

Figure 1 Frequency of each etiology among male or female patients with NBNC LC. (a) Male, (b) female. AIH, autoimmune hepatitis; ALD, alcoholic liver disease; FLD, fatty liver disease; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis; NBNC LC, non-B, non-C liver cirrhosis; PBC, primary biliary cirrhosis.

To determine the frequency of complicated portal hypertension patients, the prevalence of gastroesophageal varices was calculated. The prevalence in the ALD and PBC patients (54.5% and 61.9%, respectively) was significantly higher compared with that in the patients with NASH, FLD, AIH and unknown etiology (40.8%,

40.7%, 48.2% and 45.9%, respectively) ($P < 0.05$). Considering only patients with Child–Pugh class A, the prevalence of gastroesophageal varices in PBC patients was highest among all etiologies. ALD had significantly higher prevalence than NASH, the histology of which was very similar (Table 8).

The prevalence of HCC in the NBNC LC patients was 35.9%. Among 2438 NBNC HCC patients, 51.9% were diagnosed with HCC simultaneously with the diagnosis of NBNC LC, 25.6% were diagnosed after, 1.4% were diagnosed before the diagnosis of NBNC LC and the diagnosis of the remaining patients was not described in detail. The male : female ratio for the NBNC HCC patients was 3.06. The percentage of each etiology among the HCC patients was as follows: NASH, 19.9%; ALD, 53.4%; FLD, 3.7%; PBC, 3.2%; other biliary cirrhosis, 0.2%; AIH, 4.9%; metabolic disease, 0.1%; congestive disease, 0.7%; parasitic disease, 0.1%; other known etiology, 0%; and unknown etiology, 13.8%. The percentage of NASH among the NBNC HCC patients was significantly higher than that among the NBNC LC patients (19.9% vs 14.5%, $P < 0.001$). The clinical diagnosis of HCC was made at a mean age of 67.2 years in all patients. The mean age of onset of HCC was 70.8, 64.8 and 68.4 years in the NASH, ALD and FLD patients, respectively, and the differences among them were significant ($P < 0.001$). The prevalence of

Table 4 Male : female ratio of each etiology

	Male (<i>n</i> = 4608)	Female (<i>n</i> = 2391)	Male : female ratio
NASH	440	575	0.77
ALD	3381	475	7.12
FLD	151	22	6.86
PBC	87	477	0.18
Other biliary cirrhosis	38	22	1.73
AIH	69	409	0.17
Metabolic disease	22	19	1.29
Congestive disease	39	18	2.17
Parasites	10	2	5.00
Other known etiology	5	4	0.83

AIH, autoimmune hepatitis; ALD, alcoholic liver disease; FLD, fatty liver disease; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis; NBNC LC, non-B, non-C liver cirrhosis; N.S., not significant; PBC, primary biliary cirrhosis.

Table 5 The mean ages at clinical diagnosis in the patients with NBNC LC

	Total (n = 6999)	Male (n = 4608)	Female (n = 2391)	P-value (M vs F)
NASH	66.9 ± 11.6	64.8 ± 13.2	68.5 ± 9.8	P < 0.001
ALD	60.3 ± 11.0	60.9 ± 10.7	55.7 ± 12.1	P < 0.001
FLD	64.2 ± 11.8	64.7 ± 11.3	61.2 ± 15.0	P < 0.001
PBC	63.6 ± 12.1	66.0 ± 11.3	63.2 ± 12.0	P < 0.001
Other biliary cirrhosis	51.3 ± 20.7	52.0 ± 22.0	50.0 ± 19.0	P < 0.001
AIH	64.5 ± 12.2	63.3 ± 14.2	66.0 ± 11.7	P < 0.001
Metabolic disease	42.6 ± 18.2	44.0 ± 18.0	40.7 ± 19.0	P < 0.001
Congestive disease	52.7 ± 20.4	50.5 ± 20.7	57.4 ± 19.6	P < 0.001
Parasites	77.4 ± 5.9	76.5 ± 6.1	81.5 ± 2.1	P < 0.001
Other known etiology	56.1 ± 19.1	53.0 ± 18.7	58.7 ± 20.8	P < 0.001
Unknown etiology	68.8 ± 11.9	67.9 ± 13.0	69.8 ± 10.7	P < 0.001

All results are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. P-values were analyzed by Mann–Whitney U-test.

AIH, autoimmune hepatitis; ALD, alcoholic liver disease; FLD, fatty liver disease; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis; NBNC LC, non-B, non-C liver cirrhosis; PBC, primary biliary cirrhosis.

HCC in the patients with NASH, FLD and unknown etiology (50.9%, 54.5% and 47.5%, respectively) were significantly higher compared with that in the ALD, PBC and AIH patients (34.3%, 14.4% and 26.0%)

($P < 0.0001$). The percentage of moderate-to-low hepatic reserve (Child–Pugh class B and C) in HCC in AIH patients was significantly higher than those in the patients with NASH, FLD and unknown etiology

Table 6 Risk factors of NASH in the patients with NASH, ALD and FLD

Variable	NASH (n = 1015)	ALD (n = 3856)	FLD (n = 173)	P-value
Body mass index (kg/m ²)	27.0 ± 4.3	23.4 ± 6.4	25.0 ± 3.7	P < 0.001***
Diabetes mellitus or Impaired glucose tolerance	62.5%	37.5%	56.5%	P < 0.001*
Dyslipidemia	25.0%	13.5%	29.4%	P < 0.001*
Hypertension	52.0%	28.2%	34.7%	P = 0.01**
				P < 0.001***

ALD, alcoholic liver disease; FLD, fatty liver disease; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis.

Results of body mass index are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. P-values were analyzed by Mann–Whitney U-test and χ^2 -test.

*NASH vs ALD, **NASH vs FLD.

Table 7 Levels of hepatic functional reserve based on the Child–Pugh classification

Child–Pugh classification	Class A	Class B	Class C	Percentages of both class B and C	P-value
NASH (n = 783)	503	222	58	35.8%	
ALD (n = 2710)	1276	867	567	52.9%	P < 0.001*
FLD (n = 89)	65	18	6	27.0%	
PBC (n = 355)	204	105	46	42.5%	
AIH (n = 295)	139	106	50	52.9%	P < 0.001**
Unknown etiology (n = 515)	300	150	65	41.7%	P = 0.01***

AIH, autoimmune hepatitis; ALD, alcoholic liver disease; FLD, fatty liver disease; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis; NBNC LC, non-B, non-C liver cirrhosis; PBC, primary biliary cirrhosis.

P-values were analyzed by χ^2 -test.

*vs NASH, FLD, PBC and unknown etiology; **vs NASH and FLD; ***vs PBC and unknown etiology.

Table 8 Prevalence of patient with gastroesophageal varices

	Total	Child–Pugh classification		
		Class A	Class B	Class C
NASH (<i>n</i> = 686)	40.8% (280/686)*	31.8% (138/434)**	56.1% (111/198)	57.4% (31/54)
ALD (<i>n</i> = 2365)	54.5% (1289/2365)***	44.2% (486/1099)†	59.0% (447/757)	69.9% (356/509)
FLD (<i>n</i> = 81)	40.7% (33/81)	36.5% (23/63)	50.0% (7/14)	75.0% (3/4)
PBC (<i>n</i> = 331)	61.9% (205/331)††	53.5% (100/187)††	70.6% (72/102)	78.6% (33/42)
AIH (<i>n</i> = 278)	48.2% (134/278)	39.7% (52/131)	53.5% (53/99)	60.4% (29/48)
Unknown etiology (<i>n</i> = 401)	45.9% (184/401)	42.9% (94/219)	47.2% (60/127)	54.5% (30/55)

P-values were analyzed by Fisher's exact test or χ^2 -test.

P* < 0.05, vs ALD, PBC and AIH; *P* < 0.01, vs ALD, PBC and unknown etiology; ****P* < 0.05, vs NASH, FLD and unknown etiology;

†*P* < 0.0001 vs NASH; ††*P* < 0.05 vs NASH, ALD, FLD, AIH and unknown etiology.

AIH, autoimmune hepatitis; ALD, alcoholic liver disease; FLD, fatty liver disease; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis.

(*P* < 0.0001). BMI in the NASH, ALD and FLD patients was 26.8, 24.0 and 25.8 kg/m², respectively, and the differences among them were statistically significant. (Table 9).

Table 10 shows the analysis of the risk factors associated with HCC in patients with ALD LC. Obesity and complication of DM were the risk factors of hepatic carcinogenesis in ALD LC patients as well as male sex and being older. Conversely, portal hypertension and anemia of ALD LC patients without HCC were worse than those with HCC. Accordingly, we investigated the comparison of the clinical features between the two ALD LC groups divided based on BMI (Table 11). Although the mean age was similar in these two groups, the prevalence of HCC in the ALD LC patients with obesity (BMI, ≥ 25 kg/m²) was significantly higher compared with that in those without obesity (BMI, <25 kg/m²) (48.3% vs 35.7%, *P* < 0.001) and similar to that in the NASH LC patients (48.3% vs 50.9%, not significant).

