prevent the development of HCC and thus improve the outcomes of hepatitis C patients.

IFN therapy after HCC treatment is reported to inhibit the recurrence of tumors [28, 29], and a meta-analysis has revealed a trend toward inhibition of the recurrence of HCC [30, 31]. The prevention of HCC is an important issue that needs to be addressed to improve the survival of chronic hepatitis C patients. The findings of the present study and the HALT-C trial [14] indicate the effectiveness of long-term administration of maintenance IFN for preventing the development of HCC in chronic hepatitis C patients without an SVR. Improvement in ALT levels is also known to be an important predictor for the prevention of HCC [32]. A low AFP value during IFN administration is also recognized as a significant indicator of a lower risk of HCC [33, 34]. Recently, Osaki et al. [35] reported that a decrease of serum AFP during treatment with IFN was associated with a reduced incidence of HCC. Taking these findings and our own together, we conclude that maintenance administration of low-dose PegIFNα-2a weekly or biweekly to non-SVR patients with chronic hepatitis C decreases the incidence of HCC, especially in patients whose serum ALT and AFP levels are within the normal range 24 weeks after the start of treatment. The preventive effects of IFN against the development of HCC without elimination of the virus may be associated with its anticarcinogenic effects [16, 35]; however, the precise mechanism should be investigated.

The limitations of the present study are that it is retrospective and multicentric; therefore, potentially there may have been a selection bias. However, the reduction of the rate of development of HCC by maintenance administration of PegIFNα-2a in the patients in whom serum ALT and AFP levels were within the normal ranges 24 weeks after the start of treatment may be attributable to the anticarcinogenic effects of IFN without elimination of the virus.

Conclusion

The incidence of HCC was lower in non-SVR patients with chronic hepatitis C who were administered with maintenance low-dose PegIFNα-2a; especially in those whose serum ALT and AFP levels were within the normal ranges 24 weeks after the start of treatment.

Acknowledgments This study was supported by a Grant-in-Aid from the Japanese Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Labor.

Conflict of interest Namiki Izumi received lecture fees from Chugai Co. and MSD Co. in 2011.

References

1. Parkin DM, Bray F, Ferlay J, Pisani P. Global cancer statistics, 2002. CA Cancer J Clin. 2005;55:74–108. doi:10.3322/canjclin.55.2.74.
2. Llovet JM, Burroughs A, Bruix J. Hepatocellular carcinoma. Lancet. 2003;362:1907–17. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(03)14964-1.
3. Kiyosawa K, Sodeyama T, Tanaka E, Gibo Y, Yoshizawa K, Nakano K, et al. Interrelationship of blood transfusion, non-A, non-B hepatitis and hepatocellular carcinoma: analysis by detection of antibody to hepatitis C virus. Hepatology. 1990;12:671–5. doi:10.1002/hep.1840120409.
4. Namiki I, Nishiguchi S, Hino K, Suzuki F, Kumada H, Itoh T, et al. Management of hepatitis C; Report of the consensus meeting at the 45th annual meeting of the Japan Society of Hepatology (2009). Hepatol Res. 2010;40:347–68. doi:10.1111/j.1872-034X.2010.00642.x.
5. Tanaka Y, Hanada K, Mizokami M, Yeo AE, Shin JW, Gojobori T, et al. A comparison of the molecular clock of hepatitis C virus in the United States and Japan predicts that hepatocellular carcinoma incidence in the United States will increase over the next two decades. Proc Natl Acad Sci USA. 2002;99:11584–9. doi:10.1073/pnas.242608099.
6. Ikeda K, Saitoh S, Arase Y, Chayama K, Suzuki Y, Kobayashi M, et al. Effect of interferon therapy on hepatocellular carcinoma in patients with chronic hepatitis type C: a long-term observation study of 1,643 patients using statistical bias correction with proportional hazard analysis. Hepatology. 1999;29:1124–30.
7. Imai Y, Kawata S, Tamura S, Yabuuchi I, Noda S, Inada M, et al. Relation of interferon therapy and hepatocellular carcinoma in patients with chronic hepatitis C. Ann Intern Med. 1998;129:94–9.
8. Bruno S, Stroffolini T, Colombo M, Bollani S, Benveguu L, Mazzella G, et al. Sustained virological response to interferon-alpha is associated with improved outcome in HCV-related cirrhosis: a retrospective study. Hepatology. 2007;45:579–87. doi:10.1002/hep.21492.
9. Veldt BJ, Heathcote EJ, Wedemeyer H, Reichen J, Hofmann WP, Zeuzem S, et al. Sustained virological response and clinical outcomes in patients with chronic hepatitis C and advanced fibrosis. Ann Intern Med. 2007;147:677–84.
10. Asahina Y, Tsuchiya K, Tamaki N, Hirayama I, Tanaka T, Sato M, et al. Effect of aging on risk for hepatocellular carcinoma in chronic hepatitis C virus infection. Hepatology. 2010;52:518–27. doi:10.1002/hep.23691.
11. Amarapurkar D, Han KH, Chan HL, Ueno Y, Asia-Pacific working party on prevention of hepatocellular carcinoma. Application of surveillance programs for hepatocellular carcinoma in the Asia-Pacific Region. J Gastroenterol Hepatol. 2009;24:955–61. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1746.2009.05805.x.
12. Tamura Y, Yamagiwa S, Aoki Y, Kurita S, Suda T, Ohkoshi S, et al. Serum alpha-fetoprotein levels during and after interferon therapy and the development of hepatocellular carcinoma in patients with chronic hepatitis C. Dig Dis Sci. 2009;54:2530–7.
13. Di Bisceglie AM, Shiffman ML, Everson GT, Lindsay KL, Everhart JE, Wright EC, et al. Prolonged therapy of advanced chronic hepatitis C with low-dose peginterferon. N Engl J Med. 2008;359:2429–41. doi:10.1056/NEJMoa0707615.
14. Lok AS, Everhart JE, Wright EC, Di Bischeglie AM, Kim HY, Stering RK, et al. Maintenance peginterferon therapy and other factors associated with hepatocellular carcinoma in patients with advanced hepatitis C. Gastroenterology. 2011;140:840–9. doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2010.11.050.
15. Bruix J, Poynard T, Colombo M, Schiff E, Burak K, Heathcote EJ, et al. Maintenance therapy with peginterferon alfa-2b does not prevent hepatocellular carcinoma in cirrhotic patients with chronic hepatitis C. Gastroenterology. 2011;140:1990–9. doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2010.11.050.
16. Arase Y, Ikeda K, Suzuki F, Suzuki Y, Kobayashi M, Akuta N, et al. Prolonged-interferon therapy reduces hepatocarcinogenesis in aged-patients with chronic hepatitis C. J Med Virol. 2007;79:1095–102. doi:10.1002/jmv.20866.
17. Poynard T, Moussali J, Ratziu V, Regimberu C, Opolan P. Effects of interferon therapy in "non-responder" patients with chronic hepatitis C. J Hepatol. 1999;31S:178–83. doi:10.1016/S0168-8278(99)80397-3.
18. Desmet VJ, Gerber M, Hoofnagle JH, Manns M, Scheuer P. Classification of chronic hepatitis: diagnosis, grading and staging. Hepatology. 1994;19:1513–20. doi:10.1016/0270-9139(94)90250-X, doi:10.1002/hep.1840190629.
19. Kanwal F, Hoang T, Kramer JR, Asch SM, Goetz MB, Zeringue A, et al. Increasing prevalence of HCC and cirrhosis in patients with chronic hepatitis C virus infection. Gastroenterology. 2011;140:1182–8. doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2010.12.032.
20. Ge D, Fellay J, Thompson AJ, Simon JS, Shianna KV, Urban TJ, et al. Genetic variation in IL28B predicts hepatitis C treatment-induced viral clearance. Nature. 2009;461:399–401. doi:10.1038/nature08309.
21. Tanaka Y, Nishida N, Sugiyama M, Kurosaki M, Matsuura K, Sakamoto N, et al. Genome-wide association of IL28B with response to pegylated interferon-alpha and ribavirin therapy for chronic hepatitis C. Nature. 2009;41:1105–9.
22. Fabris C, Falleti E, Cussigh A, Bitetto D, Fontanini E, Bignulin S, et al. IL-28B rs 12979860 C/T allele distribution in patients with liver cirrhosis: role in the course of chronic viral hepatitis and the development of HCC. J Hepatol. 2011;54:716–22. doi:10.1016/j.jhep.2010.07.019.
23. Kurosaki M, Hosokawa T, Matsunaga K, Hirayama I, Tanaka T, Sato M, et al. Hepatic steatosis in chronic hepatitis C is a significant risk factor for developing hepatocellular carcinoma independent of age, sex, obesity, fibrosis stage and response to interferon therapy. Hepatol Res. 2010;40:870–7. doi:10.1111/j.1872-034X.2010.00692.x.
24. Koike K. Steatosis, liver injury, and hepatocarcinogenesis in hepatitis C viral infection. J Gastroenterol. 2009;44(Suppl 19):82–8. doi:10.1007/s00535-008-2276-4.
25. Veldt BJ, Chen W, Heathcote EJ, Wedemeyer H, Reichen J, Hofman WP, et al. Increased risk of hepatocellular carcinoma among patients with hepatitis C cirrhosis and diabetes mellitus. Hepatology. 2008;47:1856–62. doi:10.1002/hep.22251.
26. Lai MS, Hsieh MS, Chiu YH, Chen TH. Type 2 diabetes and hepatocellular carcinoma: a cohort study in high prevalence area of hepatitis virus infection. Hepatology. 2006;43:1295–302. doi:10.1002/hep.21208.
27. Furutani T, Hino K, Okuda M, Gondo T, Nishina S, Kitase A, et al. Hepatic iron overload induces hepatocellular carcinoma in transgenic mice expressing the hepatitis C virus polyprotein. Gastroenterology. 2006;130:2087–98. doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2006.02.060.
28. Kubo S, Nishiguchi S, Hirohashi K, Tanaka H, Shuto T, Kinoshita H. Randomized clinical trial of long-term outcome after resection of hepatitis C virus-related hepatocellular carcinoma by

