Beneficial effect of ursodeoxycholic acid in patients with acyl-CoA oxidase 2 (ACOX2) deficiency–associated hypertransaminasemia

Marta Alonso-Peña1,2, Ricardo Espinosa-Escudero1, Elisa Herraez1,3, Oscar Briz1,3, Maria Luisa Cagigal4, Jesus M. Gonzalez-Santiago5, Aida Ortega-Alonso6, Conrado Fernandez-Rodriguez7, Luis Bujanda3,8, Marta Calvo Sanchez9, Delia D’Avola10, Maria-Carlota Londoño3,11,12, Moises Diago13, Jose C. Fernandez-Checa3,12,14,15, Carmen Garcia-Ruiz3,12,14,15, Raul J. Andrade3,6, Frank Lammert16,17, Jesus Prieto3,10, Javier Crespo2, Javier Juamperez18, Alvaro Diaz-Gonzalez2, Maria J. Monte1,3, Jose J. G. Marin1,3

1Experimental Hepatology and Drug Targeting, Institute for Biomedical Research, University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain
2Gastroenterology and Hepatology Department, Clinical and Translational Research in Digestive Diseases, Valdecilla Research Institute (IDIVAL), Marqués de Valdecilla University Hospital, Santander, Spain
3Center for the Study of Liver and Gastrointestinal Diseases (CIBEREHD), Carlos III National Institute of Health, Madrid, Spain
4Pathological Anatomy Service, Hospital Universitario Marqués de Valdecilla, Santander, Spain
5Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, University Hospital of Salamanca, Institute for Biomedical Research, Salamanca, Spain
6Liver Unit, Gastroenterology Service, Institute of Biomedical Research of Málaga, School of Medicine, University Hospital Virgen de la Victoria, Málaga, Spain
7Liver Unit, Fundación Hospital Alcorcón, Rey Juan Carlos University, Madrid, Spain
8Department of Liver and Gastrointestinal Diseases, Biodonostia Health Research Institute, Donostia University Hospital, University of the Basque Country, San Sebastian, Spain
9Segovia General Hospital, Segovia, Spain
10Department of Medicine, Clínica Universidad de Navarra and Center for Applied Medical Research, University of Navarra, Pamplona, Spain
11Liver Unit, Hospital Clínico de Barcelona, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain
12Institute of Biomedical Research of Barcelona (IDIBAPS), Barcelona, Spain
13Valencia University General Hospital, Valencia, Spain
14Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC), Madrid, Spain
15Research Center for Alcoholic Liver and Pancreatic Diseases (ALPD) and Cirrhosis, Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California, USA
16Department of Medicine II, Saarland University Medical Center, Homburg, Germany
17Health Sciences, Hannover Medical School, Hannover, Germany
18Pediatric Hepatology and Liver Transplantation Unit, Vall d’Hebron University Hospital, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain

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Marta Alonso-Peña and Ricardo Espinosa-Escudero share first authorship and have contributed equally.
Maria J. Monte and Jose J.G. Marin are co-senior authors and have contributed equally.

Abbreviations: ACOX, acyl-CoA oxidase; ADAH, ACOX2 deficiency-associated hypertransaminasemia; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; BA, bile acid; CA, cholic acid; CDCA, chenodeoxycholic acid; CHO, Chinese hamster ovary; DCA, deoxycholic acid; ER, endoplasmic reticulum; GCA, glycocholic acid; HPLC-MS/MS, high-performance liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry; MAF, minor allele frequency; NTCP, Na+-taurocholate cotransporting polypeptide; OATP, organic anion transporting polypeptide; ROS, reactive oxygen species; RT-qPCR, reverse transcription followed by quantitative polymerase chain reaction; TCA, taurocholic acid; THCA, trihydroxycholanic acid; UDCA, ursodeoxycholic acid.

Marta Alonso-Peña and Ricardo Espinosa-Escudero share first authorship and have contributed equally.
Maria J. Monte and Jose J.G. Marin are co-senior authors and have contributed equally.

