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Scandinavian Journal of Surgery 102: 101–105, 2013

HUMAN EARLY LIVER REGENERATION AFTER HEPATECTOMY IN PATIENTS WITH HEPATOCELLULAR CARCINOMA: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO AGE

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ABSTRACT

Background and Aims: This study was conducted to clarify the effects of age on human liver regeneration.

Patients and Methods: Thirty major hepatectomies, equal to or more than two segmentectomies for hepatocellular carcinoma, were performed. Ages ranged from 37 to 85 years and five octogenarians were included. The early regenerative index was defined: (liver volume after 7 days after hepatectomy – estimated remnant liver volume before hepatectomy)/ estimated remnant liver volume, using three-dimensional computed tomographic volumetry. Farnesoid X receptor and forkhead box m1 expression in the liver, which has been reported to age-related decrease of liver regeneration in animal model, were examined using real-time polymerase chain reaction. The patients were divided into two groups: low early regenerative index (n = 15), early regenerative index less than 55% and high early regenerative index (n = 15), early regenerative index equal to or more than 55%.

Results: The mean early regenerative index was 57%. Age (R^2 = 0.274, P = 0.003) and estimated blood loss (R^2 = 0.134, P = 0.0466) were inversely correlated with the early regenerative index, and the expression of farnesoid X receptor and forkhead box m1 was not. The incidence of posthepatectomy liver failure in the low early regenerative index group was higher than that in the high early regenerative index group (P = 0.0421).

Conclusions: Age and intraoperative blood loss are inversely correlated with early liver regeneration in humans. In elderly patients, massive blood loss should be avoided in view of liver regeneration.

Key words: Liver regeneration, hepatic resection, human, age, early regenerative index

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INTRODUCTION

The liver is a unique organ that is able to regenerate itself after surgical resections (1–3). The loss of regenerative capacity is the most dramatic age-associated alteration in the liver. The regenerative capacity of the liver has been widely proven in experimental animal models. Although this phenomenon in experimental animal models was reported over 40 years ago (4), aging and liver regeneration in humans are not fully understood. The effects of liver cirrhosis (5) and portal pressure (6) have been reported, but the effect of age has not been

TABLE 1
Clinicopathological background.

Factors	Mean	Range
Age	69	37–85
Sex (male:female)	26:4	
Hepatitis virus status (HCV:HBV:NBNC)	9:5:16	
Diabetes mellitus (Yes/No)	12/18	
Hypertension (Yes/No)	5/25	
ASA classification (I/II)	6/24	
Total protein (g/dL)	7.3	6.2–8.1
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	0.7	0.4–1.4
Albumin (g/dL)	3.9	3.2–4.6
Prothrombin time (%)	92	64–117
Platelets ($\times 10^3/mm^3$)	217	109–413
AST (IU/L)	56	15–291
ALT (IU/L)	33	15–126
ALP (IU/L)	312	141–1236
ICGR15 (%)	10.0	3.1–16.6
Estimated blood loss (g)	864	140–4800
Blood transfusion (U)	1	0–10
Resected liver volume (g)	656	252–1800
Operation time (min)	443	260–770
Histological liver fibrosis (NL/CH/LF/LC)	11/9/4/6	
Expression of FXR by RT-PCR	2182	648–7951
Expression of Fox M1B by RT-PCR	1900	191–4512

HCV: hepatitis C virus; HBV: hepatitis B virus; NBNC: non-B non-C; ASA: American Association of Anesthesiologists; AST: aspartate aminotransferase; ALT: alanine aminotransferase; ALP: alkaline phosphatase; ICGR15: indocyanine green retention test at 15 min; NL: normal liver; CH: chronic hepatitis; LF: liver fibrosis; LC: liver cirrhosis; FXR: farnesoid X receptor; Fox M1B: forkhead box m1b; RT-PCR: real-time polymerase chain reaction.

well studied. This may be because patients who underwent hepatic resection were not very old in previous studies.

In developed countries, the number of elderly patients with hepatobiliary malignancies has increased due to life expectancy being prolonged (7). In hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), Wu et al. (8) reported zero mortality in 21 patients over 80 years of age who underwent hepatic resection. The authors also showed that more than 10% of the patients who underwent hepatic resection were octogenarians, and they demonstrated the feasibility of hepatic resection in patients over 80 years of age (9). Nevertheless, the number of major hepatectomies in these patients is limited, and liver regeneration in elderly patients remains unclear.

The mechanism of reduced cellular proliferation during aging remains unclear, even in animal models. Reduced cellular proliferation during aging has been reported to be associated with a progressive decline in both growth hormone secretion and forkhead box m1 (Fox M1B) expressions (10). Thus, one of the causes of decreased liver regeneration in elderly animals is reported to be decline in Fox M1B expression. Recently, Chen et al. (11) showed that Fox M1B is a target gene of the farnesoid X receptor (FXR). Taken together, these findings suggest that both FXR and Fox M1B may be related to deterioration of liver regeneration in elderly patients.

A retrospective study was carried out at our institution to investigate the correlation between liver regeneration and aging. Furthermore, the expression of FXR and Fox M1B was examined in these patients.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

PATIENTS

Between October 2005 and March 2011, 30 patients who underwent major hepatectomies for HCC at Kyushu University Hospital were enrolled into this study. The inclusion criteria were (1) major hepatectomies, which were equal to or more than two segmentectomies for HCC and (2) frozen tissue for reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) was available. The patient backgrounds are shown in Table 1. The mean age was 68 years, and it ranged from 37 to 85 years.

METHODS

Criteria for hepatic resection

The criteria for hepatic resection for HCC were as previously described (12). The surgical procedure was selected according to the following criteria: trisegmentectomy for indocyanine green retention test at 15 min (ICGR15) < 15% and bisegmentectomy for ICGR15 < 25%.

Early regenerative index

Volumetric measurements were performed as previously reported (13). Total volumes and segmental volumes were measured for total liver, future liver remnant (FLR), and liver remnant (LR). The total and segmental early regeneration indexes, defined as $[(V_{LR} - V_{FLR})/V_{FLR})] \times 100$, where V_{LR} is the volume of the LR and V_{FLR} is the volume of the FLR, were calculated. Preoperative multidetector helical computed tomography (MDCT) images were performed with 2-mm-thick slices represented on computed tomography (CT) machines, as previously reported (14). Enhancement was achieved by an intravenous bolus of a contrast nonionic medium (Iopamion, Schering, Erlangen, Germany) at a speed of 5 mL/s. Three-dimensional (3D) reconstruction of the liver and graft was obtained from the MDCT data with the Zio M900 (Zio Software, Inc., Tokyo, Japan).

Postoperative course

Posthepatectomy liver failure was defined as serum levels of total bilirubin 3.0 mg/dL or a prothrombin time less than 50% on the fifth operative day, according to Figueras et al. (15). Postoperative complications included surgical site infection, bile leakage, and prolonged hyperbilirubinemia.

To examine the effects of liver regeneration on the postoperative course, the patients were divided into

TABLE 2
Clinicopathological factors linked to the ERI.

Factors	R^2	P values
Age	0.274	0.0030
Sex	0.002	0.7990
NBNC	0.002	0.8070
Diabetes mellitus	0.019	0.4650
Hypertension	0.040	0.2890
ASA classification	0.009	0.6247
Total protein	0.008	0.6395
Total bilirubin	0.008	0.6325
Albumin	0.084	0.1204
Prothrombin time (%)	0.009	0.6202
Platelets	0.072	0.1520
AST	0.001	0.8441
ALT	0.065	0.1755
ALP	0.001	0.8844
ICGR15	0.048	0.2447
Estimated blood loss	0.134	0.0466
Blood transfusion	0.024	0.4138
Resected liver volume	0.006	0.6900
Operation time	0.044	0.2660
Histological liver fibrosis	0.002	0.8104
FXR	0.023	0.4388
Fox M1B	0.023	0.6447

ERI: early regenerative index; NBNC: non-B non-C; ASA: American Association of Anesthesiologists; AST: aspartate aminotransferase; ALT: alanine aminotransferase; ALP: alkaline phosphatase; ICGR15: indocyanine green retention test at 15 min; FXR: farnesoid X receptor; Fox M1B: forkhead box m1b.

two groups, according to the median value of early regenerative index (ERI). The low ERI (n = 15) group included patients with an ERI less than 55% and the high ERI (n = 15) group included those with an ERI equal to or more than 55%. The postoperative clinical course was compared between the two groups.