postoperative interferon therapy. Br J Surg. 2002;89:418–22. doi: 10.1046/j.0007-1323.2001.02054.x.
29. Kudo M, Sakaguchi Y, Chung H, Hatanaka K, Hagiwara S, Ishikawa E, et al. Long-term interferon maintenance therapy improves survival in patients with HCV-related hepatocellular carcinoma after curative radiofrequency ablation. A matched case–control study. Oncology. 2007;72(Suppl 1):132–8. doi: 10.1159/000111719.
30. Singal AK, Freeman DH Jr, Anand BS. Meta-analysis: interferon improves outcomes following ablation or resection of hepatocellular carcinoma. Aliment Pharmacol Ther. 2010;32:851–8. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2036.2010.04414.x.
31. Miyake Y, Takaki A, Iwasaki Y, Yamamoto K. Meta-analysis: interferon-alpha prevents the recurrence after curative treatment of hepatitis C virus-related hepatocellular carcinoma. J Viral Hepat. 2010;17:287–92. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2893.2009.01181.x.
32. Arase Y, Ikeda K, Suzuki F, Suzuki Y, Kobayashi M, Akuta N, et al. Interferon-induced prolonged biochemical response reduces hepatocarcinogenesis in hepatitis C virus infection. J Med Virol. 2007;79:1485–90. doi:10.1002/jmv.20925.
33. Nomura H, Kashiwagi Y, Hirano R, Tanimoto H, Tsutsumi N, Higashi M, et al. Efficacy of low dose long-term interferon monotherapy in aged patients with chronic hepatitis C genotype 1 and its relation to alpha-fetoprotein: a pilot study. Hepatol Res. 2007;37:490–7. doi:10.1111/j.1872-034X.2007.00073.x.
34. Chen TM, Huang PT, Tsai MH, Lin LF, Liu CC, Ho KS, et al. Predictors of alpha-fetoprotein elevation in patients with chronic hepatitis C, but not hepatocellular carcinoma, and its normalization after pegylated interferon alfa 2a-ribavirin combination therapy. J Gastroenterol Hepatol. 2007;22:669–75. doi: 10.1111/j.1440-1746.2007.04898.x.
35. Osaki Y, Ueda Y, Marusawa H, Nakajima J, Kimura T, Kita R, et al. Decrease in alpha-fetoprotein levels predicts reduced incidence of hepatocellular carcinoma in patients with hepatitis C virus infection receiving interferon therapy: a single center study. J Gastroenterol. 2012;47:444–51.

JGH Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology

JGHF

doi:10.1111/jgh.12057

HEPATOLOGY

Characteristics of elderly hepatitis C virus-associated hepatocellular carcinoma patients

Takashi Kumada,* Hidenori Toyoda,* Seiki Kiriyama,* Makoto Tanikawa,* Yasuhiro Hisanaga,* Akira Kanamori,* Toshifumi Tada* and Junko Tanaka†

*Department of Gastroenterology, Ogaki Municipal Hospital, Ogaki, Gifu, and †Department of Epidemiology, Infectious Disease Control and Prevention, Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Hiroshima University, Hiroshima, Japan

Key words
alanine aminotransferase (ALT), alpha-fetoprotein (AFP), average integration value of ALT, elderly patient, hepatitis C virus (HCV), hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), platelet count, propensity score.