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INTRODUCTION

Hypertransaminasemia is a common condition detected in primary care practice[1] whose most frequent etiologies in adults are nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, viral infections, consumption of toxic substances (mainly alcohol), autoimmune liver disease, celiac disease, iron overload, and Wilson disease.[2] Up to 15% of persistent hypertransaminasemia cases in adults are idiopathic.[3] Biopsy permits a diagnosis in most (87%) but not all cases.[4] Information on asymptomatic hypertransaminasemia in childhood is scarce, and identifying its cause is particularly difficult in pediatric patients due to the lack of accompanying clinical manifestations.[2] Thus, up to 13% of persistent hypertransaminasemia found in children remains cryptogenic.[5]

Acyl-CoA oxidase 2 (ACOX2) is a peroxisomal enzyme involved in the shortening of the cholesterol side-chain during bile acid (BA) biosynthesis. Two cases of ACOX2 deficiency were reported in 2016.[6,7] The first case, reported at the International Liver Congress-EASL (April 2016; Barcelona, Spain),[8] involved a 16-year-old man with unexplained hypertransaminasemia (2-5-fold upper normal limit) and no other associated

Abstract

Background and Aims: A variant (p.Arg225Trp) of peroxisomal acyl-CoA oxidase 2 (ACOX2), involved in bile acid (BA) side-chain shortening, has been associated with unexplained persistent hypertransaminasemia and accumulation of C27-BAs, mainly 3α,7α,12α-trihydroxy-5β-cholestanolic acid (THCA). We aimed to investigate the prevalence of ACOX2 deficiency-associated hypertransaminasemia (ADAH), its response to ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA), elucidate its pathophysiological mechanism and identify other inborn errors that could cause this alteration.

Methods and Results: Among 33 patients with unexplained hypertransaminasemia from 11 hospitals and 13 of their relatives, seven individuals with abnormally high C27-BA levels (>50% of total BAs) were identified by high-performance liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry. The p.Arg225Trp variant was found in homozygosity (exon amplification/sequencing) in two patients and three family members. Two additional nonrelated patients were heterozygous carriers of different alleles: c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) and c.456_459del (p.Thr154fs). In patients with ADAH, impaired liver expression of ACOX2, but not ACOX3, was found (immunohistochemistry). Treatment with UDCA normalized aminotransferase levels. Incubation of HuH-7 hepatoma cells with THCA, which was efficiently taken up, but not through BA transporters, increased reactive oxygen species production (flow cytometry), endoplasmic reticulum stress biomarkers (GRP78, CHOP, and XBP1-S/XBP1-U ratio), and BAXα expression (reverse transcription followed by quantitative polymerase chain reaction and immunoblot), whereas cell viability was decreased (tetrazolium salt-based cell viability test). THCA-induced cell toxicity was higher than that of major C24-BAs and was not prevented by UDCA. Fourteen predicted ACOX2 variants were generated (site-directed mutagenesis) and expressed in HuH-7 cells. Functional tests to determine their ability to metabolize THCA identified six with the potential to cause ADAH.

Conclusions: Dysfunctional ACOX2 has been found in several patients with unexplained hypertransaminasemia. This condition can be accurately identified by a noninvasive diagnostic strategy based on plasma BA profiling and ACOX2 sequencing. Moreover, UDCA treatment can efficiently attenuate liver damage in these patients.
symptoms. In this individual, a homozygous variant (NM_003500.4:c.673C>T) in ACOX2, resulting in the amino acid change p.Arg225Trp, caused a decrease in enzymatic activity, together with reduced plasma levels of C24-BA and the accumulation of C27-BA.

The minor allele frequency (MAF) for c.673C>T in the Genome Aggregation Database (gnomAD v3.1), including more than 76,000 whole genomes, is 0.03%, which suggested that this is not a frequent variant found in the general population. However, data from the Medical Genome Project obtained recently in a Spanish cohort of healthy individuals (approximately 2000 genomes) showed an MAF of 0.7% for the c.673C>T allele, suggesting that ACOX2 deficiency may not be an extremely rare condition. Indeed, in July 2016, a second case was reported by Vilarinho et al., which was followed by a third case identified 2 years later by Ferdinandusse et al. Both children were born from consanguineous parents and died during childhood suffering from severe hepatic and neurological alterations. One of these patients reported carried a homozygous variant (c.207T>A) encoding truncated ACOX2 at codon 69 [NM_003500.4:c.207T>A (p.Tyr69Ter)], whereas the other was homozygous for a four nucleotide deletion (NM_003500.4:c.461_464del), leading to a premature stop codon (p.Thr154fs). Although elevated serum bilirubin concentrations, were measured using standard clinical automatic analyzers.