Quantification of messenger RNA of liver tissues using real-time quantitative RT-PCR

Total RNA was isolated from noncancerous tissues of HCC patients using an ISOGEN (Nippon Gene, Tokyo, Japan) according to the manufacturer's instructions. The complementary DNA (cDNA) was synthesized with random hexamer primers and Superscript III reverse transcriptase according to the manufacturer's instructions, and the product was used for further analysis. Fox M1B and FXR transcriptions were quantified using the LightCycler (Roche Molecular Biochemicals, Mannheim, Germany) polymerase chain reaction (PCR) protocol, in which fluorescence emission is attributable to binding of SYBR Green I dye to amplified products and it can be detected and measured. The relative quantization value is expressed as 2-Ct, where Ct is the difference between the mean cycle threshold (Ct) value of triplicates of the sample and of the endogenous β-actin control (16). The primer sequences for real-time RT-PCR were as follows: Fox M1B, 5′-CGTG GATTGAGGACCACTTT-3′ (forward) and 5′-TCT GCTGTGATTCCAAGTGC-3′ (reverse); FXR, 5′-ATCAAAGGGGATGAGCTGTG-3′ (forward) and 5′-AAGCATTCAGCCAACATTCC-3′ (reverse); and β-actin, 5′-CTGGCACCACACCTTCTACAATG-3′ (forward) and 5′-GGCGTACAGGGATAGCACAGG-3′ (reverse).

Statistical analysis

Values are presented as means and standard deviations. A regression test was used to examine the relation between ERI and other clinicopathological factors. Continuous data were analyzed with the Student's t test, and categorical data were analyzed with the chi-square test. Any variable identified as $P < 0.05$ on univariate analysis was considered a candidate for multivariate analysis. StatView software (version 4.11; Abacus Concepts Inc., Berkeley, CA) running on a Macintosh computer was used for the adjustment of all covariates and stepwise regression analyses. The values of $P < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

The clinicopathological background is shown in Table 1. A total of 31 patients underwent hepatic resections for HCC. In all 31 patients, the mean ERI was 57.4%, and it ranged from 28.6% to 157.3%. Regression tests showed correlations between ERI and factors related to ERI (Table 2). Age was inversely correlated with ERI (Fig. 1A) (R^2 = 0.274, P = 0.0030). The estimated blood loss was inversely correlated with ERI (Fig. 1B) (R^2 = 0.134, P = 0.0446). There were no statistically significant factors among other clinicopathological factors.

The correlation between FXR and Fox M1B messenger RNA (mRNA) expressions and that between ERI and FXR and Fox M1B mRNA, and between age and FXR and Fox M1B mRNA was examined. The mRNA values of FXR were not correlated with Fox M1B (data not shown). Either the FXR mRNA values or the Fox M1B mRNA values were not correlated with ERI (Table 2). Furthermore, either the FXR mRNA values or the Fox M1B mRNA values were not correlated with age (data not shown).

Comparison of the postoperative clinical course between the low and high ERI groups is shown in Table 3. Serum total bilirubin levels at day 7 after hepatectomy tended to be higher in the low ERI group than those in the high ERI group (P = 0.0943), and prothrombin time was significantly lower in the low ERI group than that in the high ERI group (P = 0.0389). The incidence of posthepatectomy liver failure was compared between the low and high ERI groups. The incidence of liver failure was significantly higher (5 of 15, 33%) in the low ERI group than in the high ERI group (0 of 15, P = 0.0421).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we evaluated liver regeneration 7 days after hepatectomy. Most previous studies (5, 17, 18) evaluated regenerative liver volume at 1, 3, or 6 months, and Akamatsu et al. (19) showed that changes in liver

volume between 1 and 3 months are minimal, indicating that liver regeneration occurs within 1 month. Pomfret et al. (20) showed that most liver regeneration occurs within 1 week, and several studies showed that the ERI at 7 days after hepatectomy is critical for liver regeneration. Furthermore, most postoperative liver failure occurs within 1 month (21). In our study, the incidence of delayed liver dysfunction was significantly higher in the low ERI group compared with that in the high ERI group. This result clearly shows that ERI is a good predictor for clinical course in hepatectomized patients.

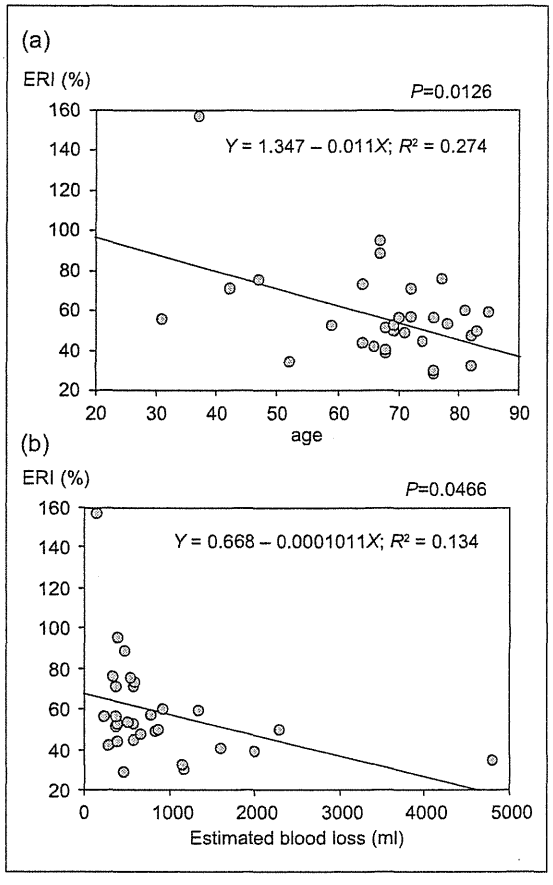

Fig. 1. A) Age was inversely correlated with ERI ($R^2 = 0.274$, $P = 0.0030$). B) the estimated blood loss was inversely correlated with ERI ($R^2 = 0.134$, $P = 0.0446$).
ERI: early regenerative index.

Mean ERI was 57.3% in the current study. This result is similar to that in the previous studies, which showed 64% (20) and 59.8% in females and 61.5% in males (13). In our study, 3D CT volumetry was used for evaluation of the ERI. This method has been reported to be good for estimating volumetry.

There are many studies regarding aging and liver regeneration in the animal experimental setting. Nevertheless, there are only a few studies in the clinical setting. Shimada et al. (17) showed that age was inversely associated with liver regeneration in patients who underwent right lobectomy, and Yamamoto et al. (18) showed no association between age and liver regeneration in elderly patients. Therefore, liver regeneration and aging are still controversial in the clinical setting. In our study, liver regeneration gradually and significantly decreased with age, and this may be because our study included very high-age patients who were octogenarians.

The mechanism of aging deteriorating liver regeneration remains unclear. Forkhead box transcription factors are an extensive family of transcription factors, consisting of more than 50 mammalian proteins (22), which share homology in the winged helix DNA-binding domains (23). Previous liver regeneration studies (10, 11, 16) have shown that increased hepatocyte expression of Fox M1B alone in elderly mice was sufficient to stimulate regenerating hepatocyte DNA replication and mitosis to levels found in young regenerating mouse liver. Fox M1B is reported to be a target gene for FXR. Furthermore, growth hormone stimulates proliferation of old-aged regenerating liver through Fox M1B (23). Nevertheless, there was no significant correlation between preoperative FXR and Fox M1B gene expression and liver regeneration in this study. Fox M1B expression is induced by greater than 40-fold during cellular proliferation (24, 25). Therefore, activation of these genes during liver regeneration, but not preoperative levels of these genes before hepatectomy, may be important. Further studies are required to determine this issue.

Another important factor related to liver regeneration was estimated blood loss during hepatic resection in this study. Previous studies have shown that cytokines and humoral factors, such as interleukin 6, hepatocyte growth factor, and growth hormone, are

TABLE 3
Outcome after hepatectomy and ERI.

Postoperative course	Low ERI ($n = 15$)	High ERI ($n = 15$)	P value
At seventh day after hepatectomy			
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	1.6 ± 1.0	1.1 ± 0.5	0.0943
Albumin (g/dL)	3.6 ± 0.4	3.3 ± 0.4	0.1078
Prothrombin time (%)	72 ± 16	85 ± 16	0.0389
Posthepatectomy liver failure	5 (33%)	0	0.0421
Postoperative complication	4 (27%)	3 (20%)	0.9999
Postoperative hospital stay >14 days	7 (47%)	4 (27%)	0.4497

ERI: early regenerative index.

important in the liver regeneration (26). Reduced humoral factors after a significant amount of blood loss may be related to decreased liver regeneration. Nevertheless, Ikegami et al. (27) demonstrated that liver regeneration of liver grafts from elderly donors was decreased in living-related donor liver transplantation compared with liver regeneration in liver grafts in young donors. This result suggests that the humoral factors may not be important in liver regeneration.