Accepted for publication 14 October 2012.

Correspondence
Dr Takashi Kumada, Department of Gastroenterology, Ogaki Municipal Hospital, 4-86, Minaminokawa-cho, Ogaki, Gifu 503-8052, Japan. Email: hosp3@omh.ogaki.gifu.jp

Financial support: This work was supported by Health and Labour Sciences Research Grants (Research on Hepatitis) from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan.

Declaration of conflict of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Abstract

Background and Aim: The average age of hepatitis C virus (HCV)-related hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) patients has been rising in Japan. We evaluate characteristics of HCV-positive patients who develop HCC in older age to determine an optimal surveillance strategy.

Methods: A total of 323 patients with three or more years of follow-up before HCC diagnosis and 323 propensity-matched controls without HCC were studied. HCC patients were classified into four groups according to age at the time of HCC diagnosis: group A (≤ 60 years, $n = 36$), group B (61–70 years, $n = 115$), group C (71–80 years, $n = 143$), and group D (> 80 years, $n = 29$). Clinical and laboratory data were compared.

Results: Platelet counts were significantly higher in the older groups at HCC diagnosis ($P < 0.0001$). The rate of platelet counts decline was lower in older groups ($P = 0.0107$). The average integration value of serum alanine aminotransferase (ALT) in groups A, B, C, and D were 80.9 IU/L, 62.3 IU/L, 59.0 IU/L, and 44.9 IU/L, respectively ($P < 0.0001$). In older patients (≥ 65 years old), cirrhosis and average integration value of ALT were significantly associated with hepatocarcinogenesis, but platelet count was not.

Conclusion: Elderly HCV-positive patients (≥ 65 years old) with low ALT values developed HCC regardless of their platelet counts. These findings should be taken into account when designing the most suitable HCC surveillance protocol for this population.

Introduction

Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is one of the most common malignancies, particularly in southern and eastern Asia. In Japan, HCC is the third leading cause of cancer death in men, behind lung and stomach cancer. In women, HCC is the fifth leading cause of cancer death during the past decade, behind colon, stomach, lung, and breast cancer.[1] Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection accounts for approximately 75–80% of cases. Each year, HCC develops in 6–8% of patients with HCV-associated cirrhosis.[2]

In Japan, screening the blood supply for HCV, which commenced in November 1989 and began using second-generation enzyme immunoassays in February 1992, decreased the risk of post-transfusion hepatitis from more than 50% in the 1960s to virtually zero presently.[3] The age of Japanese patients diagnosed with HCC has been steadily increasing. Up to 1999, the majority of HCC mortalities occurred in patients under 69 years of age, but in 2000 more than half of HCC patients were over the age of 70.[1] This aging trend is also observed in HCV patients undergoing interferon-based therapy in Japan.[4] In contrast, HCV infection in the United States and other western countries is most prevalent among persons 30 to 50 years of age,[5] and the incidence of HCV-associated HCC is expected to rise. As a country with more experience with HCV-associated HCC, Japan's long-term experience can be helpful in planning strategies to contain HCV infection and to cope with its long-term sequelae worldwide.

The aim of this study is to evaluate characteristics of HCV-positive patients who develop HCC in older age and to determine an optimal surveillance strategy for these patients.

Materials and methods

Study population. This study cohort was comprised of 6740 consecutive HCV-positive patients (1019 patients with HCC and 5721 patients without HCC) referred to the Department of Gastroenterology at Ogaki Municipal Hospital from January 1990 to December 2006.

There were 323 patients who fulfilled the following inclusion criteria out of 1019 HCC patients: (i) detectable HCV-RNA for at least six months, (ii) no evidence of hepatitis B virus infection; (iii) other possible causes of chronic liver disease were ruled out

(no history of hepatotoxic drug use, and negative tests for autoimmune hepatitis, primary biliary cirrhosis, hemochromatosis, and Wilson's disease); (iv) a follow-up period of greater than three years before HCC diagnosis; (v) no interferon therapy within the last 12 months; and (vi) serum alanine aminotransferase (ALT) measurements taken more than twice yearly. The patients were classified into four groups according to age at the time of HCC diagnosis: group A (≤ 60 years, $n = 36$), group B (61–70 years, $n = 115$), group C (71–80 years, $n = 143$), and group D (> 80 years, $n = 29$).

Of the 5721 patients who have not developed HCC, 3275 patients fulfilled the same inclusion criteria. To reduce the confounding effects of covariates, we used propensity scores to match HCC patients with unique control patients based on age, sex, Child-Pugh classification at the start of follow-up, and follow-up duration. We were able to match 323 patients with HCC to 323 patients without HCC. The patients were classified into four groups according to age at the end of follow-up: group A' (≤ 60 years, $n = 30$), group B' (61–70 years, n = 114), group C' (71–80 years, $n = 136$), and group D' (> 80 years, $n = 43$).

The start of follow-up was defined as the date a patient first visited our hospital and ended on the date of HCC diagnosis for the HCC patients, or the date of the last visit at our hospital or December 31, 2010, whichever occurred earlier, in control patients.

Histological examinations were performed in 234 out of 646 patients. Cirrhosis was diagnosed pathologically in 120 patients. The remaining 412 patients were evaluated with ultrasonography (US) and biochemical tests.[6–8] Patients who did not satisfy the criteria for cirrhosis were classified as having chronic hepatitis for the purposes of this study. All together, 288 out of 646 patients were diagnosed with chronic hepatitis, and 358 were diagnosed with cirrhosis.

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee at Ogaki Municipal Hospital in January 22, 2009 and complied with the Helsinki Declaration. Each patient provided written informed consent.

Laboratory test for liver disease and virologic markers. Platelet counts, prothrombin time, and serum levels of ALT, albumin, total bilirubin, alpha-fetoprotein (AFP), *lens culinaris* agglutinin–reactive fraction of AFP (AFP-L3%), and des-γ-carboxy prothrombin (DCP) were determined at the start of follow-up. ALT is expressed as an average integration value.[6] Serum AFP concentration was determined with a commercially available kit. AFP-L3 was measured by lectin-affinity electrophoresis and antibody-affinity blotting with the AFP Differentiation Kit L (Wako Pure Chemical Industries, Ltd, Osaka, Japan).[9] DCP was quantified with the Picolumi PIVKA-II kit (Eisai Co., Ltd, Tokyo, Japan).[10] HCV genotype was determined by PCR using genotype-specific primers, and HCV-RNA was quantified (before November 2007; COBAS Amplicor HCV monitor test and after December 2007; COBAS AmpliPrep/COBAS TaqMan HCV test, Roche Diagnostics K.K., Tokyo, Japan).