BA accumulation can lead to severe hepatocellular damage, which is often accompanied by inflammatory processes. We have previously shown that the most abundant C27-BA in the plasma of these patients were 3α,7α,12α-trihydroxy-5β-cholestanolic acid (THCA) and its conjugated derivatives, which induces oxidative stress and cell death in cells overexpressing the c.673C>T ACOX2 variant. Moreover, some BAs are capable of inducing endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress, releasing Ca2+ from the ER of hepatocytes, triggering Ca2+-dependent apoptosis and activating the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) by mitochondria, resulting in cell death, which plays a pivotal role in the hypercholanemia-induced hepatocellular damage observed in several liver diseases.

To elucidate the prevalence of ACOX2 deficiency-associated hypertransaminasemia (ADAH), we analyzed a group of 33 such patients from different hospitals. We have also explored the mechanisms underlying THCA-induced toxicity. Furthermore, because several variants that may affect ACOX2 function have been predicted, we selected those with the highest likelihood of impairing ACOX2 function, whose ability to affect BA biosynthesis was then evaluated in vitro. Finally, and more importantly, we have evaluated the clinical response of patients with ADAH to ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) treatment.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Reagents and cell lines**

BA-related compounds were from Sigma-Aldrich (Merck, Madrid, Spain), except THCA and 7α-hydroxy-4-cholesten-3-one (C4), which were from Avanti Polar Lipids (Alabaster, AL). Cells used in this study were human embryonic kidney (HEK) 293T, Huh-7 (human hepatocellular carcinoma), HepG2 and HuH-6 (human hepatoblastoma), IHH (immortalized human hepatocytes), and stably transfected Chinese hamster ovary (CHO), whose origin and culture conditions, as well as the rest of detailed information regarding the materials and methods, including statistical analysis, is available in the Supporting Information.

**Human samples**

Plasma and white blood cells samples were collected between 2016 and 2022 in 10 hospitals in Spain and one in Germany (Figure S1). The research protocol conformed to ethical guidelines of the 1975 Declaration of Helsinki. The use of genetic information was approved by the Human Ethical Committees of the University of Salamanca, Marqués de Valdecilla University Hospital, and Vall d’Hebron University Hospital (Spain). Informed consent was obtained from patients and relatives entering this study.

**Analytical methods**

Plasma samples were collected after overnight fasting. BA and C4 concentrations were measured by high-performance liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (HPLC-MS/MS). Plasma activities of alanine aminotransferase (ALT), aspartate aminotransferase (AST), gamma-glutamyltransferase and alkaline phosphatase, as well as total and direct bilirubin concentrations, were measured using standard clinical automatic analyzers.

**Genetic analysis and gene expression**

DNA was obtained from blood samples to amplify the coding sequence of ACOX2 by high-fidelity polymerase chain reaction (PCR). The amplified fragments containing both the exons and the exon-intron boundaries from at least two reactions of PCR per exon were purified by agarose gel electrophoresis. Then, the amplicons were sequenced in both directions using forward and reverse primers as previously described.

Total RNA extraction from cells, reverse transcription (RT), and quantitative PCR (qPCR) were performed.
as previously reported\textsuperscript{[22]} using the appropriate primers (Table S1). The results of mRNA abundance of target genes in each sample were normalized using hypoxanthine phosphoribosyltransferase 1 (HPRT1) expression.

**Histological assessment**

Liver biopsies were processed routinely\textsuperscript{[23]} They were fixed with 10% neutral formalin and embedded in paraffin. Serial sections (4 μm) or mirror-image sections were stained with hematoxylin and eosin or Masson’s trichrome (Figure S2). Histopathological findings and the fibrosis stage were graded by an expert pathologist using Knodell’s and Scheuer’s scores.

**Immunohistochemistry, immunoblotting, and immunofluorescence**

Immunostaining of ACOX2 and ACOX3 in 4-μm sections of paraffin-embedded liver biopsies was performed using Protein Atlas\textsuperscript{[24]} validated antibodies anti-ACOX2 (HPA064845, Merck, Madrid) and anti-ACOX3 (HPA035840, Merck, Madrid), whose specificity was tested elsewhere.\textsuperscript{[10]} Immunoblotting analyses of cell lysates were carried out with primary antibodies diluted in phosphate-buffered saline-Tween using blocking agents as appropriate (Table S2); glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH) expression was used as a loading control.