Nagasue et al. (5) showed that decreased liver regeneration is related to liver cirrhosis. Shimada et al. (17) demonstrated that intraoperative portal pressure is significantly correlated with liver regeneration. However, in our study, histological fibrosis was not related to liver regeneration. Under strict patient selection, histological fibrosis may not have an effect on liver regeneration.

In conclusion, liver regeneration occurs early, already during the first week after surgery. The independent factors related to liver regeneration were aging and estimated blood loss during hepatic resection. Massive blood loss should be avoided in elderly patients because liver regeneration might be suppressed.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

Ken Shirabe and other coauthors have no conflict of interest.

FUNDING

This study was supported in part by 2010 Research Award of Japanese Society for Advancement of Surgical Techniques.

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Received: June 9, 2012
Accepted: September 24, 2012

Hepatology Research

Hepatology Research 2013; 43: 481–487 doi: 10.1111/j.1872-034X.2012.01107.x

Original Article

Clinical usefulness of ^{18}F-fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography/computed tomography for patients with primary liver cancer with special reference to rare histological types, hepatocellular carcinoma with sarcomatous change and combined hepatocellular and cholangiocarcinoma

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Aim: The role of ^{18}F-fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography (FDG-PET) in the diagnosis and staging of primary liver cancer has been demonstrated in several reports. However, no preoperative evaluations of sarcomatous hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) and combined hepatocellular and cholangiocarcinoma (cHCC-CC) with FDG-PET have been reported so far.

Methods: Fifty-three HCC patients and three cHCC-CC patients who received liver resection or living-donor liver transplantation were enrolled in this study. All 56 patients had undergone preoperative FDG-PET, and a total of 67 HCC and three cHCC-CC were analyzed histologically. The relationship between clinicopathological features and the maximum standardized uptake value (SUVmax) of tumors were evaluated.

Results: The detection rate of HCC by FDG-PET was 43.3 %, and the sensitivity of FDG-PET for the detection of HCC was significantly associated with tumor differentiation, tumor size and microvascular invasion. All three cHCC-CC were detected by FDG-PET. The SUVmax values of the three sarcomatous HCC (SUVmax 14.1, 18.6 and 25.0) and the three cHCC-CC (SUVmax 9.9, 12.0 and 13.0) were higher than that of the poorly differentiated HCC (mean SUVmax 5.7 ± 2.3).

Conclusion: SUVmax may be a useful diagnostic tool for the preoperative evaluation of the aggressiveness of primary liver cancers such as sarcomatous HCC and cHCC-CC.

Key words: ^{18}F-fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography, combined hepatocellular and cholangiocarcinoma, hepatocellular carcinoma, sarcomatous hepatocellular carcinoma

INTRODUCTION

POSITRON EMISSION TOMOGRAPHY (PET) using ^{18}F-fluorodeoxyglucose (FDG) has become standard procedure for the detection of a variety of malignant tumors.[1] It is considered a useful diagnostic tool for tumor characterization and assessing therapy response.[2] For hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), however, several reports suggest that the sensitivity of FDG-PET (50–55%) is insufficient.[3,4] Because the enzymatic activity of well-differentiated HCC cells is similar to that of the surrounding normal liver, the accumulation of FDG in these tumors is low, and the role of FDG-PET imaging in the early detection of HCC is limited.[5] On the other hand, previous studies have demonstrated that FDG accumulation is increased in undifferentiated HCC, and recently, preoperative FDG-PET has been shown to be closely associated with tumor differentiation and prognosis in HCC patients.[6,7]

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Received 26 April 2012; revision 29 August 2012; accepted 13 September 2012.

The histological differentiation grade is an important prognostic factor for HCC.[8] Once cancer is established, HCC dedifferentiates to a more malignant histology in a multistep fashion, from well- and moderately to poorly differentiated tumors.[9] Although the prognosis of well-differentiated HCC is good following resection, poorly differentiated HCC have a poor prognosis due to a high rate of vascular invasion and metastasis.[10,11] The basic histological pattern of HCC is trabecular; however, a sarcomatous appearance has been sporadically reported as one of the histological features of HCC.[12] Approximately 1.8% of all resected HCC have a sarcomatous feature, usually associated with a very poor prognosis because of its rapid growth, low resectability and frequent recurrence after resection.[13,14]

Combined hepatocellular and cholangiocarcinoma (cHCC-CC) is a rare primary liver cancer that contains the histological features of both HCC and CC.[15] cHCC-CC has been reported to show frequent vascular invasion and lymph nodes metastasis, and has a poorer prognosis than HCC.[16,17] It is difficult for patients with cHCC-CC to get a correct preoperative diagnosis because of the lack of a sensitive diagnosis procedure.[18]

Although previous studies have shown that FDG-PET is useful for evaluating various liver tumors, there have been no reports regarding preoperative FDG uptake in resectable sarcomatous HCC and cHCC-CC. In the present study, we retrospectively investigated the feasibility of FDG-PET for the detection of different types of primary liver cancer including sarcomatous HCC and cHCC-CC.

METHODS

Patients

IN THIS STUDY, we retrospectively reviewed 53 HCC patients and three cHCC-CC patients who received liver resection (LR) or living-donor liver transplantation (LDLT) at Kyushu University Hospital between April 2010 and August 2011. There were 35 male and 21 female patients, and the mean age (± standard deviation [SD]) of the patients was 65 ± 12 years (range, 36–87). All 56 patients were diagnosed as having HCC or cHCC-CC by conventional radiologic imaging and FDG PET/computed tomography (CT). Thirteen patients with HCC in cirrhosis underwent LDLT, and the other 43 patients with HCC or cHCC-CC underwent LR. Among the HCC patients, 29 had a single lesion, and the other 24 had multiple lesions. Among the cHCC-CC patients, one had a single lesion and the other two had multiple lesions.

Patient follow up

After discharge, all patients were examined for recurrence by ultrasound and by tumor markers every 1–3 months. Dynamic CT was performed every 6 months. Patients with any sign of recurrence and/or inconclusive imaging studies underwent additional FDG PET/CT. All of the patients were followed up while they were alive.

FDG PET/CT

^{18}F-Fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography studies were performed with Discovery ST Elite (GE Healthcare, Milwaukee, WI, USA) and Biograph mCT (Siemens AG, Erlangen, Germany) PET/CT scanners. All patients fasted for at least 4 h before FDG administration, and 185 MBq of FDG was i.v. administrated to each patient. Approximately 60 min after the FDG injection, whole-body PET images were acquired from thigh to head with 7–10 bed positions. The Discovery ST Elite scanner consists of a 16-slice multidetector CT and bismuth germanium oxide crystal. The unenhanced CT was performed first with the following parameters: 5-mm slice thickness, 120 kV, 30–250 mAs with auto mode (Smart mA). Then, PET images were obtained in 3-D mode for 3 min per bed position with a 3.27-mm slice thickness, at 70 cm field of view (FOV) in a 128 × 128 matrix. Based on the CT data, transmission maps were created and used for the attenuation correction of the PET images. The PET data were reconstructed using a 3-D ordered subset expectation maximization (3D-OSEM) algorithm (VUE Point Plus) with two iterations and 28 ordered subsets. A 6-mm post-filter of full-width at half maximum (FWHM) was applied. The Biograph mCT scanner is equipped with a 128-slice multidetector CT and lutetium crystal. The unenhanced CT was performed at 120 kV with automatic mAs adjustment (Care Dose 4D) and the slice thickness was 3 mm. The PET emission time was 2 min per bed position. The PET images were acquired with a 2-mm slice thickness, at 70 cm FOV in a 256 × 256 matrix. The concomitant CT data were used for attenuation correction. The PET data were reconstructed using a 3D-OSEM algorithm with two iterations and 21 subsets. Time of flight and point spread function techniques were also used for the image reconstruction (ultra-HD-PET). A 3-D Gaussian filter of 6-mm FWHM was applied. The PET images were qualitatively evaluated to assess whether the FDG uptake in the tumor was (PET positive status) or was not

(PET negative status) significantly higher than in the surrounding non-cancerous hepatic parenchyma.