Alcohol exposure. Past alcohol exposure was estimated based on chart review of drinking patterns over five years. Patients were categorized as either "excessive" or "moderate" alcohol consumers. Excessive alcohol consumers drank over 50 g daily for five years.

Methods of follow-up. All patients received medical examinations at least every six months at our institution. Imaging studies, either US, computed tomography (CT), or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), were performed at least every six months. When patients were considered to have developed cirrhosis by laboratory data or imaging findings, imaging was performed at three-month intervals.[11]

Diagnosis and treatment of HCC. The diagnosis of HCC was made based on either pathological or clinical and radiological criteria. Histological examination of resected hepatic tumors or US-guided needle biopsy specimens confirmed HCC in 165 patients (resected specimens: 111 patients; biopsy specimens: 54 patients). In the remaining 158 patients, the diagnosis of HCC was made using clinical criteria and imaging findings obtained from B-mode US, CT, MRI, and CT angiography.[12,13]

Tumor staging was performed according to the American Joint Committee on Cancer (AJCC) classification system.[14] In cases where pathologic evaluation was not available, vascular invasion was assessed by dynamic CT and angiography.

Treatment for each patient was individualized according to evidence-based clinical practice guidelines for HCC in Japan.[14] Hepatic resection was performed on 111 patients. Percutaneous ethanol injection therapy was performed in 16 patients. Radiofrequency ablation therapy was performed in 104 patients. Transcatheter arterial chemoembolization was performed in 62 patients. Thirty patients did not undergo treatment because of the patient's wishes or impaired liver function.

Statistical analyses. Statistical analysis was performed with the Statistical Program for Social Science (SPSS ver.18.0 for Windows; SPSS Japan Inc., Tokyo, Japan). Continuous variables are represented as medians (range). The non-parametric Jonckheere–Terpstra test was used to assess continuous variables. The Steel–Dwass or Shirley–Williams multiple comparisons method was applied if the Jonckheere–Terpstra test yielded significant results. The Cochran–Armitage test or the chi-square test was used to assess categorical variables. Actual survival was estimated using the Kaplan–Meier method,[15] and differences were tested with the log-rank test.[16] The Cox proportional hazards model and forward selection method were used to estimate the relative risk of HCC development associated with age, sex, cirrhosis, alcohol consumption, diabetes mellitus, effect of prior interferon therapy, platelet count, AFP at the start of follow-up, and average integration value of ALT, and the annual rate of platelet count decline. Statistical significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

Results

Clinical features at baseline. The clinical profiles of the HCC patients at the start of follow-up are shown in Table 1. There was a higher proportion of women diagnosed with HCC at a later age ($P = 0.0016$); the percentage of women in groups A, B, C, and

Table 1 Profile of HCV-infected HCC patients at the start of follow-up

	Group A ($n = 36$)	Group B ($n = 115$)	Group C ($n = 143$)	Group D ($n = 29$)	P
Sex (female/male)	5/31	43/72	63/80	15/14	0.0016
Age at the start of follow-up† (years)	49 (36–57)	59 (47–66)	66 (52–75)	74 (64–80)	< 0.0001
Duration of observation period until HCC diagnosis† (years)	6.4 (3.1–16.7)	6.9 (3.0–15.8)	8.0 (3.0–17.7)	9.3 (3.0–15.7)	0.0003
Alcohol consumption (≥ 50 g per day/< 50 g per day)	9/27	24/91	26/117	2/27	0.0873
History of blood transfusion (present/absent)	6/30	26/89	35/108	2/27	0.8247
Diabetes mellitus (present/absent)	24/12	40/75	51/92	5/24	0.0008
Prior interferon therapy (SVR/non-SVR/absent)	3/17/16	12/32/71	0/15/128	0/1/28	< 0.0001

†Expressed as median (range).
Group A, diagnosis of HCC at age ≤ 60 years; Group B, 61–70 years; Group C, 71–80 years; Group D, > 80 years.
HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; HCV, hepatitis C virus; SVR, sustained virologic response.

Table 2 Profile of control patients with HCV infection at the start of follow-up

	Group A' ($n = 30$)	Group B' ($n = 114$)	Group C' ($n = 136$)	Group D' ($n = 43$)	P
Sex (female/male)	7/23	48/66	56/80	20/23	0.1175
Age at the start of follow-up† (years)	48 (40–56)	58 (48–67)	66 (54–75)	74 (65–82)	< 0.0001
Duration of observation period until the end of follow-up† (years)	7.0 (3.0–15.5)	7.8 (3.0–18.7)	8.5 (3.0–17.7)	8.5 (3.6–19.1)	0.0064
Alcohol consumption (≥ 50 g per day / < 50 g per day)	8/22	27/87	20/116	3/40	0.0630
History of blood transfusion (present/absent)	5/25	29/85	40/96	2/41	0.1939
Diabetes mellitus (present/absent)	7/23	38/76	47/89	12/31	0.0758
Prior interferon therapy (SVR/non-SVR/absent)	4/15/11	8/34/72	3/20/113	0/1/42	< 0.0001

†Expressed as median (range).
Group A', age ≤ 60 years at the end of follow-up; Group B', 61–70 years; Group C', 71–80 years; Group D', > 80 years.
HCV, hepatitis C virus; SVR, sustained virologic response.

D was 13.9, 37.4, 44.1, and 51.7, respectively. As the patient's age at HCC diagnosis increased, the patient's age at the start of follow-up and the duration of the observation period until HCC diagnosis increased ($P < 0.0001$ and $P = 0.0003$, respectively). Patients who received a diagnosis of HCC at a more advanced age have a significantly decreased incidence of diabetes mellitus and prior interferon therapy ($P = 0.0008$ and $P < 0.0001$, respectively). The clinical profiles of the control patients at the start of follow-up are shown in Table 2. The same tendency between HCC patients and control patients was observed.

Laboratory data of the HCC patients at the start of follow-up are shown in Table 3. Patients diagnosed with HCC at a more advanced age had lower baseline serum ALT and AFP levels ($P < 0.0001$ and $P = 0.0043$, respectively) and higher baseline platelet counts ($P = 0.0032$). In Table 4, the oldest group of control patients had lower baseline serum ALT and AFP levels ($P < 0.0001$ and $P = 0.0261$, respectively); however, no significant differences in baseline platelet count were observed.