For immunofluorescence studies, cells were fixed with paraformaldehyde and permeabilized with Triton X-100. After blocking with fetal bovine serum, cells were incubated for 1 h with anti-ACOX2 antibody (PA5-50297, Invitrogen, Thermo Fisher) and anticalatase antibody (LF-MA0004, Invitrogen, Thermo Fisher). Finally, samples were incubated with the appropriate secondary antibodies, mouse or rabbit anti-IgG conjugated with Alexa Fluor-488 or Alexa Fluor-594 (Invitrogen, Thermo Fisher) and 4,6-diamidino-2-phenylindole (Invitrogen, Thermo Fisher). Visualization of the labeling was performed under a confocal microscope (TCS SP5, Leica, Barcelona).

**Functional study of ACOX2 variants**

The ACOX2 open reading frame (ORF) was amplified from human liver RNA and cloned into the pGEM-T Easy vector (Promega, Madrid), which was used to generate vectors containing different ACOX2 variants by site-directed mutagenesis (Table S3). The mutant ORF was then transferred to lentiviral vectors containing a V5-tag.\textsuperscript{[8]} Recombinant lentiviruses were produced in host HEK293T cells\textsuperscript{[25]} and viral titers were determined by analyzing Enhanced Green Fluorescent Protein (EGFP)-positive cells in a FACSCalibur flow cytometer (BD Biosciences, Madrid).\textsuperscript{[8]} HuH-7 hepatoma target cells were transduced with lentiviral vectors. Overexpression of ACOX2 variants was assessed by RT-qPCR and immunoblotting. Double limiting-dilution was performed to obtain monoclonal populations, which were selected according to ACOX2 mRNA and protein expression, as determined by RT-qPCR, immunoblot, immunofluorescence, and BA metabolism studies. ACOX2 activity was assessed by studying the conversion of THCA into cholic acid (CA) in HuH-7 cells expressing each variant. Cells were incubated with 2 μM THCA for 72 h. Biotransformation of THCA into CA was measured by analyzing them in cells and culture medium.\textsuperscript{[8]}

**Toxicity and cell stress studies**

Cell viability was determined by the tetrazolium salt-based cell viability test using thiazolyl blue tetrazolium bromide (Sigma-Aldrich, Merck). Oxidative stress was determined by flow cytometry using 2′,7′-dichlorofluorescein diacetate (Sigma-Aldrich, Merck). ER stress and apoptosis were evaluated by analyzing atypical XBP1 splicing by RT-qPCR by combining specific primers (Table S1) for total (XBP1-total), short (XBP1-S) and long (XBP1-U) mRNA. Up-regulation of genes involved in ER stress (CHOP and GRP78) and apoptosis activation (BAX and BCL2) was determined by RT-qPCR (Table S1) and/or immunoblot (Table S2) after incubation with assayed agents for 24 h. Thapsigargin (2 μM) and sorafenib (5 μM) were used as a positive controls of ER stress and apoptosis activation, respectively.

**In silico prediction of dysfunctional ACOX2 variants**

The gnomAD v3.1 (exomes) (https://gnomad.broad institute.org) was searched to identify ACOX2 variants described in the population that might result in a dysfunctional protein. Inclusion criteria for the study of ACOX2 genetic variants were (i) single nucleotide polymorphism; (ii) MAF <1%; and (iii) generation of a missense variant. The selected variants were classified according to the prediction of the effect of each variant in ACOX2 activity, using SIFT and PolyPhen-2 algorithms. The predicted functional impact score was calculated as follows: SIFT and PolyPhen-2 predictions of the effect of each variant in ACOX2 activity was given values from 0 to 2, depending on their predicted effect by each algorithm (null = 0, probable = 1, or highly probable = 2). The sum of both scores resulted in a scale from 0 to 4 of which 0 indicated the variant was
most likely benign and 4 indicated a high probability of deleterious effects.