Histopathological study

A total of 67 HCC and three cHCC-CC were evaluated histologically. Formalin-fixed specimens were embedded in paraffin. Deparaffinized 4-μm sections were stained with hematoxylin–eosin for microscopic evaluation. The histopathological definition of HCC and the criteria for cHCC-CC were based on the classification proposed by the World Health Organization. The cHCC-CC contain unequivocal hepatocellular and cholangiocellular components that are intimately admixed. The HCC displayed a trabecular pattern with little stroma, a pseudoglandular pattern with or without bile production, abundant eosinophilic cytoplasm, and immunoreactivity for Hep par 1. The CC was defined by a definite glandular pattern with fibrous stroma, low columnar cells with round vesicular nuclei, mucin production confirmed by Alcian blue, and immunoreactivity for cytokeratin 19 but not Hep par 1.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using the StatView ver. 5.0 software package. Continuous variables were compared using the Mann–Whitney *U*-test or Student's *t*-test. The χ^2-test was used for categorical variables. The differences were considered to be significant if $P < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Patients with HCC

PATIENT CHARACTERISTICS ARE summarized in Table 1(a). The mean age (± SD) was 66 ± 12 years (range, 36–87), and the sex ratio (M : F) was 32:21. Thirty-two patients (60.4%) were seropositive for hepatitis C virus, 11 for hepatitis B surface antigen (20.8%) and 10 (18.8%) had non-B/non-C etiologies. Twelve of the 53 patients had a serum α-fetoprotein (AFP) level of more than 100 ng/mL (median, 11.8; range, 1.6–994 600) and 24 patients had a serum des-γ-carboxy prothrombin (DCP) level above 100 mAU/mL (median, 81; range, 10–109 730). Twenty-nine patients with solitary tumors were divided into two groups: PET positive ($n = 16$) and PET negative ($n = 13$). Although there was no significant difference in serum AFP levels between the PET positive and negative groups (110.2 ± 196.9 and 132.9 ± 372.7 ng/mL, respectively), the PET positive group had higher serum

Table 1 Characteristics of patients with HCC and clinicopathological data of HCC

a. Characteristics of patients with HCC

Characteristic	No. of patients (%)
Total number of patients	53
Age (years)	
Mean (range)	66 (36–87)
Sex	
Male : female	32 (60.4):21 (39.6)
Etiology of liver disease	
Hepatitis B	11 (20.8)
Hepatitis C	32 (60.4)
Other	10 (18.8)
Child–Pugh classification	
A	40 (75.5)
B	6 (11.3)
C	7 (13.2)
Tumor stage (UICC)	
I	21 (39.6)
II	25 (47.2)
III	5 (9.4)
IV	2 (3.8)
Type of hepatic surgery	
Resection	40 (75.5)
Liver transplantation	13 (24.5)
Tumor number	
Solitary	29 (54.7)
Multiple	24 (45.3)
Preoperative serum AFP (ng/mL)	
Median (range)	11.8 (1.6–99 4600)
Preoperative serum DCP (mAU/mL)	
Median (range)	81 (10–109 730)

b. Clinicopathological data of HCC

Characteristic	No. of HCC (%)
Total number of nodules	67
Tumor differentiation	
Well	7 (10.4)
Moderately	47 (70.1)
Poorly	9 (13.4)
Undifferentiated	1 (1.5)
Moderately with sarcomatous change	1 (1.5)
Poorly with sarcomatous change	2 (3.0)
Tumor size (cm)	
Mean ± SD	3.4 ± 3.4
Microvascular invasion	16 (23.9)

AFP, α-fetoprotein; DCP, des-γ-carboxy prothrombin; HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; SD, standard deviation; UICC, Union for International Cancer Control.

Table 2 Association between PET status and clinicopathological data of HCC

Characteristic	PET negative ($n = 38$)	PET positive ($n = 29$)	*P*-value
Tumor differentiation (%)			<0.05
Well	7 (100)	0 (0)	
Moderately	31 (66)	16 (34)	
Poorly	0 (0)	9 (100)	
Undifferentiated	0 (0)	1 (100)	
Moderately with sarcomatous change	0 (0)	1 (100)	
Poorly with sarcomatous change	0 (0)	2 (100)	
Tumor size (cm)			
Mean ± SD	2.1 ± 1.5	5.1 ± 4.3	<0.05
Microvascular invasion (%)	4 (11)	12 (41)	<0.05

HCC, hepatocellular carcinoma; PET, positron emission tomography; SD, standard deviation; UICC, Union for International Cancer Control.

DCP levels than the PET negative group (529.6 ± 748.3 and 54.2 ± 50.7 mAU/mL, respectively; $P < 0.05$) (± SD). Using the modified Union for International Cancer Control staging system, we enrolled 21 (39.6%) stage I patients, 25 (47.2%) stage II patients, five (9.4%) stage III patients and two (3.8%) stage IV patients.

The characteristics of HCC are summarized in Table 1(b). The histological grades were well differentiated in seven HCC (10.4%), moderately differentiated in 47 (70.1%), poorly differentiated in nine (13.4%), undifferentiated in one (1.5%), moderately differentiated with sarcomatous change in one (1.5%) and poorly differentiated with sarcomatous change in two (3.0%). Mean tumor size (± SD) was 3.4 ± 3.4 cm, and microvascular invasion was observed in 16 HCC (23.9%). The detection rate of HCC by PET was 43.3%. The sensitivity of PET for the detection of HCC was significantly associated with tumor differentiation, tumor size and microvascular invasion (Table 2). None of the seven well-differentiated HCC were detected by PET. The mean maximum standardized uptake value (SUVmax) (± SD) was 4.7 ± 1.3 in moderately differentiated HCC with positive PET findings, 5.7 ± 2.3 in poorly differentiated HCC and 26.2 in undifferentiated HCC. One poorly differentiated HCC with a maximum diameter of 17.0 cm, direct invasion to the stomach, and lymph node and pulmonary metastases, had a high SUVmax of 11.3. Moderately differentiated HCC with sarcomatous change had a high SUVmax of 18.6, and poorly differentiated HCC with sarcomatous change also showed high FDG uptake (SUVmax 14.1 and 25.0) (Fig. 1). One poorly differentiated HCC with sarcomatous change had a high SUVmax of 14.1 despite the small size of the tumor (1.6 cm) and absence of microvascular invasion (Fig. 2). The patients with poorly differentiated HCC with sarcomatous change developed recurrences soon after surgery. One patient with an SUVmax of 14.1 had metastasis to the mediastinal lymph nodes 9 months after surgery, and another with an SUVmax of 25.0 developed intrahepatic metastasis 44 days after surgery.

Patients with cHCC-CC

Patient characteristics are summarized in Table 3. All three cHCC-CC were detected by PET and the SUVmax

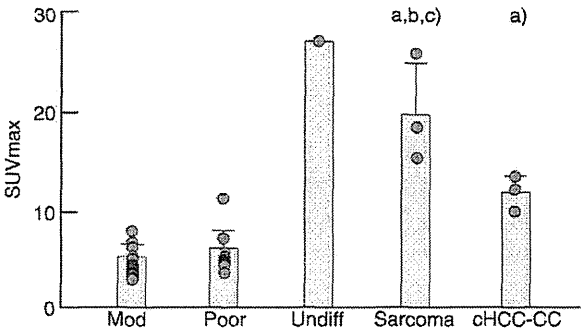

Figure 1 Maximum standardized uptake value (SUVmax) values of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) and combined hepatocellular and cholangiocarcinoma (cHCC-CC) with positive positron emission tomography (PET) findings. Undifferentiated HCC, moderately or poorly differentiated HCC with sarcomatous change, and cHCC-CC have high SUVmax values (>9.9), respectively. Data are expressed as mean ± standard deviation. (a) $P < 0.05$ vs mod; (b) $P < 0.05$ vs poor; (c) $P < 0.05$ vs cHCC-CC. Mod, moderately differentiated HCC; poor, poorly differentiated HCC; undiff, undifferentiated HCC; sarcoma, moderately or poorly differentiated HCC with sarcomatous change.