The results of the Cox proportional hazards model and forward selection method to test factors associated with the age-related development of HCC to patient age at the start of follow-up are shown in Table 5. Ten covariates including age, sex, cirrhosis, alcohol consumption, diabetes mellitus, effect of prior interferon therapy, platelet count, baseline AFP, average integration value of ALT, and the annual rate of platelet count decline were studied. Age, cirrhosis, average integration value of ALT, platelet count, and AFP were significantly associated with hepatocarcinogenesis. However, only cirrhosis and average integration value of ALT were selected as factors significantly associated with hepatocarcinogenesis in patients ≥ 65 or 70 years old. Platelet count was not a significant factor.

Clinical features at the time of HCC diagnosis. Platelet counts at the time of HCC diagnosis in groups A, B, C, and group D were $72 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (40–192), $84 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (28–256), $99 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (31–355), and $119 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (58–232), respectively. There is a statistically significant trend toward higher platelet counts as the age at HCC diagnosis increases ($P < 0.0001$). In contrast, platelet counts at the end of follow-up in groups A', B', C', and D' were $194 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (44–543), $172 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (40–484), $177 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (21–415), and $193 \times 10^3/mm^3$ (52–429), respectively. There is no significant difference between the four groups of control patients ($P = 0.4772$). The annual rate of decline in platelet count, calculated as [platelet count at the start of the study period—platelet count at the time of HCC diagnosis]/duration of the observation period until the diagnosis of HCC, decreased significantly as the age at HCC diagnosis increased, and the annual rate of decline in platelet count, calculated as [platelet count at the start of study period—platelet count at the end of follow-up]/duration of observation period until the end of follow-up in control patients, did not increase significantly as the age at the end of follow-up increased (Fig. 1, $P = 0.0247$ and 0.1571, respectively). The annual rate of platelet count decline was

Table 3 Baseline laboratory data of HCV-infected HCC patients

	Group A ($n = 36$)	Group B ($n = 115$)	Group C ($n = 143$)	Group D ($n = 29$)	*P*
Platelet count† ($\times 10^3/mm^3$)	104 (34–249)	114 (29–253)	125 (44–307)	124 (70–201)	0.0032
Prothrombin time† (%)	87 (52–129)	88 (24–119)	85 (22–128)	86 (45–129)	0.6062
Total bilirubin† (mg/dL)	0.8 (0.3–1.8)	0.7 (0.2–4.7)	0.7 (0.3–6.7)	0.6 (0.2–1.3)	0.4583
ALT† (IU/L)	125 (24–361)	76 (18–387)	64 (8–154)	44 (17–221)	< 0.0001
Child-Pugh classification[17] (A or B/C)	33/3	103/12	130/13	24/5	0.5512
HCV genotype‡ (1/2)	26/6	66/24	75/29	15/6	0.4083
HCV viral concentration† (log copies/mL)	5.7 (2.7–8.0)	5.0 (2.0–8.0)	5.4 (2.0–6.9)	5.5 (3.0–7.0)	0.4952
AFP† (ng/mL)	13.5 (1.8–163.4)	8.4 (1.9–583.4)	7.2 (1.0–372.3)	4.8 (1.2–141.5)	0.0043
AFP-L3† (%)	0 (0–56.3)	0 (0–43.6)	0 (0–15.2)	0 (0–7.0)	1.0000
DCP† (mAU/mL)	19 (10–154)	19 (10–367)	17 (10–745)	15 (10–182)	0.0958
Cirrhosis (present/absent)	31/5	95/20	112/31	21/8	0.0903

†Expressed as median (range).
‡Data were unavailable for 76 patients.
AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; AFP-L3, *lens culinaris* agglutinin–reactive fraction of AFP; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; DCP, des-γ-carboxy prothrombin; Group A, diagnosis of HCC at age ≤ 60 years; Group B, 61–70 years; Group C, 71–80 years; Group D, > 80 years; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; HCV, hepatitis C virus.

Table 4 Baseline laboratory data of control patients with HCV infection

	Group A′ ($n = 30$)	Group B′ ($n = 114$)	Group C′ ($n = 136$)	Group D′ ($n = 43$)	*P*
Platelet count† ($\times 10^3/mm^3$)	204 (58–375)	180 (40–540)	187 (51–484)	196 (52–418)	0.4301
Prothrombin time† (%)	100 (52–138)	96 (38–153)	96 (48–144)	95 (47–145)	0.3435
Total bilirubin† (mg/dL)	0.5 (0.2–1.2)	0.4 (0.2–5.3)	0.4 (0.2–5.3)	0.3 (0.2–1.5)	0.6298
ALT† (IU/L)	53 (12–131)	46 (5–490)	35 (8–484)	22 (2–199)	< 0.0001
Child-Pugh classification[17] (A or B/C)	30/0	103/11	128/8	40/3	0.1088
HCV genotype‡ (1/2)	15/10	60/23	66/25	12/5	0.0869
HCV viral concentration† (log copies/mL)	5.9 (2.7–6.6)	5.7 (2.7–7.3)	5.8 (2.0–7.0)	5.1 (3.0–6.6)	0.1130
AFP† (ng/mL)	4.3 (0.8–156.3)	3.1 (0.8–170.3)	3.1 (0.8–219.2)	2.0 (0.8–29.2)	0.0261
AFP-L3† (%)	0 (0–26.9)	0 (0–34.2)	0 (0–41.4)	0 (0–5.2)	1.0000
DCP† (mAU/mL)	22 (10–122)	19 (10–487)	19 (10–503)	16 (10–30)	0.2549
Cirrhosis (present/absent)	5/25	35/79	48/88	11/32	0.1201

†expressed as median (range).
‡Data were unavailable for 107 patients.
AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; AFP-L3, *lens culinaris* agglutinin–reactive fraction of AFP; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; DCP, des-γ-carboxy prothrombin; Group A′, age ≤ 60 years at the end of follow-up; Group B′, 61–70 years; Group C′, 71–80 years; Group D′, > 80 years; HCV, hepatitis C virus.