Of the NBNC LC patients, 31.3% were anti-HBc positive. Anti-HBc positivity was 30.7%, 30.8%, 34.7% and 43% in the patients with NASH, ALD, FLD and unknown etiology, respectively. The positivity was significantly higher in the patients with unknown etiology compared with the NASH, ALD and FLD patients (*P* < 0.001). Anti-HBc positivity was significantly higher in the HCC patients than in those without HCC (41.1% vs 24.8%, *P* < 0.001).

DISCUSSION

THIS NATIONWIDE SURVEY revealed the following clinical features in the NBNC LC patients:

1 Compared with the previous nationwide survey,¹ the percentage of ALD among the NBNC LC patients

remained unchanged, whereas that of NASH increased.

- 2 The NASH LC patients were significantly older, predominantly female, heavier, hypertensive and more likely to have DM and HCC.
- 3 The ALD LC patients were significantly younger, predominantly male, had low hepatic reserve and were more likely to have portal hypertension than NASH LC.
- 4 The FLD LC patients were observed at an age between that of the NASH and ALD patients, were predominantly male (similar to the ALD patients) and were more likely to have DM and HCC similar to the NASH patients.
- 5 Approximately 10% of the NBNC LC patients still had an unknown etiology, and these patients were more likely to have HCC similar to both the NASH and FLD patients.
- 6 Anti-HBc positivity was significantly higher in the HCC patients than in those without HCC.

Although the natural history of NASH is not completely understood, Matteoni *et al.* reported that 23% of NASH patients progressed to cirrhosis within 10–15 years.⁶ In addition, Starley *et al.* recently stated that approximately 26–37% of NASH patients demonstrate the progression of fibrosis over time periods up to 5.6 years, with up to 9% patients progressing to cirrhosis.⁷ BMI and DM have been found to be independent risk factors associated with the progression of fibrosis in NASH patients.⁸ Therefore, it is thought that the NASH LC patients in the present study had significantly more severe disease and were more likely to have DM. Conversely, the prevalence of NAFLD in Japan appears to be twice as high in males than in females;⁹ however, the NASH LC patients in the present study were

Table 9 Clinical features of patients with HCC

	Percentage (%)	Prevalence of HCC (%)	Age of onset of HCC (years)	M : F ratio	Child–Pugh classification (A/B/C, %)	BMI	Platelet (10 ³ /mm ³)
Total (n = 2438)	100	35.9	67.2 ± 10.1	3.06	62.6/28.8/8.6	24.6 ± 4.0	127 ± 66
NASH (n = 485)	19.9	50.9*	70.8 ± 9.0**	1.06	66.0/28.9/5.1	26.8 ± 4.3**	128 ± 61
ALD (n = 1302)	53.4	34.3	64.8 ± 9.4†	19.05††	60.3/29.8/9.9	24.0 ± 3.8	126 ± 66
FLD (n = 91)	3.7	54.5*	68.4 ± 8.8***	17.20††	82.5/15.9/1.6	25.8 ± 4.0***	120 ± 61
PBC (n = 79)	3.2	14.4	68.0 ± 10.4***	0.32†††	53.2/35.9/10.9	22.3 ± 3.0	110 ± 54
Other biliary cirrhosis (n = 4)	0.2	6.8	–	–	–	–	–
AIH (n = 119)	4.9	26.0	68.8 ± 8.7**	0.23†††	42.5/42.5/15.0†	24.3 ± 4.1	107 ± 60 [§]
Metabolic disease (n = 2)	0.1	5.1	–	–	–	–	–
Congestive disease (n = 16)	0.7	32.0	52.0 ± 16.6	1.67	57.2/21.4/21.4	23.6 ± 3.2	127 ± 72
Parasites (n = 3)	0.1	30.0	–	–	–	–	–
Unknown etiology (n = 337)	13.8	47.5*	70.9 ± 10.9**	1.57	70.8/22.4/6.8	23.6 ± 3.7	143 ± 76

Results of age are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. P-values were analyzed by Mann–Whitney U-test and χ^2 -test as appropriate.

*P < 0.0001, vs ALD, PBC and AIH; **P < 0.0001, vs ALD and congestive disease; ***P < 0.001, vs ALD and congestive disease; †P < 0.0001, vs NASH, PBC, AIH and unknown etiology; †††P < 0.0001, vs NASH, ALD, FLD and unknown etiology; ††P < 0.0001, vs NASH, FLD and unknown etiology; †P < 0.0001, vs NASH, PBC, AIH and unknown etiology; †††P < 0.0001, vs ALD, PBC and unknown etiology; ††P < 0.0001, vs ALD, PBC and unknown etiology; †P < 0.001, vs NASH and unknown etiology. AIH, autoimmune hepatitis; ALD, alcoholic liver disease; BMI, body mass index; FLD, fatty liver disease; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; NASH, non-alcoholic steatohepatitis; NBNC LC, non-B, non-C liver cirrhosis; PBC, primary biliary cirrhosis.

predominantly female. Yasui *et al.* reported that NASH HCC patients were predominantly male, although the prevalence of cirrhosis among these patients was significantly lower in male patients compared with that in female patients.¹⁰ These studies suggest that sex is implicated in the progression of fibrosis in NASH patients in Japan. In addition, the prevalence of HCC in the NASH LC patients in the present study was significantly higher compared with that in the previous nationwide survey (50.9% vs 31.5%, $P < 0.001$).¹ The incidence of NASH and NASH HCC has been gradually increasing in Japan, contrary to the decreased incidence of virus-related HCC.⁴ Starley *et al.* found that as many as 4–27% of cases of NASH transform to HCC after the development of cirrhosis, and that the prevalence of HCC in NAFLD is 0–0.5%, whereas that of HCC in NASH is 0–2.8% over time periods of up to 19.5 years.⁷ Yatsuji *et al.* reported the prospective evaluation of NASH LC and HCV-related LC (LC-C). They reported that NASH LC followed a course similar to that of LC-C, namely, complications of cirrhosis developed, including HCC (the 5-year cumulative rate of HCC development was 11.3% for NASH LC and 30.5% for LC-C).¹¹ Therefore, NASH LC patients need to be followed up carefully with respect to the occurrence of HCC, similar to LC-C patients.

Alcoholic liver disease remains the most prevalent cause of NBNC LC in Japan, accounting for approximately 55% of all NBNC LC cases. In the present study, the prevalence of HCC was significantly lower in the ALD LC patients than in the NASH LC patients, whereas the ALD LC patients were significantly younger and had a lower hepatic reserve. Regarding the comparison of outcomes with LC-C, Toshikuni *et al.* reported that the risk of HCC was lower in ALD LC than in LC-C, whereas the risk of hepatic decompensation and mortality was the same.¹² It is estimated that there are approximately 2.4 million heavy drinkers in Japan, and the number of ALD patients has been increasing because of increased alcohol consumption.¹³ Therefore, ALD LC patients need to be followed up carefully with respect to the occurrence of hepatic decompensation, similar to LC-C patients. Obesity appears to be involved in the progression of ALD LC.¹³ Accordingly, we investigated the risk factors associated with HCC and clarified that obesity and complication of DM could be the risk for hepatic carcinogenesis in ALD LC patients. The comparison of the clinical features between the two ALD LC groups divided based on BMI revealed that the prevalence of HCC in the ALD LC patients with obesity was significantly higher compared with that in those without obesity. Horie *et al.* also reported similar results.¹⁴ Thus,

Table 10 Factors associated with HCC in patients with ALD

Factors	HCC (-), (n = 2494)	HCC (+), (n = 1303)	Univariate analysis, P-value	Multivariate analysis, P-value
Sex (M : F)	83.7%:16.3%	95.0%:5.0%	<0.0001	<0.0001
Age (years)	57.9 ± 11.0	64.8 ± 9.4	<0.0001	<0.0001
Body mass index (kg/m ²)	22.8 ± 3.8	24.0 ± 3.8	<0.0001	<0.0001
Hypertension (- : +)	77.4%:22.6%	61.9%:38.1%	<0.0001	0.068
Dyslipidemia (- : +)	87.0%:13.0%	81.6%:18.4%	<0.0001	0.482
Diabetes mellitus (- : +)	67.2%:32.8%	50.2%:49.8%	<0.0001	<0.0001
Child–Pugh classification (A : B + C)	38.5%:61.5%	60.3%:39.7%	<0.0001	0.188
Esophageal varices (- : +)	42.3%:57.7%	57.9%:42.1%	<0.0001	<0.0001
Ascites (- : +)	57.1%:42.9%	76.5%:23.5%	<0.0001	<0.0001
WBC (/mm ³)	6014 ± 3465	5532 ± 3484	0.001	0.547
Hemoglobin (g/dL)	11.3 ± 2.6	12.7 ± 2.2	<0.0001	<0.0001
Platelet (×10 ³ /mm ³)	114.6 ± 67.1	126.1 ± 65.5	<0.0001	0.104
AST (IU/L)	93 ± 209	65 ± 71	<0.0001	0.974
ALT (IU/L)	51 ± 118	45 ± 43	0.159	0.786
Bilirubin (mg/dL)	2.8 ± 3.9	1.6 ± 2.4	<0.0001	0.006
Albumin (g/dL)	3.3 ± 1.0	3.5 ± 0.7	<0.0001	0.281
PT%	69 ± 22	79 ± 19	<0.0001	0.628

Results of age are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. P-values were analyzed by Mann–Whitney U-test, χ^2 -test and multivariate Cox's proportional hazard model as appropriate.