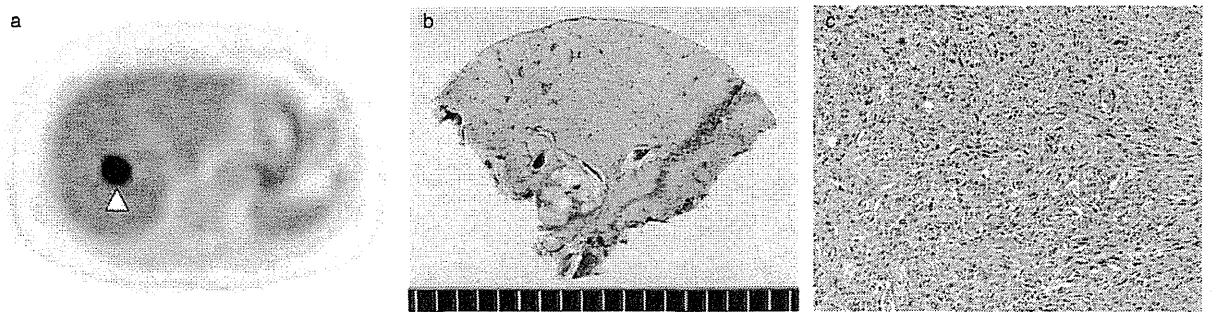

Figure 2 A 74-year-old female patient with poorly differentiated hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) with sarcomatous change. (a) ^{18}F-Fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography/computed tomography (FDG-PET/CT) image shows a liver mass with a maximum standardized uptake value (SUVmax) of 14.1 (arrow head). (b) Macroscopic image of the liver mass. (c) The liver tumor demonstrates histological features of poorly differentiated HCC with sarcomatous change (hematoxylin–eosin, original magnification ×100).

of cHCC-CC was 9.9, 12.0 and 13.0 (Fig. 1). One cHCC-CC had a high FDG uptake (SUVmax 12.0) despite the small size of the tumor (2.2 cm) and low levels of tumor markers (patient no. 1) (Fig. 3).

DISCUSSION

THE ROLE OF FDG PET/CT in the diagnosis and staging of HCC and other forms of liver cancer has been demonstrated in several reports.[6,7,19] However, preoperative evaluation of sarcomatous HCC and cHCC-CC with FDG PET/CT has not been reported so far. In the present study, we showed that sarcomatous HCC and cHCC-CC could be detected by PET/CT with high FDG uptake, and positive preoperative FDG uptake in HCC was significantly associated with tumor differentiation, tumor size and microvascular invasion.

Recently, several studies have shown that FDG-PET is useful for predicting tumor characterization, clinical outcome and prognosis in patients with HCC. Well-differentiated HCC regions were reported to show a tendency toward negativity by PET, whereas poorly differentiated types show increased FDG accumulation.[6,7] Our data also demonstrate that well-differentiated and some moderately differentiated HCC do not show FDG uptake exceeding that of the surrounding normal liver, whereas poorly differentiated and undifferentiated HCC have positive PET findings. There was no significant difference between the mean SUVmax of poorly differentiated HCC and that of moderately differentiated HCC with positive PET findings. On the other hand, the SUVmax of sarcomatous HCC were 18.6, 14.1 and 25.0, much higher than that of poorly differentiated HCC.

Table 3 Characteristics of patients with cHCC-CC

Characteristic	Patient no. 1	Patient no. 2	Patient no. 3
Age (years)/sex	78/M	54/M	47/M
Viral infection	HBsAg positive	Negative	HCVAb positive
Maximal tumor size (cm)	2.2	12.3	4.0
Microvascular invasion	Positive	Positive	Positive
Tumor stage (UICC)	II	IV	III
AFP (ng/mL)	4.3	16.4	18 286
DCP (mAU/mL)	20	45	231
CEA (ng/mL)	1.7	0.5	2.8
CA19-9 (U/mL)	7.4	76.6	31.9
Maximum SUV	12.0	9.9	13.0

CA19-9, carbohydrate antigen 19-9; CEA, carcinoembryonic antigen; DCP, des-γ-carboxy prothrombin; HBsAg, hepatitis B surface antigen; HCVAb, anti-hepatitis C virus antibody; SUV, standardized uptake value; UICC, Union for International Cancer Control.

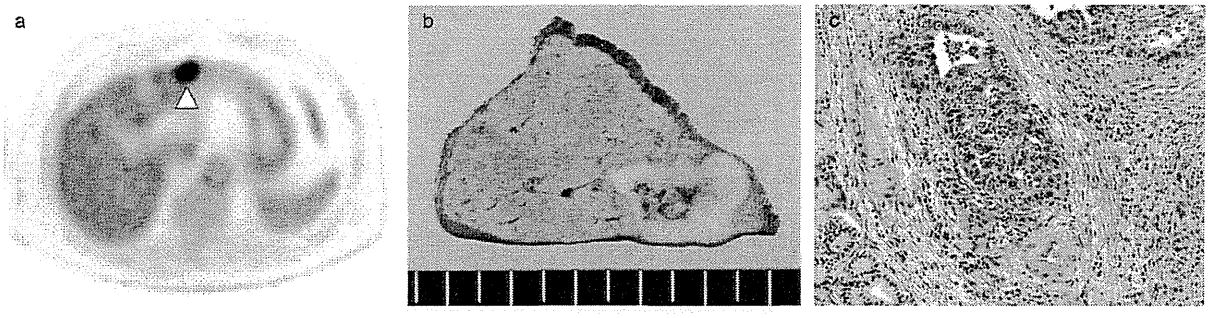

Figure 3 A 78-year-old male patient with combined hepatocellular and cholangiocarcinoma (cHCC-CC). (a) ^{18}F-Fluorodeoxyglucose positron emission tomography/computed tomography (FDG-PET/CT) image shows a liver mass with a maximum standardized uptake value (SUVmax) of 12.0 (arrow head). (b) Macroscopic image of the liver mass. (c) The liver tumor demonstrates histological features of cHCC-CC with microvascular invasion (hematoxylin–eosin, original magnification ×100).

Sarcomatous HCC is a rare histological variant of HCC.[13] Although the pathogenesis of sarcomatous HCC has not been clarified, the sarcomatous components are thought to be derived from a dedifferentiation or anaplasia, rather than from a combination of HCC and sarcoma.[13,20] Previous reports have suggested that anticancer therapy has an influence on the development of sarcomatous features in HCC, and the prognosis of patients with sarcomatous HCC is very poor due to frequent widespread metastases.[13,14,21] Although we performed curative resection for primary sarcomatous HCC, two of the three patients developed recurrences soon after surgery. Honda *et al.* reported that sarcomatous HCC appears as an irregularly demarcated intrahepatic mass with delayed or prolonged peripheral enhancement on CT.[22] However, it seemed to be difficult to make a correct preoperative diagnosis of sarcomatous changes by imaging or serological tumor markers. Our results show that FDG-PET may be a useful diagnostic tool for sarcomatous changes of HCC because the high FDG uptake of sarcomatous HCC seems to be related to its progression or aggressiveness.

In the present study, the SUVmax values of three cHCC-CC were higher than those of the poorly differentiated HCC. cHCC-CC is an uncommon subtype of primary liver cancer that contains elements of both HCC and CC.[15] Several studies have reported that the prognosis of patients with cHCC-CC was worse than that of patients with HCC because of frequent portal venous invasion and metastasis to lymph nodes and other organs.[16,17] Vascular invasion, tumor size and tumor stage were found to be prognostic factors for poor outcome in patients with cHCC-CC.[16,23] Moreover, recent studies have demonstrated that a large CC component in cHCC-CC and a high serum carbohydrate antigen 19-9 (CA19-9) level were also associated with poorer survival rates.[24,25] We demonstrated that one cHCC-CC showed high FDG uptake (SUVmax 12.0) despite the low CA19-9 level (7.4 U/mL) and small size of the tumor (2.2 cm) (patient no. 1). In addition, another cHCC-CC showed high FDG uptake (SUVmax 13.0) despite the small CC component in the tumor (1%) (patient no. 3) (data not shown). If the degree of FDG uptake in cHCC-CC also reflects the aggressiveness of the tumor like other malignant tumors, FDG-PET may become a useful diagnostic tool for the preoperative evaluation of cHCC-CC.

Our data show that the SUVmax of sarcomatous HCC and cHCC-CC are much higher than those of liver cancers reported to be associated with poor prognosis in previous studies. Seo *et al.* have demonstrated that high FDG uptake (SUVmax ≥5.0) was a predictive factor of postoperative early recurrence and poor survival in patients with HCC.[7] Riedl *et al.* have also reported that an SUVmax of 5.0 or greater was correlated with worse long-term prognosis after liver resection for colorectal metastases.[26]

In summary, our studies demonstrate that FDG-PET shows high FDG uptake in sarcomatous HCC and cHCC-CC that have been reported to be associated with poor prognosis after surgery. Therefore, FDG-PET may be an effective diagnostic tool for the non-invasive evaluation of the aggressiveness of primary liver cancer before surgical resection and liver transplantation. Further clinical studies are warranted.