Table 5 Factors associated with the development of HCC according to the age at start of follow-up in multivariate analysis

		All patients ($n = 646$) hazard ratio (95% CI)	≥ 60 years ($n = 428$) hazard ratio (95% CI)	≥ 65 years ($n = 255$) hazard ratio (95% CI)	≥ 70 years ($n = 92$) hazard ratio (95% CI)
Age (years)	≤ 60	1			
	> 60, ≤ 70	1.600 (1.240–2.064)			
	> 70	2.738 (1.858–4.036)			
Cirrhosis	Absent	1	1	1	1
	Present	2.165 (1.575–2.978)	2.269 (1.554–3.311)	2.734 (1.724–4.336)	2.962 (1.200–7.310)
Average integration value of ALT (IU/L)	≤ 20	1	1	1	1
	> 20, ≤ 40	4.239 (1.336–13.800)	4.885 (1.179–20.249)	5.243 (1.253–22.020)	12.162 (1.549–95.496)
	> 40, ≤ 60	5.518 (1.725–17.648)	6.661 (1.619–23.397)	6.739 (1.610–28.250)	6.797 (0.854–54.080)
	> 60, ≤ 80	7.182 (2.230–23.130)	9.362 (2.268–38.641)	12.265 (2.867–56.471)	11.183 (1.400–89.317)
	> 80	10.211 (3.175–33.031)	12.249 (2.494–50.884)	13.087 (2.962–57.815)	11.052 (0.964–126.671)
Platelet count ($\times 10^3/mm^3$)	≥ 150	1	1		
	< 150	1.644 (1.237–2.186)	1.728 (1.240–2.408)		
AFP* (ng/mL)	≤ 10	1			
	> 10, ≤ 20	1.406 (1.002–1.971)			
	> 20	1.609 (1.214–2.132)			

AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; CI, confidence interval; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma.

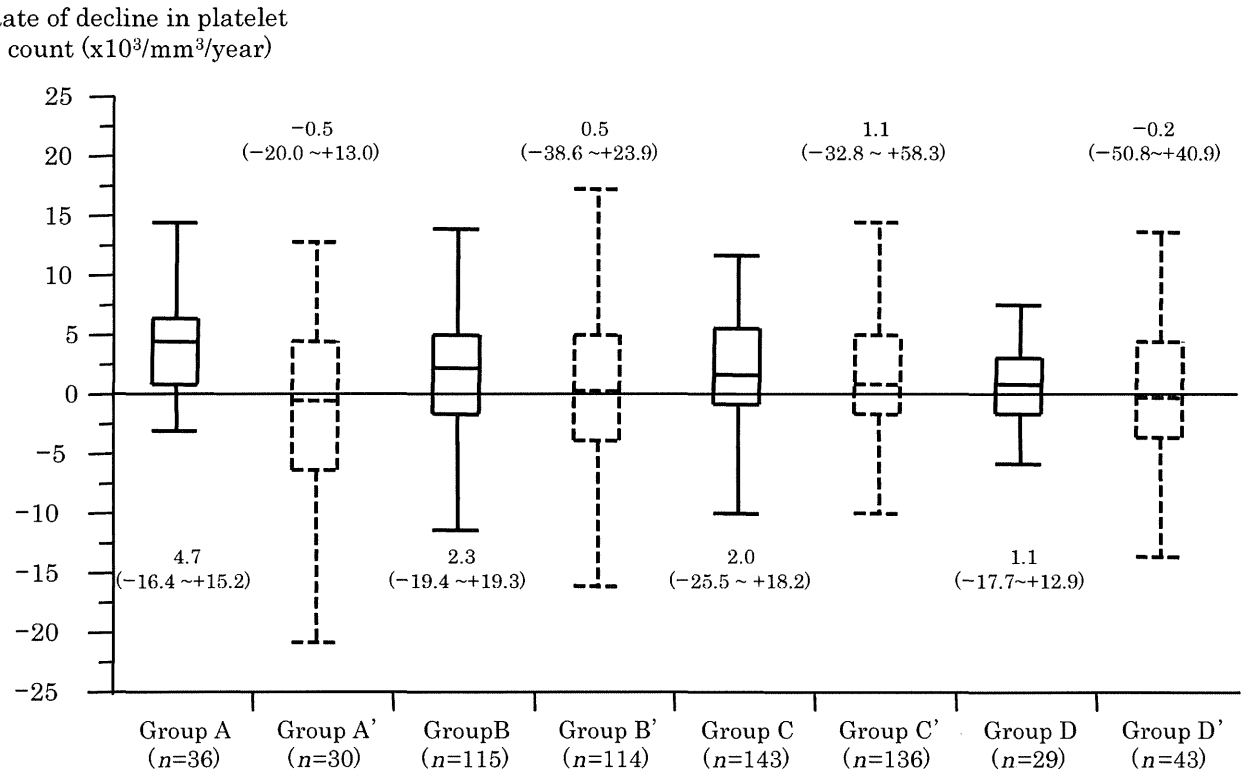


Figure 1 Rate of decline in platelet count prior to hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) diagnosis in HCC patients and prior to the end of follow-up in control patients. The annual rate of platelet count decline in the period prior to HCC diagnosis was lower in the groups that were older at the time of HCC diagnosis. In control patients, there was no trend toward higher annual rates of platelet count decline in the period prior to the end of follow-up when the patients were classified by age ($P = 0.0247$ and 0.1571, respectively, Jonckheere-Terpstra Test). Group A, HCC diagnosed at age ≤ 60 years; group B, 61–70 years; group C, 71–80 years; group D, > 80 years. group A', control patients ≤ 60 years old at the end of follow-up; group B', 61–70 years; group C', 71–80 years; group D', > 80 years. The annual rate of platelet count decline was significantly lower in group A' than in group A ($P = 0.0039$); however, there were no significant differences when HCC patients in other age groups were compared to their respective matched controls.

lower in group A' than in group A ($P = 0.0039$), and there were no significant differences between group B and group B', group C and group C', and group D and group D'.

The average integration value of ALT in groups A, B, C, and D was 80.9 IU/L (25.3–179.3), 62.3 IU/L (14.5–167.9), 59.0 IU/L (9.9–134.1), and 44.9 IU/L (22.7–91.9), respectively. The average integration value of ALT was significantly lower in patients diagnosed with HCC at an older age (Fig. 2, $P < 0.0001$). There was a similar trend among control patients (Fig. 2, $P < 0.0001$). The average integration values of ALT in groups A', B', C', and D' were significantly lower than in groups A, B, C, and D, respectively ($P < 0.0001$).

Patient profiles at the time of HCC diagnosis are shown in Table 6. There were no significant differences in tumor characteristics and levels of tumor markers among the age groups. Fewer patients in Group D underwent hepatic resection ($P = 0.0293$).

Survival rates according to age at HCC diagnosis. Five and 10-year cumulative survival rates of groups A, B, C, and D were 44.2%, 58.2%, 44.3%, and 33.3% and 22.7%, 31.2%, 26.6%, and not available, respectively (Fig. 3). There were no significant differences in the cumulative survival rate among the four groups.