ALD, alcoholic liver disease; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; PT, prothrombin time; WBC, white blood cells.

obesity appears to be involved in the progression of HCC in ALD LC. Therefore, ALD LC patients with obesity need to be followed up carefully with respect to the occurrence of HCC, similar to NASH LC and LC-C patients. Not only abstinence from alcohol but also improvement in lifestyle is important to decrease the progression of ALD LC.

In the present study, we established a new clinical etiologic criterion: FLD. According to previous clinical etiologic criteria in Japan, mild drinkers (intake of >20 g and <70 g of ethanol/day) with steatohepatitis were not diagnosed with both NASH and ALD. The prevalence of minor homozygote or heterozygote type of the aldehyde

dehydrogenase-2 gene (*ALDH2*), which oxidizes acetaldehyde to acetate and is a key enzyme in alcohol metabolism, is very high in Asian countries. The enzyme activity of a minor homozygote of *ALDH2* is completely defective. Moreover, the enzyme activity of a heterozygote is only 1/16th. Our survey is the first to reveal that these FLD LC patients were observed in 2.5% of NBNC LC patients. Considering the frequencies of mild drinkers and obese people in Japan, it is thought that the frequency of FLD LC is lower than that of LC with unknown etiology. This is because there were many patients whose amounts of daily alcohol intake were unknown; therefore, some were diagnosed as having an

Table 11 Clinical features of patients with ALD LC

	BMI <25 (n = 1915)	BMI ≥25 (n = 749)	P-value
Sex (M : F)	1644:317 (83.4%:16.6%)	692:57 (92.4%:7.6%)	P < 0.001
Age	60.2 ± 11.1	61.0 ± 10.2	N.S.
Diabetes mellitus	35.1%	43.9%	P < 0.001
HCC	35.7%	48.3%	P < 0.001

Results of age are expressed as mean ± standard deviation, P-values were analyzed by Mann–Whitney U-test and χ^2 -test as appropriate.

ALD, alcoholic liver disease; BMI, body mass index; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; N.S., not significant.

unknown etiology. Interestingly, the clinical features of the FLD LC patients overlapped with those of the NASH LC and ALD LC patients. Because the mean age of the FLD LC patients was between that of the NASH and ALD patients, the FLD LC patients were predominantly male, similar to the ALD LC patients, and they were more likely to have DM and HCC similar to the NASH LC patients. Horie *et al.* described a category such as FLD as overlap steatohepatitis.^{13,14} The most important clinical feature in FLD LC patients was that the prevalence of HCC was high, similar to that in the NASH LC patients. This finding suggests that steatohepatitis per se is a potent risk factor of HCC, irrespective of alcohol consumption.

The LC patients with unknown etiology (or cryptogenic LC) were approximately 10% of the NBNC LC patients and were more likely to have HCC similar to the NASH and FLD patients. Some FLD LC patients whose daily alcohol intake was unknown may have been included in this group, and some “burnt-out” NASH LC patients whose liver showed complete disappearance of steatosis¹⁵ may have also been included in this group. In addition, some patients who had been HBV carriers but had become HBsAg negative or those with occult HBV may have also been included in this group. Anti-HBc positivity was significantly higher in this group than in the NASH, ALD and FLD LC groups. Several studies have suggested a high prevalence of occult HBV among cryptogenic LC and NBNC HCC patients and also the participation of occult HBV in the progression to cirrhosis and occurrence of HCC.^{16,17} In the present study, anti-HBc positivity was significantly higher in the NBNC LC patients with HCC than in those without HCC; however, the role of occult HBV in the progression to cirrhosis and carcinogenesis remains unclear. Occult HBV is defined as the presence of HBV DNA in the liver (with or without detectable HBV DNA in serum) for patients testing HBsAg negative.¹⁸ Because of the lack of a HBV DNA assay in the present study, the impact of occult HBV on carcinogenesis could not be evaluated. Thus, a HBV DNA assay in the liver is needed for the evaluation of occult HBV on carcinogenesis. Although NBNC LC seemed to include varied etiology, occult HBV should be taken into account in the prediction of future HCC development in NBNC LC.

Our nationwide survey determined the etiology of NBNC LC in Japan. Future changes in etiology must be considered for the establishment of precise diagnostic strategies. We hope that these results contribute new ideas toward understanding NBNC LC and NBNC HCC.

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APPENDIX I

THE JAPAN NON-B, Non-C Liver Cirrhosis Study Group consists of the following members: Takashi Goto, Hirohide Ohnishi (Department of Gastroenterology, Akita University Graduate School of Medicine Akita University); Shigeaki Maeda, Yoshinori Saito (Department of Gastroenterology, Asahikawa-Kosei General Hospital); Shunsuke Nakajima, Masami Abe (Division of Gastroenterology and Hematology/Oncology, Department of Medicine, Asahikawa Medical University); Mituyoshi Okada, Masakazu Haneda (Division of Metabolism and Biosystemic Science, Department of Medicine, Asahikawa Medical University); Takaaki Hosoki, Chitomi Hasebe (Department of Gastroenterology, Asahikawa Red Cross Hospital); Shingo Nakamoto, Osamu Yokosuka (Department of Medicine and Clinical Oncology, Graduate School of Medicine, Chiba University); Toshimitsu Murohisa, Hideyuki Hiraishi (Department of Gastroenterology, Dokkyo Medical University); Taiki Utsunomiya, Kojiro Michitaka (Gastroenterology Center, Ehime Prefectural Central Hospital); Yoshio Tokumoto (Department of Gastroenterology and Metabolism, Ehime University Graduate School of Medicine); Yukiko Kanno, Hiromasa Ohira (Department of Gastroenterology and Rheumatology, Fukushima Medical University School of Medicine); Hiroaki Hashizume, Masatomo Mori (Department of Medicine and Molecular Science, Gunma University Graduate School of Medicine); Naoya Sakamoto (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine); Tomoko Aoki (Division of Hepatobiliary and Pancreatic Medicine, Department of Internal Medicine, Hyogo College of Medicine); Sumio Kawata (Hyogo Prefectural Nishinomiya Hospital); Kojiro Kataoka Kazuyuki Suzuki (Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, Iwate Medical University); Hiroshi Abe, Yoshio Aizawa (Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, The Jikei University School of Medicine, Katsushika Medical Center);

Kazuyoshi Kon, Sumio Watanabe (Department of Gastroenterology, Juntendo University School of Medicine); Akihiro Deguchi, Tsutomu Masaki (Department of Gastroenterology and Neurology, Faculty of Medicine, Kagawa University); Takashi Saito, Mikihiro Tsutsumi (Department of Gastroenterology, Kanazawa Medical University); Shingo Usui, Toshifumi Hibi (Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, Keio University School of Medicine); Youko Yoshimaru, Yutaka Sasaki (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Kumamoto University); Takumi Kawaguchi, Michio Sata (Division of Gastroenterology, Department of Medicine, Kurume University School of Medicine); Atsuhiko Morita (Department of Gastroenterology, Kyoto Second Red Cross Hospital); Ryosuke Sugimoto, Yoshiyuki Takei (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Mie University Graduate School of Medicine); Yuka Takahashi, Namiki Izumi (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Musashino Red Cross Hospital); Hiromitsu Mori, Shuichi Wada (Department of Gastroenterology, Nagano Red Cross Hospital); Masao Fujimoto, Hiroshi Fukui (Third Department of Internal Medicine, Nara Medical University); Yuichi Nozaki, Mikio Yanase (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, National Center for Global Health and Medicine); Yasuo Arakawa, Mitsuhiko Moriyama (Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Department of Medicine, Nihon University School of Medicine); Masaaki Hirano (Department of Internal Medicine, Niigata Prefectural Central Hospital); Hirokazu Kawai (Department of Clinical Laboratory, Niigata University Medical and Dental Hospital); Tadashi Doi, Toshinori Okuda (Department of Gastroenterology, Oji General Hospital); Hiroyasu Morikawa, Norifumi Kawada (Department of Hepatology, Graduate School of Medicine, Osaka City University); Masahide Oshita, Hideki Miyatake (Department of Internal Medicine, Osaka Police Hospital); Soo Ki Kim, Yukio Osaki (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Osaka Red Cross Hospital); Masatake Nishiwaki, Takeshi Okanoue (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Saiseikai Suita Hospital); Mie Inao, Satoshi Mochida (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Saitama Medical University); Ayana Endo, Atsushi Nagasaka (Department of Gastroenterology, Sapporo City General Hospital); Tomoaki Nakajima, Joji Toyota (Department of Hepatology, Sapporo Kosei General Hospital); Takehumi Kimura, Eiji Tanaka (Departments of Medicine, Shinshu University School of Medicine); Masaki Mikami, Hajime Takikawa (Department of