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Shimada et al. World Journal of Surgical Oncology 2013, 11:52
http://www.wjso.com/content/11/1/52

WORLD JOURNAL OF SURGICAL ONCOLOGY

RESEARCH Open Access

Clinicopathological characteristics and prognostic factors in young patients after hepatectomy for hepatocellular carcinoma

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Abstract

Background: The aim of this study was to analyze the clinicopathological characteristics and the prognostic factors for survival and recurrence of young patients who had undergone hepatectomy for hepatocellular carcinoma.

Methods: Between 1990 and 2010, 31 patients aged 40 years or younger (younger patient group) among 811 consecutive patients with hepatocellular carcinoma who had undergone primary hepatectomy were analyzed with regard to patient factors, including liver function, tumor factors and operative factors. The clinicopathological characteristics of the younger patients were compared with those of patients over the age of 40 (older patient group). Then the prognostic factors of the younger patients were analyzed. Continuous variables were expressed as the means ± standard deviation and compared using the χ^2 test for categorical variables. Overall survival and recurrence-free survival rates were determined by the Kaplan-Meier method and analyzed by the log-rank test. The Cox proportional hazards model was used for multivariate analysis.

Results: In the younger patients, the rates of HBs-antigen-positivity, high alpha-fetoprotein, portal invasion, intrahepatic metastasis, large tumors, low indocyanin green retention rate at 15 minutes, and anatomical resection were significantly higher than the same measures in the older patients. The five-year overall survival rate of the young patients was 49.6%. The prognostic factors of survival were HCV-antibody-positivity and low albumin status. Prognostic factors of recurrence were multiple tumors and the presence of portal invasion.

Conclusions: In younger patients, survival appeared to be primarily affected by liver function, while recurrence was affected by tumor factors. Young patients with hepatocellular carcinoma should be aggressively treated with hepatectomy due to their good pre-surgical liver function.

Keywords: Hepatocellular carcinoma, Young, Hepatectomy, Clinicopathological characteristics, Prognostic factors

Background

Liver cancers are malignant tumors and are the third leading cause of cancer-related death; they are responsible for approximately 700,000 deaths per year [1]. Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) has a poor prognosis and accounts for 70 to 85% of primary liver cancers [2]. Generally, there are few opportunities for discovery of malignant tumors in younger patients, and thus they tend to present with a highly advanced malignancy at the time of diagnosis; nonetheless, younger patients can expect long-term survival. The definition of what constitutes a "young patient" differs between studies [3-12]. HCC is fairly rare in younger individuals, with an occurrence rate of only 0.6 to 2.7% in those under 40 years of age, according to Japanese reports [12-14]. In Asia and Africa, which are areas with prevalent hepatitis B virus (HBV), the frequency of HCC is higher than in Japan [4,8,9,11,15]; however, there are still few reports on independent prognostic factors in young patients with HCC.

In this study, we examined the prognostic clinicopathological features, as well as the prognostic factors for

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survival and recurrence, in young patients with HCC who had undergone hepatectomy.

Methods

Between January 1990 and May 2010, 811 consecutive patients with HCC underwent primary liver resection at the Gastroenterological Surgery I unit of Hokkaido University Hospital in Sapporo, Japan. Of these patients, 31 patients (3.8%) were 40 years old or younger, while 780 patients (96.2%) were over 40 years of age. For group stratification, the former patients were defined as the younger patient group, and the latter as the older patient group. This study was approved by the Hokkaido University Hospital Voluntary Clinical Study Committee and was performed according to the Helsinki Declaration guidelines. The clinicopathological characteristics and surgical data of the patients are shown in Table 1.

The indications for hepatic resection and the type of operative procedures were usually determined based on the patients' liver function reserve, that is, according to the results of the indocyanin green retention test at 15 minutes (ICGR15) [16]. Anatomical resection was performed on patients in whom the ICGR15 was lower than 25%. Anatomical resection was defined as a resection in which the lesions were completely removed anatomically on the basis of Couinauds' classification (segmentectomy, sectionectomy, and hemihepatectomy or more). Non-anatomical partial but complete resection was achieved in other cases. In all patients, surgery was performed at R0 or R1. When R0 and R1 resections were performed, the resection surfaces were found to be histologically or macroscopically free of HCC, respectively. Follow-up studies after liver resection were conducted at three-month intervals, which included physical, serological (liver function test, serum alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) level, and serum protein induced by vitamin K absence-II (PIVKA-II)), and radiological examinations (ultrasound sonography (US) and contrast-enhanced computed tomography (CT) scan or contrast-enhanced magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)). Recurrence was diagnosed on the basis of the results of contrast-enhanced CT and elevation of serum levels of AFP and/or PIVKA-II. Extrahepatic metastasis (lung, lymph node, adrenal gland, brain and bone) was diagnosed by contrast-enhanced chest and abdominal CT, contrast-enhanced head MRI and bone scintigram. The median follow-up period was 111 months (range, 5 to 249 months).

Statistical analysis

Continuous variables were expressed as the means ± standard deviation and compared using the χ^2 test for categorical variables. Overall survival (OS) and recurrence-free survival (RFS) were determined by the Kaplan-Meier

Table 1 Clinicopathological characteristics

	Young (age ≤40 years) n = 31	Old (age >40 years) n = 780	P
Epidemiology			
Sex: Male/Female	24/7 (77%/23%)	644/136 (83%/17%)	NS
HBs-Ag positive	26 (84%)	321 (41%)	<0.0001
HCV-Ab positive	1 (3%)	310 (40%)	<0.0001
Biochemical Factors			
Albumin ≥4.0 g/l	17 (55%)	411 (53%)	NS
Total bilirubin ≥0.8 mg/dl	17 (55%)	379 (49%)	NS
ICGR15 ≥15	3 (10%)	360 (46%)	0.0001
AFP ≥200 ng/ml	16 (52%)	210 (27%)	0.0026
Tumor Factors			
Number of tumors: 1	20 (65%)	522 (67%)	NS
2 to 3	6 (19%)	183 (23%)	
≥4	5 (16%)	75 (10%)	
Maximum size of tumors: <2 cm	4 (12%)	83 (11%)	0.0074
≥2 cm, <5 cm	7 (23%)	395 (50%)	
≥5 cm	20 (65%)	303 (39%)	
Macroscopic classification: simple nodular type	10 (32%)	408 (52%)	NS
simple nodular type with extranodular grow	10 (32%)	222 (28%)	
confluent multinodular type	8 (26%)	122 (16%)	
infiltrative type	0 (0%)	6 (1%)	
others	3 (10%)	22 (3%)	
Distant metastasis positive	2 (6%)	18 (2%)	NS
Surgical Factors			
Anatomical resection	29 (94%)	525 (67%)	0.0021
Histological Factors			
Differentiation: well	3 (10%)	114 (15%)	NS
moderate	13 (42%)	430 (55%)	
poor	14 (45%)	209 (27%)	
others	1 (3%)	27 (3%)	
vp:vp0	14 (45%)	569 (73%)	0.0026
vp1	9 (29%)	125 (16%)	
vp2,3,4	8 (26%)	86 (11%)	
im	16 (52%)	264 (34%)	0.0413
cirrhosis	9 (29%)	287 (37%)	NS

AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; HBs-Ag, HBs-antigen; HCV-Ab, HCV-antibody; ICGR15, indocyanin green retention rate at 15 minutes; im, microscopic intrahepatic metastasis; NS, non-significant; vp0, no tumor thrombus in the portal vein; vpl, tumor thrombus distal to the second branches of the portal vein; vp2, tumor thrombus in the second branches of the portal vein; vp3, tumor thrombus in the first branch of the portal vein; vp4, tumor thrombus extension to the trunk or the opposite side branch of the portal vein.

method and analyzed by the log-rank test. The Cox proportional hazards model was used for multivariate analysis. Significance was defined as a *P*-value of <0.05. Statistical analyses were performed using Stat View 5.0 for Windows (SAS Institute, Cary, NC, USA).

Results

Clinicopathological characteristics and operative variables

Patient factors

The ratio of males to females (24:7) in the younger patient group was not significantly different from that of the older patient group. Patients with HBV markers accounted for most of the virus-associated cases: HBs-antigen (HBs-Ag)-positive, 26/31 (total number in the younger group) vs. 321/780 (total number in the older group); 84% vs. 41%; *P* <0.0001. Patients who were hepatitis C virus (HCV)-antibody (HCV-Ab)-positive were significantly fewer in number, that is, 1/31 vs. 310/780 (3% vs. 40%; *P* <0.0001) in the younger group. Although serum albumin and total bilirubin levels were not significantly different between the groups, patients with ICGR15 ≥15 were 3/31 vs. 360/780 (10% vs. 46%; *P* = 0.0001).