Discussion

In Japan, the average age of patients with chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis, or HCV-associated HCC is increasing. The number of deaths due to these diseases is also increasing. The age-specific prevalence of HCV seropositivity in the USA is about 30 years below that in Japan; thus, a majority of patients in the USA with chronic HCV infection will reach an advanced age in the near future.[3]

In our study, elderly HCC patients have high platelet counts and low ALT values. In addition, multivariate analysis using propensity-matched control patients revealed that the presence of cirrhosis and high ALT levels (> 20 IU/L) are significantly associated with the development of HCC. However, platelet count is not significantly associated with hepatocarcinogenesis in elderly HCV carriers (≥ 65 years). Physicians should be aware that patients aged 65 years or older could develop HCC regardless of their platelet count.

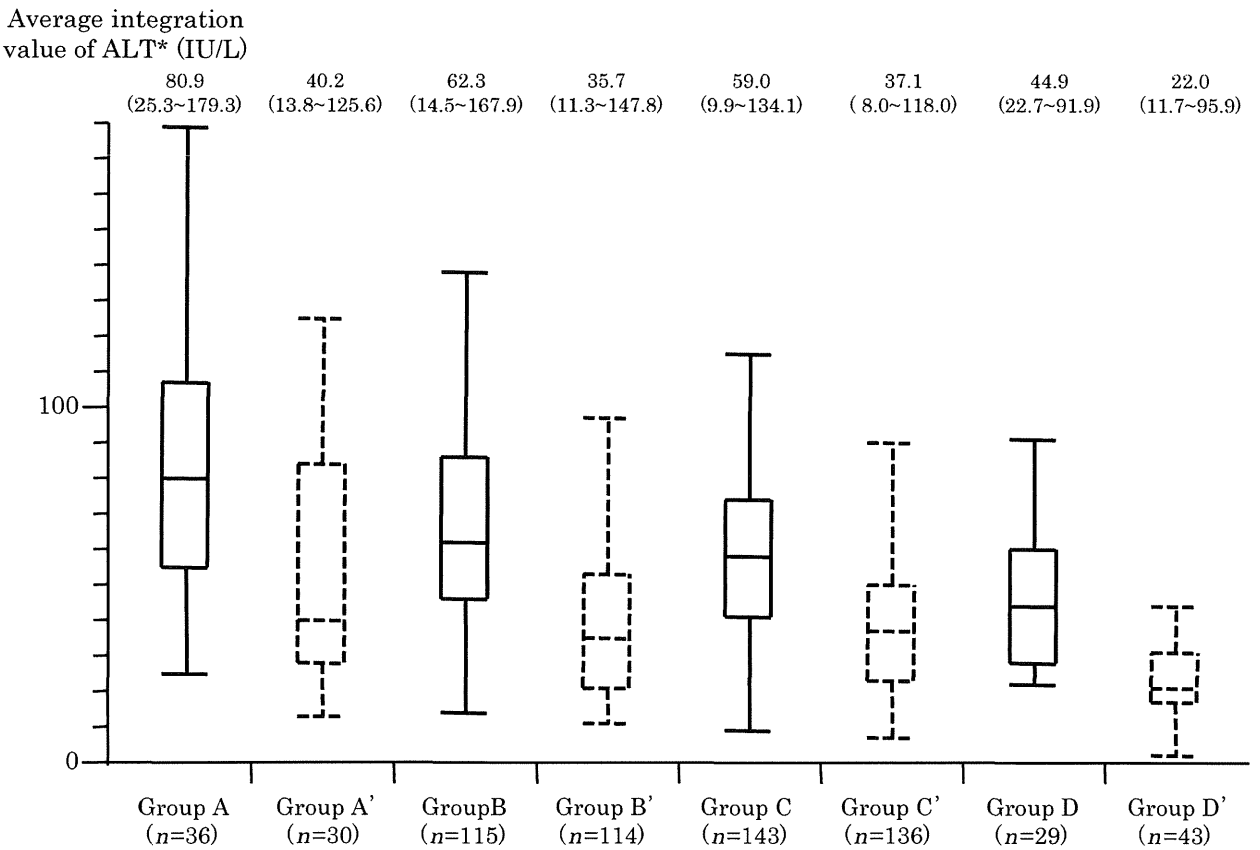


Figure 2 Average integration values of alanine aminotransferase (ALT) prior to HCC diagnosis in HCC patients and prior to the end of follow-up in control patients. Patients who were older at the time of HCC diagnosis had lower average integration values of ALT in the period prior to HCC diagnosis. In control patients, the average integration values of ALT in the period prior to the end of follow-up were lower in the groups that were older at the end of follow-up ($P < 0.0001$ and < 0.0001, respectively, Jonckheere-Terpstra Test). Average integration values of ALT in groups A′, B′, C′, and D′ were significantly lower than in groups A, B, C, and D, respectively ($P < 0.0001$).

Table 6 Profile of HCV-infected HCC patients at the time of HCC diagnosis

	Group A ($n = 36$)	Group B ($n = 115$)	Group C ($n = 143$)	Group D ($n = 29$)	*P*
AFP† (ng/mL)	23.9 (0.8–500)	19.8 (0.6–10500)	12.8 (0.8–12680)	17.8 (0.8–99720)	0.2347
AFP-L3† (%)	0 (0–89)	0 (0–87.2)	0 (0–81.0)	0 (0–40.7)	1.0000
DCP† (mAU/mL)	36 (10–36164)	35 (10–5941)	32 (10–50904)	24 (10–6229)	0.5650
Tumor size† (cm)	2.0 (0.8–10.0)	2.0 (0.3–8.8)	2.0 (0.6–11.4)	2.3 (1.0–9.0)	0.3754
Number of tumors†	1 (1–6)	1 (1–8)	1 (1–10)	1 (1–4)	1.0000
Portal thrombus (present/absent)	2/34	3/112	6/137	0/29	0.3293
Stage (1/2/3/4)	14/15/5/2	41/53/21/0	50/61/29/3	10/12/7/0	0.4957
Initial treatment (HR/PT/TACE/none)	9/18/4/5	47/44/16/8	51/47/33/12	4/11/9/5	0.0293

†Expressed as median (range).

AFP, α-fetoprotein; AFP-L3, *lens culinaris* agglutinin–reactive fraction of AFP; DCP, des-γ-carboxy prothrombin; Group A, diagnosis of HCC at age ≤ 60 years; Group B, 61–70 years; Group C, 71–80 years; Group D, > 80 years; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; HCV, hepatitis C virus; HR, hepatic resection; PT; percutaneous treatment including ethanol injection therapy, microwave coagulation therapy, and radiofrequency ablation therapy; TACE, transcatheter arterial chemoembolization.

The male-to-female ratio of HCC patients in Japan has decreased from 4.5 in 1984–1985 to 2.5 in 2002–2003.[1] It is well known that the mean age of female HCC patients with HCV infection is higher than that of males.[18,19] The increased proportion of female patients is considered a result of more older patients with HCV-related HCC. In our study, the proportion of female patients was the highest in group D. Further investigation of the role of sex in hepatocarcinogenesis is needed.