Medicine, Teikyo University School of Medicine); Hayato Shida, Kunihiko Tsuji (Center for Gastroenterology, Teine-Keijinkai Hospital); Yuki Nishimura-Sakurai (Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Tokyo Medical and Dental University); Shoichiro Yara, Yasushi Matsuzaki (Division of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Tokyo Medical University Ibaraki Medical Center); Maki Tobari (Internal Medicine, Institute of Gastroenterology, Tokyo Women's Medical University); Kenji Oyama (Tottori University Hospital Cancer Center); Yoshikazu Murawaki (Division of Medicine and

Clinical Science, Department of Multidisciplinary Internal Medicine, Tottori University School of Medicine); Kenichiro Enooku, Kazuhiko Koike (Department of Gastroenterology, Graduate School of Medicine, The University of Tokyo); Fumitake Amemiya, Nobuyuki Enomoto (First Department of Internal Medicine, University of Yamanashi); Masanori Matsuda, Hideki Fujii (First Department of Surgery, Faculty of Medicine, University of Yamanashi); and Rika Ishii (Department of Gastroenterology, Yamagata University Faculty of Medicine).

Original Article

Hepatitis C virus relapse was suppressed by long-term self-injection of low-dose interferon in patients with chronic hepatitis C after pegylated interferon plus ribavirin treatment

Tomoyuki Takashima,¹ Hirayuki Enomoto,¹ Toshiaki Ninomiya,³ Soo Ryang Kim,⁵ Hiroaki Okushin,⁸ Masahiko Sugano,⁹ Susumu Imoto,⁵ Yoshihiko Yano,⁶ Teruji Ooka,⁴ Yasushi Seo,⁶ Hiroshi Kasugai,⁷ Akira Muramatsu,¹⁰ Hisato Jomura,¹² Soji Shimomura,² Michiko Shindo,¹¹ Hideji Nakamura,¹³ Nobuhiro Aizawa,¹ Yoshinori Iwata,¹ Masaki Saito,¹ Hiroyasu Imanishi,¹ Hiroko Iijima¹ and Shuhei Nishiguchi¹

¹Division of Hepatobiliary and Pancreatic Disease, Department of Internal Medicine, ²General Medicine and Community Health Science, Sasayama Medical Center, Hyogo College Of Medicine, ³Ninomiya Internal Clinic, ⁴Ooka Clinic, Institute for Liver Disease, Nishinomiya, ⁵Kobe Asahi Hospital, ⁶Department of Gastroenterology, Kobe University Graduate School of Medicine, ⁷Kasugai Clinic, Kobe, ⁸Japanese Red Cross Himeji Hospital, ⁹Sugano Internal Medical Clinic, Himeji, ¹⁰Meimai Central Hospital, ¹¹Akashi Municipal Hospital, Akashi, ¹²Wakakoukai Clinic, and ¹³Nippon Life Saiseikai Public Interest Incorporated Foundation, Nissay Hospital, Osaka, Japan

Aim: The recommended treatment for chronic hepatitis C is a combination of pegylated interferon (PEG IFN) plus ribavirin (RBV). However, the sustained virological response (SVR) rate of PEG IFN-RBV therapy was approximately 50% in patients with genotype 1b and a high viral load. Thus, we compared the efficiencies and side-effects of PEG IFN-RBV and self-injected low-dose natural (n) IFN- α in patients with hepatitis C virus (HCV).

Methods: A prospective, multicenter, open-label study was conducted in 12 Japanese institutions. A total of 129 patients with chronic hepatitis C and no detectable HCV after 24–72 weeks of PEG IFN-RBV treatment were assigned to the control ($n = 82$) or treated ($n = 47$) group. Treated patients received 3 million units of nIFN- α 2–3 times/week over 96 weeks. The groups were compared regarding treatment efficiency and side-effects.

Results: Significant treatment success regarding virus negativation rates was found, with 89% and 73% for the

treated and control groups, respectively ($P = 0.039$). In contrast, there was no difference in relapse rate between the groups 24 weeks after the 96-week nIFN- α treatment ($P = 0.349$). However, when early viral responders and late viral responders (LVR) were separated, LVR patients responded significantly to the treatment with 90% sustained virological response, compared to 53% for the control group ($P = 0.044$). The side-effects of nIFN- α were less than that of PEG IFN-RBV treatment.

Conclusion: Self-injected nIFN- α has larger benefits than prolonged PEG IFN-RBV for chronic hepatitis C patients with high viral loads of genotype 1b who fail to achieve early viral response during initial combination treatment.

Key words: chronic hepatitis C, hepatitis C virus, interferon- α , pegylated interferon

Correspondence: Dr Hirayuki Enomoto, Division of Hepatobiliary and Pancreatic Disease, Department of Internal Medicine, Hyogo College of Medicine, 1-1 Mukogawa, Nishinomiya, Hyogo 663-8501, Japan. Email: enomoto@hyo-med.ac.jp

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INTRODUCTION

CHRONIC HEPATITIS C virus (HCV) infection currently affects nearly 200 million people worldwide, and is the leading cause of liver cirrhosis and liver cancer.¹⁻⁴ Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) is induced by viral proteins activating signaling pathways, and indirectly by chronic inflammation. Accordingly, standard treatments currently combine antiviral ribavirin (RBV) and a pegylated form of interferon- α (PEG IFN- α). Unfortunately, the success rate of this treatment depends upon the genotype of the virus. Clinical studies demonstrate that PEG IFN plus RBV is effective in 90% of patients with genotype 2 HCV after 24 weeks,^{5,6} whereas only 50% of patients with intractable hepatitis (genotype 1 HCV and high viral load) respond even after 48 weeks of treatment.⁷⁻¹¹ Therefore, further research is necessary to address patients whom are refractory to standard PEG IFN plus RBV treatments.

A combination of PEG IFN plus RBV is used to treat high HCV genotype 1b viral loads, and a sustained virological response (SVR) rate of 70–80% can be achieved in patients who show a complete disappearance of the virus at week 12, considered a complete early virological response (cEVR). However, SVR rates are low in late virological response (LVR) patients who show a complete disappearance of the virus after 13 weeks.¹²⁻¹⁷ Prolonged administration of PEG IFN plus RBV over a 72-week period increases the SVR rates¹⁸⁻²⁴ and has guaranteed treatment efficacy; but, the longer the treatment duration, the more frequently the patient must attend the hospital, which will be a burden on the patient, and the incidence rate of side-effects also increases.

Accordingly, the current guidelines for the treatment of hepatitis C state that, for the prevention of carcinogenesis, long-term administration of low-dose IFN is preferable in patients for whom RBV combination therapy is contraindicated, or in patients who are unresponsive to RBV combination therapy.²⁵⁻³⁵ Since April 2005, self-injection of IFN- α at home has been covered by health insurance in Japan, and administration of the medication at home has been made possible. Particularly when administered at night, which is more possible to do at one's home, IFN- α is less likely to affect the circadian rhythm of endogenous cortisol than when administered in the morning,³⁶ which is promising in reducing its side-effects.

However, the treatment efficiency of self-injected natural IFN- α (nIFN- α) has not been evaluated. In addition, the therapeutic efficacy of self-injected IFN- α after combination therapy including RBV for over 48 weeks is

unclear and the therapy's use could result in concerns of poor adherence due to side-effects such as anemia. Therefore, a reduction of the dose of IFN and a transition to self-injection would be preferable.

To this end, we conducted a multicenter study involving 12 medical institutions located in Kinki district, Japan. The aim was to test the efficiency of low-dose self-injected IFN- α in patients diagnosed with high viral loads of HCV genotype 1b. Patients who achieved an EVR or LVR at the end of treatment proceeded with self-injections of low-dose nIFN- α for 96 weeks and were periodically monitored for clinical symptoms and relapse of HCV infection.