Tumor factors

The younger group had significantly higher AFP levels compared to the older group (*P* = 0.0026). Although the number of tumors did not differ significantly between the younger and older patients, there were significantly more cases with a maximum tumor size of ≥5 cm in the younger group (*P* = 0.0072). The mean maximum tumor diameter in the younger group in this study was 8.6 ± 7.3 cm. Neither macroscopic type nor extrahepatic metastasis was significantly different between the groups.

Operative variables

The rate of anatomical resections in the younger patients was significantly higher than that in the older patients.

Pathological factors

There were significant differences between groups in terms of microscopic tumor thrombus in the portal vein (*P* = 0.0026) and microscopic intrahepatic metastasis (*P* = 0.0413) (Table 1).

Causes of death and recurrence

Among the total 811 patients, 390 (48.1%) died. The mortality rates were 17/31 (54.8%) in the younger patient group and 373/780 (47.8%) in the older patient group. The causes of death, which did not differ significantly between groups, were as follows: HCC recurrence (n = 301; 77.2%; 16 in the younger patients vs. 285 in the older patients), liver failure (n = 36; 9.2%; 0 in the younger vs. 36 in the older patients), and other causes (n = 53; 13.6%; 1 in the younger vs. 52 in the older patients). In addition, two patients in the older group died of operative complications prior to 1995. No patients in the younger group died of operative complications.

In the younger group, 22 patients experienced a recurrence (71.0%). There were 17 (77.3%) liver tumor recurrences, with a median recurrence time of six months (1 to 27). Lung metastases occurred in 11 (50.0%) cases, with a median recurrence time of 12 months (1 to 42); bone metastases in 7 (31.8%) cases, with a median recurrence time of 23 months (6 to 60); brain metastases in 6 (27.3%) cases, with a median recurrence time of 20 months (10 to 61); lymph node metastases in 3 (13.6%) cases, with a median recurrence time of 12 months (12 to 56); and adrenal gland metastases in 3 (13.6%) cases, with a median recurrence time of 10 months (5 to 50).

Cumulative rates of patient survival and recurrence-free survival

The five-year OS rate of all 811 patients was 57.1%. The five-year OS rate and median survival time (MST) of the younger group were 49.6% and 40 months, respectively, whereas those of the older group were 57.7% and 79 months, respectively (Figure 1). The median RFS time of all 811 patients was 23 months, while that of the younger patients was 6 months, and that of the older patients was 25 months (Figure 2). Neither OS nor RFS were significantly different between the younger and older groups, although recurrence tended to occur earlier in the younger patients.

Factors related to long-term survival and disease-free survival after primary hepatectomy in the younger patient group

Table 2 shows those factors that were found by univariate analysis to influence OS and RFS in the younger

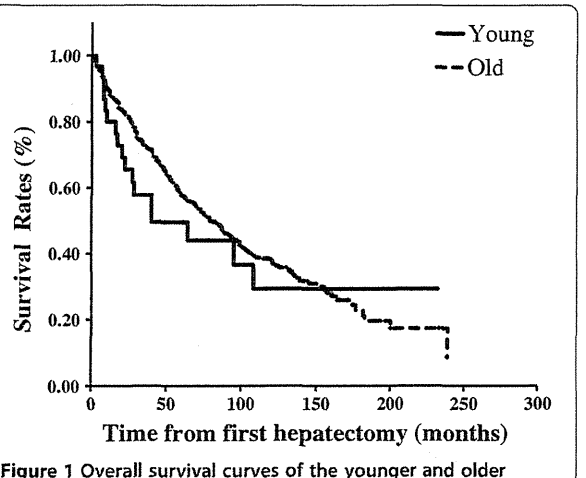

Figure 1 Overall survival curves of the younger and older patient groups after first hepatectomy.

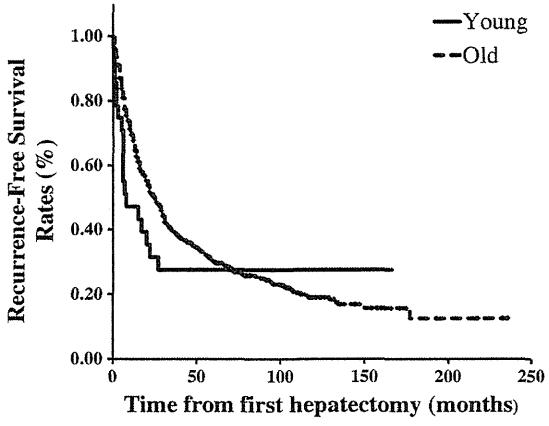

Figure 2 Recurrence-free survival curves of the younger and older patient groups after first hepatectomy.

Table 2 Univariate analyses of prognostic factors of survival and recurrence in the younger group

	Survival	Recurrence
	P	*P*
Epidemiology		
Sex: Male	*NS*	*NS*
HBs-Ag positive	*NS*	*NS*
HCV-Ab positive	0.0172	*NS*
Biochemical Factors		
Albumin <4.0 g/l	0.0088	*NS*
Total bilirubin ≥0.8 mg/dl	*NS*	*Ns*
ICGR15 ≥15	*NS*	*NS*
AFP ≥200 ng/ml	*NS*	*NS*
Tumor Factors		
Number of tumors: multiple	*NS*	0.0199
Maximum size of tumor: ≥5 cm	0.0034	0.0006
Macroscopic classification: except for simple nodular type	*NS*	*NS*
Distant metastasis positive	*NS*	-
Surgical Factors		
Non-anatomical resection	*NS*	*NS*
Histological Factors		
Differentiation: poor	*NS*	0.0395
vp2, 3, 4	0.0108	0.0020
im	0.0058	0.0053
cirrhosis	0.0446	*NS*

AFP, alpha-fetoprotein; HBs-Ag, HBs-antigen; HCV-Ab, HCV-antibody; ICGR15, indocyanin green retention rate at 15 minutes; im, microscopic intrahepatic metastasis; NS, non-significant; vp2, tumor thrombus in the second branches of the portal vein; vp3, tumor thrombus in the first branch of the portal vein; vp4, tumor thrombus extension to the trunk or the opposite side branch of the portal vein.

group. The univariate analysis revealed that OS was significantly related to being HCV-Ab-positive, having a serum albumin level of <4.0 g/l and a maximum tumor size of ≥5 cm, the presence of tumor thrombus in the second and first branches and trunk or opposite side branch of the portal vein (vp2, 3, 4), microscopic intrahepatic metastasis, and histological liver cirrhosis of non-cancerous liver.

Univariate analysis showed that RFS was significantly related to multiple tumors, maximum tumor size of ≥5 cm, poor differentiation, the presence of tumor thrombus above vp2 and microscopic intrahepatic metastasis. Multivariate analysis showed HCV-Ab-positive status and serum albumin levels of <4.0 g/l to be independent predictive factors for OS, and multiple tumors and vp2, 3, 4 were independent predictive factors for RFS in the younger group of patients (Tables 3 and 4).

Discussion

In this study, the younger patients with HCC who underwent hepatectomy were more likely than the older patients to be HBV-positive, to have large tumors with portal invasion and to have high AFP, although they also retained better liver function than the older patients. Despite the significant difference in tumor progression, neither OS nor RFS were significantly different between the two groups, although recurrence tended to occur earlier in the younger patients. Multivariate analysis showed HCV-Ab-positive status and serum albumin levels of <4.0 g/l to be independent predictive factors for OS, and multiple tumors and vp2, 3, 4 were independent predictive factors for RFS in the younger patients. Therefore, young patients with hepatocellular carcinoma should be aggressively treated with hepatectomy due to their good pre-surgical liver function.

In the younger group of patients, HCV-Ab-positive status and low serum albumin levels were the liver-function-related factors that were found to be significantly unfavorable in terms of OS, while multiple tumors

Table 3 Multivariate analyses of prognostic factors of survival in the younger group

Risk factor	*P*-value	Hazard ratio	95% CI
HCV-Ab positive	0.0196	59.816	1.927 to 1856.714
Albumin <4.0 g/l	0.0296	6.665	1.207 to 36.813
Maximum size of tumor: ≥5 cm	*NS*	0.381	0.025 to 5.697
vp2, 3, 4	*NS*	2.313	0.420 to 12.738
im	*NS*	14.563	0.951 to 222.939
cirrhosis	*NS*	1.037	0.149 to 7.200

CI, confidence interval; HCV-Ab, HCV-antibody, im, microscopic intrahepatic metastasis; NS, non-signficant; vp2, tumor thrombus in the second branches of the portal vein; vp3, tumor rhombus in the first branch of the portal vein; vp4, tumor thrombus extension to the trunk or the opposite side branch of the portal vein.