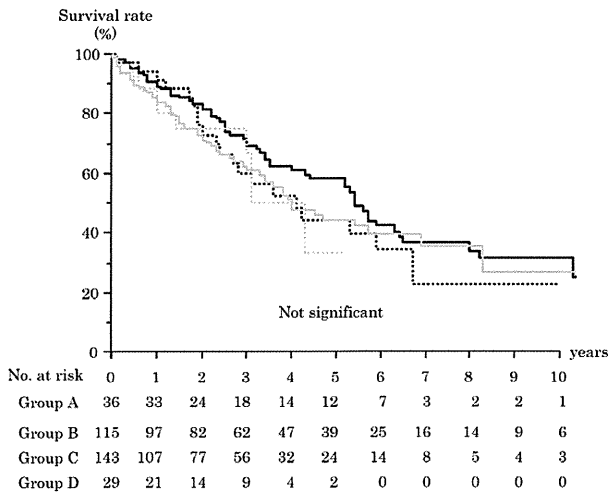


Figure 3 Cumulative survival rate of groups A, B, C, and D according to age at hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) diagnosis. Kaplan-Meier curves showing the survival rate stratified by age at HCC diagnosis. There were no significant differences in the survival rate among the four groups. ——, A group (≤ 60 years, $n = 36$); ·····, B group (61–70 years, $n = 115$); – – –, C group (71–80 years, $n = 143$); – · – · –, D group (> 80 years, $n = 29$).

We previously reported that the average integration value of ALT was associated with the cumulative incidence of hepatocarcinogenesis and that minimizing ALT is necessary for the prevention of hepatocarcinogenesis.[20] In addition, we demonstrated a 6.242-fold higher (95% confidence interval: 1.499–25.987) cumulative incidence of hepatocarcinogenesis in patients with average ALT integration values between 20 and 40 IU/L (within the current normal range) than in patients with 20 IU/L or below.[21] In this study, the average integration value of ALT significantly decreased as the age at HCC diagnosis increased. Especially in group D, the average integration value of ALT was 44.9 IU/L (range, 22.7–91.9 IU/L), which is near the upper limit of the conventional reference range of ALT (40 IU/L). There was the same tendency in control patients; however, average integration values of ALT were lower in control patients than HCC patients in each corresponding age group. These data suggest close surveillance for HCC is important even if older patients (≥ 65 years) have low ALT values.

It is likely that low platelet counts account for a large proportion of patients with cirrhosis, consistent with the theory that HCC develops in patients with progressive or advanced liver disease. Cirrhosis is an established risk factor for HCC in patients with HCV.[22,23] It is generally accepted that platelet count is a surrogate marker of liver fibrosis.[24,25] Platelet counts were highest in group D, both at the start of follow-up and at the time of HCC diagnosis. In contrast, there were no differences in platelet counts among control patients without HCC. It is particularly worth noting that group D had the smallest annual decline in platelet count, at levels comparable to the control patients. A previous report showed that the rate of progression of fibrosis to cirrhosis was accelerated by aging.[24] The precise mechanism of this discrepancy is uncertain. Probably, differences in patient selection might account for this discrepancy. We hypothesize that in our study, the increased rate of annual decline in platelet count may be linked to accelerated carcinogenesis occurring in the younger patients. Group D also had the lowest values of AFP, which is considered a marker of hepatic regeneration as well as a HCC tumor marker in viral hepatitis.[26] Taken together, this suggests a weaker inflammatory response in older patients. Further investigation is necessary.

Why do elderly patients progress to HCC even though liver function appears stable? Aging is associated with a number of events at the molecular, cellular, and physiological level that influence carcinogenesis and subsequent cancer growth.[22] Age may be considered as a progressive loss of stress tolerance due to declines in the functional reserve of multiple organ systems.[27] It has been hypothesized that age-associated declines in DNA repair[28] contribute to the development of HCC. The precise relationship between aging and hepatocarcinogenesis remains uncertain. Further assessment of the role of aging in the progression of HCV is needed.

We found no difference in tumor stage among the four groups. The younger groups A and B tended to receive curative therapy more often than the older groups C and D. However, there were no significant differences in survival. We hypothesize that this is due to the aggressive multiple treatments received by elderly patients with good liver function.

One limitation of our study is that histological confirmation was available in only 234 patients (36.2%). However, it is not practical to perform biopsies on all patients because of potential complications. Lu *et al.* reported that the best cutoff platelet count for the diagnosis of cirrhosis is 150×10^3 /mm^3.[29] Therefore, we employed platelet count as a surrogate marker of liver fibrosis in this study.

In conclusion, we demonstrated that elderly HCV-positive patients (≥ 65 years old) with low ALT values developed HCC regardless of their platelet counts. This finding should be taken into account when designating the most suitable HCC surveillance protocol. The optimal screening interval for HCV-infected patients aged 65 years older should be three to four months like cirrhotic patients even in the absence of cirrhosis.

References

1 Umemura T, Ichijo T, Yoshizawa K, Tanaka E, Kiyosawa K. Epidemiology of hepatocellular carcinoma in Japan. *J. Gastroenterol.* 2009; **44** (Suppl. 19): 102–7.
2 Kiyosawa K, Umemura T, Ichijo T *et al.* Hepatocellular carcinoma: recent trends in Japan. *Gastroenterology* 2004; **127** (Suppl. 1): S17–26.
3 Yoshizawa H. Hepatocellular carcinoma associated with hepatitis C virus infection in Japan: projection to other countries in the foreseeable future. *Oncology* 2002; **62** (Suppl. 1): 8–17.
4 Honda T, Katano Y, Urano F *et al.* Efficacy of ribavirin plus interferon-alpha in patients aged >or =60 years with chronic hepatitis C. *J. Gastroenterol. Hepatol.* 2007; **22**: 989–95.
5 El-Serag HB. Hepatocellular carcinoma and hepatitis C in the United States. *Hepatology* 2002; **36** (Suppl. 1): S74–83.
6 Shen L, Li JQ, Zeng MD, Lu LG, Fan ST, Bao H. Correlation between ultrasonographic and pathologic diagnosis of liver fibrosis due to chronic virus hepatitis. *World J. Gastroenterol.* 2006; **28**: 1292–5.
7 I Iacobellis A, Fusilli S, Mangia A *et al.* Ultrasonographic and biochemical parameters in the non-invasive evaluation of liver fibrosis in hepatitis C virus chronic hepatitis. *Aliment. Pharmacol. Ther.* 2005; **22**: 769–74.