METHODS

Patients

THE PROSPECTIVE MULTICENTER study was conducted between 1 April 2006 and 1 March 2012 at 12 medical institutions located in Kinki district, Japan. The patients enrolled were diagnosed with high viral loads (HCV TaqMan ≥ 5.0 logIU/mL) of HCV genotype 1b, had completed a 24–72-week combination therapy of PEG IFN- α plus RBV, and were aged 20 years or older on the day they provided consent.

The following subjects were excluded from the study: (i) patients with a history of hypersensitivity to IFN formulations; (ii) patients with chronic liver diseases other than hepatitis C, such as chronic hepatitis B, autoimmune hepatitis and alcoholic hepatitis; (iii) patients with severe depression or neuropsychiatric disorders; (iv) patients with severe complications (renal disorders, heart disease, hypertension, diabetes, autoimmune diseases and asthma); (v) patients with a history of interstitial pneumonia; and (vi) pregnant women, lactating women or women who were likely to be pregnant.

Study design

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the efficiency of low-dose self-injected IFN- α in patients diagnosed with high viral loads of HCV genotype 1b. We investigated several concerns, including side-effects and relapse rates, as well as prevention of disease progression, including HCC development. This study was an open-label prospective multicenter study in which a combination therapy of RBV with PEG IFN- α -2a (Pegasys; Chugai Co. Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) or - α -2b (Pegintron; MSD Co. Ltd., Tokyo, Japan) was conducted for 24–72 weeks on patients with high viral loads of HCV genotype 1b. Among the patients whose serum HCV RNA was negative at the completion of treatment,

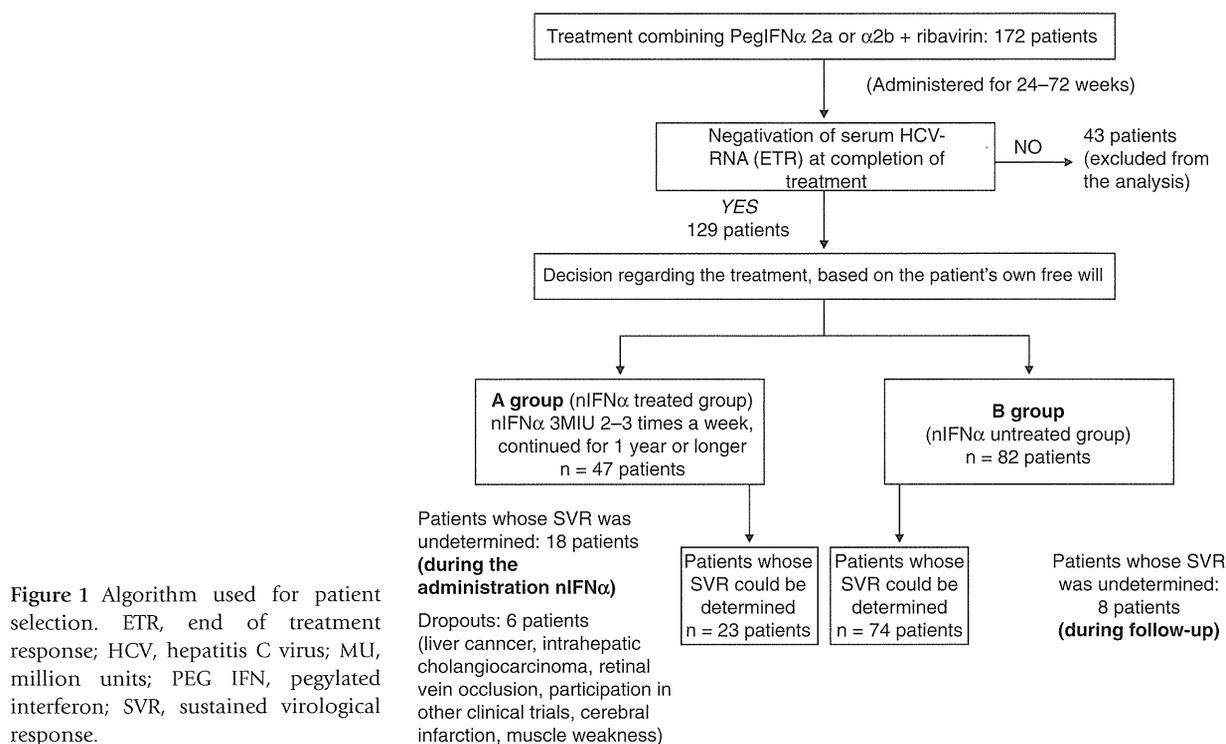


Figure 1 Algorithm used for patient selection. ETR, end of treatment response; HCV, hepatitis C virus; MU, million units; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; SVR, sustained virological response.

47 were treated with a prolonged administration of nIFN- α (Sumiferon; Dainippon Sumitomo Co. Ltd., Osaka, Japan) by self-injection at a dose of 3 million units (MU) 2–3 times a week for year or longer (group A) and the therapeutic efficacy was prospectively compared with that of 82 non-treated patients (group B). In the present study, treatment was selected based on the patient's own free will (Fig. 1). The combination therapy of PEG IFN- α plus RBV was conducted in accordance with the recommended initial dose described in the attached document, and in consideration of each patient's bodyweight.

This study design was reviewed and approved by our university hospital's ethics committee (approval no. 352). The determination of genetic polymorphism in interleukin (IL)-28B rs8099917 was also reviewed and approved by our ethics committee on genetics (approval no. rin-hi-92). This study was conducted in compliance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Each patient signed an informed consent form for the research and for the disclosure of their genetic information.

Measurements pertaining to IL-28B were conducted using the TaqMan probe method,³⁷ and those pertaining to HCV amino acid 70 in the core region (core70) and the interferon sensitivity-determining region

(ISDR) were conducted using a direct sequencing method.^{38,39}

Questionnaire survey

For the 41 patients who performed self-injections of nIFN- α (group A) (recovery rate, 87.2%), a patient survey was conducted after the transition from PEG IFN plus RBV treatment to the nIFN- α self-injection protocol.

The contents of the questionnaire survey included technical issues pertaining to the self-injection of nIFN- α , the severity of side-effects, and changes in daily life due to the switch from PEG IFN plus RBV to nIFN- α , as well as any inconveniences encountered during the administration of each medication.

Treatment success assessment through HCV RNA levels and viral load

In group A, therapeutic efficacy was evaluated at two time points, 24 weeks after completion of PEG IFN plus RBV and 24 weeks after completion of nIFN- α . In group B, the therapeutic efficacy was evaluated 24 weeks after completion of PEG IFN plus RBV. In both groups, the evaluations were based on the amount of HCV RNA (TaqMan PCR method) present in the serum.

Table 1 Comparison of patient backgrounds (all patients)

No. of patients	Group A 47	Group B 82	<i>P</i> -value
Age (mean value \pm SD)	58.8 \pm 9.8	56.3 \pm 10.5	0.1710
Sex (male/female)	30/17	47/35	0.4680
Median ALT (IU/L) (range)	43 (18–157)	54 (3–228)	0.1151
Median HCV RNA (log IU/mL) (range)	6.5 (5.1–7.5)	6.2 (5.1–7.4)	0.1026
PEG IFN- α -2a/PEG IFN- α -2b	5/42	12/70	0.5184
Mean duration of PEG IFN treatment (weeks)	53.4 \pm 11.6	49.2 \pm 13.2	0.0301
†F stage (F0/F1/F2/F3/F4)	(2/12/13/5/3)	(4/26/13/7/1)	0.4009
†A grade (A0/A1/A2/A3)	(1/24/8/2)	(1/19/27/4)	0.0449
History of liver cancer	2	1	0.2657
‡IL-28B SNP rs8099917 (TT/non-TT)	23/2	41/7	0.4168
‡Core70 (wild/mutant)	9/9	23/7	0.0577

†Only patients who signed an informed consent to undergo liver biopsy were analyzed. ‡Only patients who signed an informed consent to check each marker were analyzed.

ALT, alanine aminotransferase; HCV, hepatitis C virus; IL, interleukin; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; SD, standard deviation; SNP, single nucleotide polymorphism.

In addition, evaluations according to the timing of the negatification of viral load were also conducted to determine whether the recurrence of HCV could be inhibited in patients whose HCV RNA was successfully maintained below detectable levels 24 weeks after completion of PEG IFN plus RBV. The rates of SVR in group A and B were evaluated and were also assessed according to the negatification of viral load.