Table 4 Multivariate analyses of prognostic factors of recurrence in the younger group

Risk factor	*P*-value	Hazard ratio	95% CI
Number of tumor: multiple	0.0415	51.312	1.163 to 2264.565
Maximum size of tumor: ≥5 cm	*NS*	3.210	0.353 to 29.152
Differentiation: poor	*NS*	2.796	0.450 to 17.043
vp2, 3, 4	0.0253	13.517	1.380 to 132.442
im	*NS*	0.137	0.005 to 3.541

CI, confidence interval; im, microscopic intrahepatic metastasis; NS, non-significant; vp2, tumor thrombus in the second branches of the portal vein; vp3, tumor thrombus in the first branch of the portal vein; vp4, tumor thrombus extension to the trunk or the opposite side branch of the portal vein.

and vp2, 3, 4 were the tumor-related factors that were significantly unfavorable in terms of RFS; moreover, these findings were obtained by both univariate and multivariate analyses. Although most of the younger patients had advanced tumors, no differences were found between the younger and older patients in terms of OS. These results indicate that aggressive and curative liver resection should be performed for young patients with HCC, because most young patients retain good presurgical liver function.

The definition of who should be classified as a "young patient" with HCC remains controversial. In the literature, the definition of a young patient with HCC has tended to be a patient aged 40 years or younger [4,8,10-12,14]. Cases of HCC in such patients are comparatively rare, for example, HCC occurs in only 0.6 to 2.7% of this age group in Japanese reports [12-14]. In other countries, the reported rates of HCC in this age range are as follows: 8.6% (40 years and younger) in Singapore [11], 10.9% (under 40 years) in Taiwan [8] and 6.5% (40 years and younger) in Hong Kong [4]. Thus most of the existing reports have been from Asia, and they show a difference in frequency among regions. There appear to be many young patients in Asia with HCC who are HBV-positive; HBV is an underlying disease of HCC in young patients, and many carriers live in Asia [17].

Many young patients with HCC have HBs-Ag, that is, up to 71.4 to 100% [3-5,7-11,14]. Meanwhile, cases of HCV-Ab-positivity plus HCC among younger patients are reported at rates of 0 to 10% [4,5,7-10,12,14], which is much lower than the range for older patients. Rates of Child-Pugh A are 69.1 to 92.3% among younger patients [4-6,8-12], which is higher than the range in older patients. It has been reported that histological hepatitis or cirrhosis of non-cancerous liver is significantly less common in younger hepatectomy patients than in older hepatectomy patients among cases with HCC [3,4,12]. Though HCC is generally found by medical examination or follow-up of liver function, in most young patients, HCC is found by symptoms such as pain and/or palpation of an abdominal mass [11,14,18,19]. Accordingly, members of the younger patient group in this study had larger tumors than the older patient group.

This study revealed that the rate of cases related to HBV was 93.5%, and the rate of HBs-Ag-positive cases was 87.0%. The MST of the younger group was 40 months, and the five-year OS rate was 49.6%. These results did not differ significantly from the previously reported MST and five-year OS rates of 27.8 to 52.5 months and 30.5 to 54.8%, respectively, among cases of liver resection for HCC across all ages [20,21]. Therefore, it appears likely that aggressive and curative liver resection contributes to prolonged prognosis.

In regard to tumor factors, several studies have reported that more young than old patients have high AFP levels, that is, the rates of cases in which AFP is equal to or exceeds a value of 400 ng/ml range from 52.6 to 82.0% [3,7,9-11,14], and rates for an AFP of ≥10,000 ng/ml range from 31.6 to 60.0% [3,10,11,14]. In addition, younger patients tend to have larger tumors than older patients, with the maximum diameter of tumors being 6.9 to 12.7 cm in younger patients [3,4,7,10,12,14]. Cases showing portal invasion count for 45.0 to 100% [10-12,14] of younger HCC patients. In the present study, the younger patient group had higher AFP levels and larger tumors, was more likely to have portal invasion and showed better liver function than the older group, as has been reported elsewhere [3,7,10-12,14]. It has also been reported that cases with high AFP levels have a poor prognosis due to a correlation between tumor size and AFP [22].

As regards prognostic factors, Chen *et al.* reported that hepatectomy was a significant favorable prognostic factor among HCC patients aged 40 years and younger [8]. As regards other prognostic factors, AFP [8,11], portal invasion [8,11] and reserved liver function [8,11,12] have been reported, although these remain controversial. In this study, prognostic factors related to OS were HCV-Ab-positive status and low serum albumin levels, and prognostic factors related to RFS were the number of tumors and vp2, 3, 4. It has been suggested that liver function preservation primarily influences survival, and tumor factors influence recurrence. Furthermore, while the time to recurrence in the younger patients was shorter than that in the older patients, the RFS of the younger group tended to overtake that of the older group in the long term. The recurrence rate was 71%, and the site of recurrence was almost always the liver. This rate was comparable to those of other reports, which ranged from 60.2 to 78.2% across all ages [20]. The results to date suggest that aggressive treatments, including re-hepatectomy for recurrence, contribute to an improvement in the long-term prognosis.

Moreover, in order to improve prognosis, we should take care to perform aggressive resections, and should also make note of cases with a background of potentially liver-affecting hepatitis B. Chuma *et al.* reported that the quantity of HBV-DNA and non-treatment for HBV were risk factors for a recurrence of HCC [23]. Li *et al.* reported that one-year and two-year RFS rates were 23.3% vs. 8.3%, and 2.3% vs. 0%, respectively, in a treatment group receiving lamivudine for HCC due to concurrent hepatitis B vs. a control group [24]. Therefore, viral treatments in combination with cancer treatments, including resection, are important to consider.

There have been few reports on liver transplantation for young patients with HCC. The reason for this lack of information is likely to be that younger patients have relatively larger tumors and, therefore, they tend to have tumors exceeding the Milan criteria. Ismail *et al.* reported that the outcomes of liver transplantation were better than those of liver resection among patients with HCC who were aged 2 to 27 years, namely, the OS rates were 72% vs. 40%, and the RFS rates were 91% vs. 30% [25]. It was also reported that primary liver transplantation for children with HCC without extrahepatic lesions has a good outcome, even if the tumors exceed the Milan criteria [26]. An accumulation of future cases is expected.

As noted above, many young HCC patients present with advanced tumors and unfavorable prognostic factors. In a study on 16 patients who received liver transplantation for HCC and who had low differentiation and vascular invasion beyond the Milan criteria, Saab *et al.* reported that those receiving sorafenib (n = 8) had one-year OS rates and RFS rates of 87.5% and 85.7%, versus 62.5% and 57.1% for the control group (n = 8) [27]. It is expected that supportive treatment with molecular target medicine after liver resection or transplantation could contribute to a prolonged prognosis.

Conclusions

In our younger patients with HCC, survival appeared to be mainly affected by liver function while recurrence was mainly affected by tumor factors. Young patients with HCC should be offered aggressive hepatectomy due to their relatively preserved liver function.

Abbreviations

AFP: Alpha-fetoprotein; CT: Computed tomography; HBV: Hepatitis B virus; HBs-Ag: HBs-antigen; HCC: Hepatocellular carcinoma; HCV: Hepatitis C virus; HCV-Ab: Hepatitis C virus-antibody; ICGR15: Indocyanin green retention test at 15 minutes; MRI: Magnetic resonance imaging; MST: Median survival time; OS: Overall survival; PIVKA-II: Protein induced by vitamin K absence-II; RFS: Recurrence-free survival; US: Ultrasound sonography; vp2: Tumor thrombus in the second branches of the portal vein; vp3: Tumor thrombus in the first branch of the portal vein; vp4: Tumor thrombus extension to the trunk or the opposite side branch of the portal vein.

Competing interests

All of the authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

SS carried out the analysis of data and wrote the manuscript. TK and AT gave comments and revised the manuscript. HY, KW, YT, TK and HK made the database of patients. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the staff of Gastroenterological Surgery I, Hokkaido University Graduate School of Medicine, for their kind co-operation.

Received: 11 October 2012 Accepted: 6 February 2013
Published: 2 March 2013

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doi:10.1186/1477-7819-11-52
Cite this article as: Shimada *et al.*: Clinicopathological characteristics and prognostic factors in young patients after hepatectomy for hepatocellular carcinoma. *World Journal of Surgical Oncology* 2013 11:52.