Statistical analysis

Per protocol-based (PPB) analysis was performed and JUMP9 analysis software was used for analysis. The patients' backgrounds (normally distributed data) were analyzed using Student's *t*-test and the χ^2 -test, the recurrence rate and SVR rate were analyzed using the χ^2 -test and the questionnaire count (non-normally distributed data) was analyzed by the Mann-Whitney *U*-test. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Patient selection and characteristics

DURING THIS MULTICENTER prospective study, a total of 172 patients diagnosed with high viral loads of HCV genotype 1b received PEG IFN plus RBV treatment. Of these 172 patients, 129 had HCV RNA levels that fell below the level of detection after 24–72 weeks of PEG IFN plus RBV treatment (Table 1). These 129 patients elected to initiate the secondary treatment

of self-injected nIFN- α . They were assigned to the control group (untreated; $n = 82$) or those receiving nIFN- α (treated; $n = 47$).

The algorithm of patient selection is shown in Figure 1. The study was multicenter, prospective and based on each patient's choice; the entries included 47 patients in group A and 82 patients in group B.

In group A, six patients discontinued treatment during administration of nIFN- α for the following reasons: development of liver cancer (one patient), intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma (one patient), retinal vein occlusion (one patient), participation in other clinical trials (one patient), cerebral infarction (one patient), and muscle weakness and gait disturbance (one patient). The characteristics of the two groups did not differ significantly in terms of age, sex, viral load, history of liver cancer and stage of liver disease (Table 1). The two groups also received similar primary PEG IFN plus RBV treatment, except for slightly shorter durations in group B.

The study was conducted on consenting patients whose core70, ISDR mutations and IL-28B could be measured. Core70 mutants were found in 50.0% (9/18) of group A and 23.3% (7/30) of group B ($P = 0.057$). ISDR 0–1 amino acid substitutions were present in 73.3% (11/15) patients in group A and 42.8% (9/21) in group B ($P = 0.069$), with no significant difference between the two groups. However, refractory virological cases tended to be higher in group A. The non-TT type IL-28B were found in 8.0% (2/25) of patients in group A and 14.5% (7/48) in group B ($P = 0.416$); there was no

Table 2 Comparison of patient backgrounds (patients whose SVR could be determined)

No. of patients	Group A 23	Group B 74	P-value
Age (years) (mean value \pm SD)	55.4 \pm 9.30	56.9 \pm 10.23	0.5332
Sex (male/female)	13/10	41/33	0.9250
Median ALT (IU/L) (range)	43 (18–157)	54 (3–228)	0.5088
Median HCV RNA (log IU/mL) (range)	6.4 (5.2–7.0)	6.2 (5.1–7.4)	0.8229
PEG IFN- α -2 α /PEG IFN- α -2b	1/22	9/65	0.2817
Mean duration of PEG IFN treatment (weeks)	48.7 \pm 6.0	48.7 \pm 13.0	0.9897
Mean duration of nIFN- α treatment (weeks)	84.0 \pm 36.7	NA	NA
†F stage (F0/F1/F2/F3/F4)	(1/6/8/2/0)	(2/26/13/7/1)	0.5805
†A grade (A0/A1/A2/A3)	(0/12/4/1)	(1/17/27/4)	0.1001
History of liver cancer	1	1	0.3770
‡IL-28B SNP rs8099917 (TT/non-TT)	17/2	30/4	0.8914
EVR	10/0	24/3	0.2715
LVR	7/2	6/1	0.6865
‡Core70 (wild/mutant)	9/7	12/6	0.5327
EVR	5/4	10/5	0.5862
LVR	4/3	2/1	0.7781

†Only patients who signed an informed consent to undergo liver biopsy were analyzed. ‡Only patients who signed an informed consent to check each marker were analyzed.

ALT, alanine aminotransferase; EVR, early virological response; HCV, hepatitis C virus; IL, interleukin; LVR, late virological response; NA, not applicable; nIFN- α , natural interferon- α ; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; SD, standard deviation; SNP, single nucleotide polymorphisms; SVR, sustained virological response.

significant difference in genetic background between the two groups in patients whose SVR could be determined (Table 2).

In group A, five patients were treated with PEG IFN- α -2a plus RBV and 42 patients were treated with PEG IFN- α -2b plus RBV, whereas in group B, 12 patients were treated with PEG IFN- α -2a plus RBV and 70 patients were treated with PEG IFN- α -2b plus RBV. The mean duration of treatment was 54.3 \pm 11.6 weeks of patients in group A and 49.2 \pm 13.2 weeks in group B.

The backgrounds of patients in group A (23 patients) and group B (74 patients) were examined 24 weeks after completion of nIFN- α or PEG IFN plus RBV treatment, respectively (Table 2). In group A, one patient received PEG IFN- α -2a plus RBV and 22 patients received PEG IFN- α -2b plus RBV, whereas in group B, nine patients received PEG IFN- α -2a plus RBV and 65 patients received PEG IFN- α -2b plus RBV. The mean duration of treatment was 48.7 \pm 6.0 weeks for group A and 48.7 \pm 13.0 weeks for group B. In addition, in group A, nIFN- α treatment was initiated after completion of PEG IFN- α -2a plus RBV or PEG IFN- α -2b plus RBV, and the mean duration of nIFN- α treatment was 84.0 \pm 36.7 weeks.

Virological relapse rates in early and late viral responders

The capacity of nIFN- α self-injection to control HCV infection was tested by comparing the virus negativation rates of the two groups after 24 weeks of treatment (Fig. 2). A total of 10 patients (two in group A and eight in group B) who had not passed 24 weeks after the completion of the PEG IFN plus RBV treatment were excluded from this analysis. Therefore, Figure 2 includes the results obtained from the 45 (group A) and 74 cases (group B), respectively.

The treated group showed a significant treatment success rate compared to the control group, with virus negativation rates of 89.0% and 73.0%, respectively ($P = 0.039$). This comparison was performed under the condition that the patients in group A continue the low-dose nIFN- α treatment, and did not directly indicate the increased SVR rate. However, our result suggests that the self-injection IFN treatment can suppress HCV relapse.

Analysis of the time of negativation after completion of PEG IFN plus RBV treatment revealed that the relapse rate among EVR patients was 4.5% (1/22) in group A

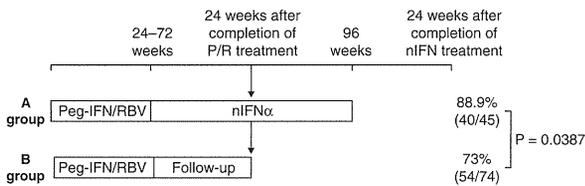


Figure 2 Virus negatigation rate 6 months after completion of PEG IFN plus RBV treatment. The negatigation rates of HCV RNA were compared 6 months after completion of PEG IFN plus RBV treatment. In group A, during the administration of nIFN- α , the recurrence rate was 11% and the negatigation rate was 88.9%. In group B, determination of the SVR was possible, and the SVR rate was 73%. The rates were significantly higher in group A than in group B ($P = 0.0387$). nIFN- α , natural interferon; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; RBV, ribavirin; SVR, sustained virological response.

and 20.0% (11/55) in group B, and that the relapse rate was lower in group A than in group B ($P = 0.0912$, χ^2 -test). Among LVR patients, the relapse rate was 17.4% (4/23) in group A and 47.4% (9/19) in group B, with a significant difference ($P = 0.0364$, χ^2 -test) between groups.

SVR rates

In group A, it was possible to follow up with 23 patients up to 24 weeks after completion of nIFN- α treatment, and SVR was found in 19 patients (82.6%). This percentage was slightly higher than the SVR rate in group B (73.0%), but no significant difference was found ($P = 0.3495$, χ^2 -test) between the groups (Fig. 3).

Treatment success was further assessed by separating the early and late virological responders in each group. In EVR patients, the SVR was not affected by nIFN- α self-injection. In contrast, LVR patients responded

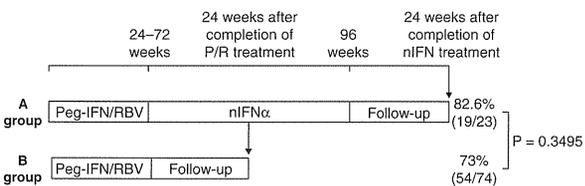


Figure 3 SVR rate after completion of IFN treatment. In group A, 23 patients were evaluated 6 months after completion of nIFN- α treatment, and 19 of them (82.6%) showed an SVR. Although the SVR rate was higher than that found in group B, there was no significant difference between the two groups. nIFN- α , natural interferon; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; RBV, ribavirin; SVR, sustained virological response.

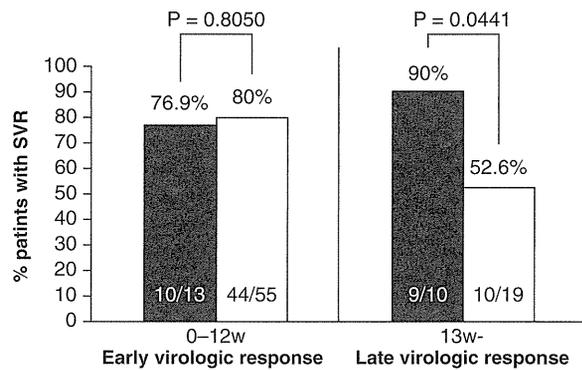


Figure 4 Timing of the HCV viral load negatigation during administration of PEG IFN plus RBV treatment and the subsequent SVR rate. In EVR patients, no difference in SVR rates was found between group A and group B. In LVR patients, group A had a significantly higher SVR rate than group B. EVR, early virological response; HCV, hepatitis C virus; LVR, late viral responders; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; RBV, ribavirin; SVR, sustained virological response. ■, group A; □, group B.

significantly to treatment, with 90% SVR, compared to 53% in the control group ($P = 0.044$) (Fig. 4). These data suggest that treatment may be particularly efficient for a subset of patients.

We also analyzed the SVR rate for each type of IL-28B, core70 and ISDR. Patients with the IL-28B major allele (type TT) had an SVR rate of 69.6% (16/23) in group A and 78.0% (32/41) in group B, and patients with the minor allele (type TG/GG) had an SVR rate of 100% (2/2) in group A and 57.1% (4/7) in group B. Patients with wild-type core70 had an SVR rate of 88.9% (8/9) in group A and 91.3% (21/23) in group B, and patients with mutant core70 had an SVR rate of 77.8% (7/9) in group A and 71.4% (5/7) in group B. Patients with two or more ISDR mutations had an SVR rate of 100% (4/4) in group A and 75.0% (9/12) in group B, and patients with a 0-1 ISDR mutation, had an SVR rate of 72.7% (8/11) in group A and 77.8% (7/9) in group B. Although a significant difference of SVR rate was found in the late responders, the frequency of IL-28B single nucleotide polymorphisms were not different between groups A and B (Table 2).

Quality of life

A questionnaire survey regarding the subjective symptoms accompanying PEG IFN plus RBV and self-injected nIFN- α , as well as the patients' impression of the treatment, was conducted on 41 patients (recovery rate, 87.2%) using by asking the following questions:

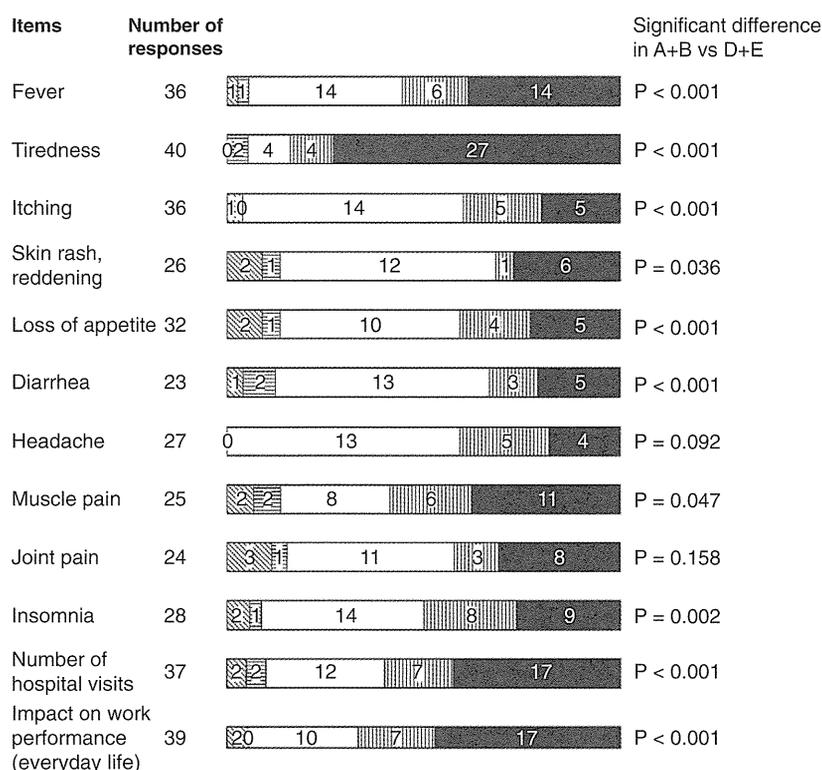


Figure 5 Comparison between PEG IFN plus RBV and self-injected nIFN- α regarding criteria for the evaluation of side-effects and treatment. The following question was asked of 41 patients in group A during administration of nIFN- α : “When the treatment was switched from PEG IFN plus RBV to nIFN- α , which treatment was better in terms of the symptoms and impact on everyday life? PEG IFN plus RBV or self-injected nIFN- α ?” The results obtained from this question revealed that the self-injection of nIFN- α was better, with a significant difference ($P < 0.05$, Mann-Whitney U -test) in terms of fever, general fatigue, itching, skin rash or redness, loss of appetite, diarrhea, muscle pain, insomnia, number of hospital visits and impact on performance at work. In contrast, there was no difference between the two treatments with respect to headache and joint pain. nIFN- α , natural interferon; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; RBV, ribavirin. □, (A) PEG IFN plus RBV was better; ▨, (B) PEG IFN plus RBV was slightly better; ▩, (C) the two were equal; ▪, (D) nIFN- α was slightly better; ■, (E) nIFN- α was better. nIFN- α , natural interferon; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; RBV, ribavirin.

1 “When the treatment was switched from PEG IFN plus RBV to nIFN- α , which treatment was better in terms of the items pertaining to symptoms and everyday life? PEG IFN plus RBV or the self-injection of nIFN- α ?” The results obtained from this question showed that self-injection of nIFN- α was significantly better ($P < 0.05$, Mann-Whitney U -test) in terms of fever, general fatigue, itching, skin rash or redness, loss of appetite, diarrhea, muscle pain, insomnia, number of hospital visits and impact on performance at work. In contrast, there was no difference between the two treatments with respect to headache and joint pain (Fig. 5).

2 “Based on your overall impression, which treatment was better when conducted after the 1-year administration of PEG IFN plus RBV? The treatment consisting of continuing PEG IFN plus RBV or the treatment when switched to self-injection of nIFN- α ?” Figure 6 shows that nearly 42% of the patients stated that nIFN- α self-injection was better than prolonging the combination treatment. When the answers quoting nIFN- α as “better” or “slightly better” were included, the results showed that the overall side-effects of self-injection of nIFN- α as well as the severity of its interference with everyday life were significantly lower than those associated with PEG IFN plus RBV

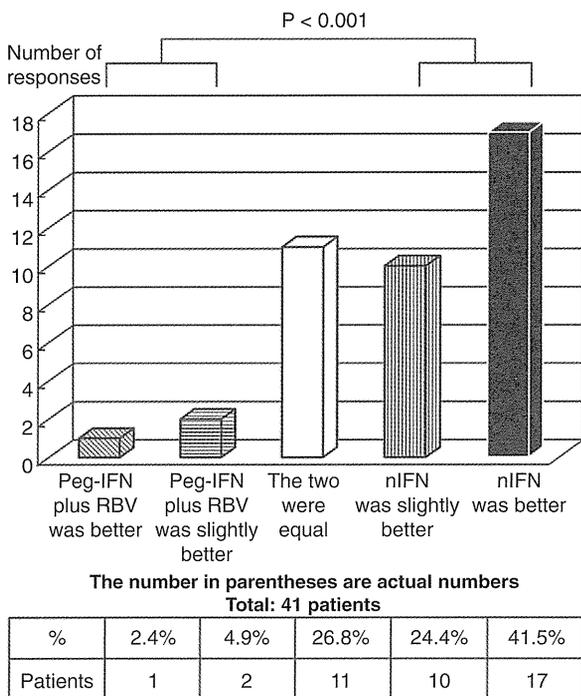


Figure 6 Overall impressions regarding the relative merits of PEG IFN plus RBV and the self-injection of nIFN- α as a treatment. The following question was asked of the 41 patients in group A: "Your treatment has been changed to a self-injection of sumiferon after the 1-year administration of PEG IFN plus RBV. Do you think that a continuation of PEG IFN plus RBV would have been better? Or, do you think that changing the treatment to a self-injection of nIFN- α was better?" Statements of "self-injection of nIFN- α was better" accounted for 65.9% of responses, and were significantly larger in number. nIFN- α , natural interferon; PEG IFN, pegylated interferon; RBV, ribavirin.

treatment ($P = 0.00000011$, Mann-Whitney U -test) (Fig. 6).

- 3 "Are there specific side-effects or problematic issues associated with the treatment during the administration of PEG IFN plus RBV or after the transition to self-injection of nIFN- α ? Multiple answers are allowed." The respondents cited a total of 65 problems and side-effects associated with PEG IFN plus RBV, including seven answers mentioning "feeling sluggish", five that mentioned "attending outpatient treatment was tiresome", five mentioned a loss of appetite, seven mentioned itchy skin, two mentioned a skin rash and two mentioned fever. The respondents mentioned 42 troubles associated with the tran-

sition to self-injection of nIFN- α , including seven that were reluctant to self-inject, and two that reported the storage (management) of the medication was tiresome. Although there was dissatisfaction with the self-injection itself, the side-effects of nIFN- α were of minor severity, and therapeutic problems were fewer, compared to those found with PEG IFN plus RBV treatment.

DISCUSSION

SEVERAL PAPERS HAVE examined the utility of prolonging PEG IFN plus RBV treatment by 72 weeks in cases of slow virological response for high viral loads of HCV genotype 1b. Previous reports have stated that the SVR rate was 38–48% in Europe and the USA^{18–23} and 36–60% in Japan.²⁴ In this study, only patients who achieved an end of treatment response were examined, but when only LVR patients were considered, the administration of nIFN- α resulted in an SVR rate of 90.0% (9/10), which indicated a favorable outcome. As nIFN- α self-injection is a properly validated drug for treatment of chronic hepatitis C, it was ethically difficult to design a completely randomized clinical trial, and the patients in this study were therefore not randomly assigned to the two groups. Furthermore, the duration of PEG IFN plus RBV treatment in the present study varied between 24 and 72 weeks, and the differing durations would influence SVR rate, as well as the prevalence of adverse events. Therefore, results obtained from this study may have some limitations. However, our results suggest that nIFN- α self-injection improves the SVR rate in patients treated with PEG IFN plus RBV, particularly in patients with LVR.

Administration of nIFN- α , even at low doses, resulted in a decreased recurrence rate in LVR patients whose viral loads had once decreased below detectable levels due to treatment with PEG IFN plus RBV. Thus, when prolonging treatment beyond 48 weeks, sufficient therapeutic efficacy with few side-effects can be achieved with self-injected nIFN- α monotherapy, even at low doses. In addition, low doses of nIFN- α monotherapy had fewer side-effects than continuation of PEG IFN plus RBV; the switch to self-injection also proved to be effective, and was better in terms of acceptability.

The results of the patient questionnaire in this study demonstrated that, taking into consideration symptoms due to IFN administration and the changes affecting everyday life, the self-injection of nIFN- α was significantly more acceptable than administration of PEG IFN plus RBV. The differences were particularly large regard-

ing items such as fever, general fatigue and the number of hospital visits; switching the treatment to self-injected nIFN- α resulted in an improvement of the quality of life. However, we did not directly compare the prolonged PEG IFN plus RBV for 24 weeks or self-injected nIFN- α for 1 year or longer; therefore we cannot conclusively state the difference in SVR rate or quality of life between the two therapies (prolonged PEG IFN plus RBV for 24 weeks and self-injected nIFN- α). Furthermore, despite the fact that severe IFN therapy-related adverse events often occur in elderly patients, we did not assure the low adverse events of the long-term nIFN- α treatment in the elderly patients because we conducted an anonymous survey. The prolonged PEG IFN plus RBV for 24 weeks may have some advantages in elderly patients because of its shorter duration of treatment when compared with self-injected nIFN- α for 1 year or longer.

Due to the small number of cases that could be analyzed, no significant difference was found; however, in refractory cases with mutant-type core70 and IL-28B minor allele, the SVR rate was found to be more elevated in group A than in group B, suggesting that continuous administration of nIFN- α may also affect the SVR in more refractory cases.

A new triple therapy (PEG IFN-RBV plus a protease inhibitor) with an increased SVR rate was recently approved for use in Japan. PEG IFN plus RBV is not a standard therapy for patients with high viral loads of genotype 1b, and our conclusion that self-injected nIFN- α has larger benefits may have less impact on the triple therapy. However, the highly efficient therapy may cause certain severe adverse events,⁴⁰ and many patients in the present study selected the self-injection therapy as the less stressful therapy (Fig. 6), suggesting that self-injection therapy may be an acceptable method for raising the SVR rate with comparatively mild side-effects.

The combination therapy with the direct anti-viral agent (DAA) allows for the shortened duration of treatment. Although we did not investigate the inhibitory effect of hepatocarcinogenesis in the observation period of this study, IFN treatment is known to suppress the development of HCC even in patients without SVR,²⁹⁻³¹ suggesting that IFN treatment inhibits hepatocarcinogenesis through several mechanisms, in addition to HCV eradication. Therefore, it remains unknown whether the rate of carcinogenesis in patients who achieve SVR with a shortened-period IFN treatment or IFN-free treatment with DAA is equal to that in the patients who achieve SVR with a long-term IFN treat-

ment. Further work is needed to investigate the rate of HCC development in patients who achieved SVR by means of the shortened treatment. No significant difference was found regarding the inhibitory effect on carcinogenesis, but the administration of 3 MU of nIFN- α tended to increase the number of patients with stable alanine aminotransferase levels of less than 20 IU and α -fetoprotein levels of less than 5 ng/mL (data not shown). Therefore, non-responders for the triple therapy as well as DAA combination therapy may require low-dose IFN therapy to prevent HCC development. An inhibitory effect could be promising if the number of such cases increases and a long-term follow up is performed.

In conclusion, this study suggests that there are more benefits of low-dose nIFN- α self-injection than of prolonged PEG IFN plus RBV treatment for chronic hepatitis C patients with high viral loads of genotype 1b who fail to achieve early viral response during the initial combination treatment.

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Original Article

Nationwide survey in Japan regarding splenectomy/partial splenic embolization for interferon treatment targeting hepatitis C virus-related chronic liver disease in patients with low platelet count

Naoto Ikeda,¹ Hiroyasu Imanishi,¹ Nobuhiro Aizawa,¹ Hironori Tanaka,¹ Yoshinori Iwata,¹ Hirayuki Enomoto,¹ Masaki Saito,¹ Hiroko Iijima,¹ Yuji Iimuro,² Jiro Fujimoto,² Satoshi Yamamoto,³ Shozo Hirota,³ Masatoshi Kudo,⁴ Shigeki Arii⁵ and Shuhei Nishiguchi¹

¹Division of Hepatobiliary and Pancreatic Disease, Department of Internal Medicine, Departments of ²Surgery and ³Radiology, Hyogo College of Medicine, Nishinomiya, ⁴Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, Faculty of Medicine, Kinki University, Sayama, and ⁵Department of Hepato-Biliary-Pancreatic Surgery, Tokyo Medical and Dental University, Tokyo, Japan

Aim: In chronic liver disease associated with hepatitis C virus (HCV), a low platelet count is a major obstacle in carrying out interferon (IFN) treatment. We used a questionnaire to clarify the extent to which splenectomy/partial splenic embolization (PSE) is performed before IFN treatment, as well as the efficacy and complications thereof.

Methods: Two questionnaires were distributed to 413 medical institutes in Japan specializing in the treatment of liver diseases, and responses were obtained from 204 institutes. Furthermore, a more detailed questionnaire was completed by 10 institutes that experienced cases of death.

Results: In patients with HCV genotype 1b and a high viral load (HCV1b/High), the sustained viral response (SVR) rate was 28% for the splenectomy group and 22% for the PSE group, with no significant difference between these groups. In patients that were not HCV1b/High, the SVR rate was higher

in those that underwent splenectomy (71%) compared to the PSE group (56%; $P = 0.025$). There were cases of death in seven of 799 splenectomy cases (0.89%) and four of 474 PSE cases (0.84%). Infectious diseases were involved in nine of 11 cases of death, with a peculiar patient background of Child-Pugh B (6/10) and an age of 60 years or greater (7/11).

Conclusion: The application of splenectomy/PSE before IFN treatment should be avoided in patients with poor residual hepatic function and/or elderly patients. In HCV1b/High patients, splenectomy/PSE should be performed only after selecting those in which IFN treatment should be highly effective.

Key words: chronic hepatitis C, interferon, low platelet count, partial splenic embolization, questionnaires, splenectomy

Correspondence: Professor Shuhei Nishiguchi, Division of Hepatobiliary and Pancreatic Disease, and Department of Internal Medicine, Hyogo College of Medicine, 1-1 Mukogawa-cho, Nishinomiya, Hyogo 663-8501, Japan. Email: nishiguc@hyo-med.ac.jp

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INTRODUCTION

IN JAPAN, MANY patients with hepatitis C virus (HCV)-related chronic liver disease (CLD) exhibit advanced aging and a long disease duration. These patients often have pancytopenia due to hypersplenism caused by advanced liver fibrosis, thus leading to difficulty in receiving a sufficient dose of interferon (IFN). Because low adherence to IFN often results in treatment failure, pancytopenia, including low platelet count, is a major challenge for IFN therapy in Japanese HCV-infected patients.