Transport assays

BA uptake by HuH-7 cells and transporter-mediated uptake by CHO cells was determined as previously described.[26] HuH-7 and CHO cells, either wild-type or stably expressing Na+-taurocholate cotransporting polypeptide (NTCP), organic anion transporting polypeptide-1B1 (OATP1B1), or OATP1B3,[17,27–29] were incubated with uptake medium containing 50 µM THCA, glycocholic acid (GCA), or CA with or without 250 µM taurocholic acid (TCA) for 60 min. Uptake was stopped by rinsing the wells twice with cold uptake medium and twice with cold PBS. Cells were lysed with ultra-pure water containing 5 µM of taurochenodeoxycholic acid (TCDA; internal standard), and BA concentrations were determined by HPLC-MS/MS as described above.

RESULTS

Patients with idiopathic hypertransaminasemia

Thirty-three patients with persistent hypertransaminasemia of unknown origin entered this study after ruling out common causes of elevated serum aminotransferases (viral hepatitis, alcoholic or metabolic liver damage, autoimmune hepatitis, hemochromatosis, Wilson’s disease, alpha 1 antitrypsin deficiency, and obstructive cholestasis). Fourteen of these subjects showed hypercholanemia (≥10 µM), suggesting some degree of cholestasis. Among the rest of normocholanemic individuals, a C27-BAs/C24-BAs ratio >1 was found in four subjects, who were considered as potential ADAH cases. Thirteen relatives from these patients were also analyzed. Among them, three individuals had enhanced C27-BAs levels together with genetic data consistent with dysfunctional ACOX2 (Figure 1). Plasma BA profiles of the individuals with confirmed ADAH are shown in Table 1. No significant alteration was detected in some cases in which serum C4 levels were measured (Table 1).

Case 1

A 17-year-old boy was first seen in 2010 in the Hepatology Unit of Marqués de Valdecilla University Hospital (Santander, Spain) due to fatigue symptoms and unexplained hypertransaminasemia (Table S4). Abdominal ultrasound showed normal liver and biliary tract. A liver biopsy (2010) revealed the presence of a single portal fibrous enlargement with focal porto-portal bridging fibrosis and minimal portal inflammatory component, which suggested a preliminary diagnosis of seronegative autoimmune hepatitis. Accordingly, the patient received immunosuppressive drugs for 10 years, but biochemical remission was not achieved. Lack of response and persistent hypertransaminasemia during this time prompted new clinical evaluation. Again, all common causes of liver and biliary tract disorder were ruled out. A new liver biopsy (2019) showed no additional information (Figure S2). Finally, as the first episode of hypertransaminasemia had been recorded after treating a testicular torsion with nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which resembled the first case of ADAH previously described[6,8] following an empiric approach, UDCA therapy was started. After 3 weeks, plasma aminotransferases reverted to normal (Table S4), and fatigue symptoms improved. Further analysis revealed that the patient showed an increased proportion of C27-BAs (Figure 1, Table 1) and the presence in homozygosis of the previously described[6] ACOX2 variant c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) (Figure 1). The study of his family revealed that his brother, mother, and uncle carried this variant in homozygosis and accumulated C27-BAs in serum (Figure 1, Table 1). Interestingly, all had undergone a cholecystectomy because of complicated cholelithiasis. Biochemical analysis of the uncle revealed hypertransaminasemia (ALT/AST: 131/68 U/l), which led his physician to prescribe him UDCA therapy. This restored his aminotransferase levels to normal values after 3 weeks (ALT/AST: 27/19 U/l). Serum aminotransferase levels were still low after 6 months of treatment (ALT/AST: 17/20 U/l), even though the abnormal proportion of C27-BAs was not corrected (Figure 1, Table 1). In contrast, the father, who was heterozygous for the same variant, and the aunt, who did not carry any ACOX2 variant, were negative for C27-BA accumulation (Figure 1, Table S8).

Case 2

A 17-year-old boy with persistent and unexplained hypertransaminasemia was first seen in the Hepatology Unit of Marqués de Valdecilla University Hospital in 2020. He had previously been diagnosed with growth hormone deficiency, treated with somatropin, and followed up by his pediatrician in another center. Hypertransaminasemia had been recorded since his first year of life (Table S5). Usual and unusual causes of persisting hypertransaminasemia were discarded, including lysosomal acid lipase deficiency. Abdominal ultrasound and MRCP showed no relevant findings. Liver biopsy showed no remarkable signs: slight sinusoidal dilatation and minimal central vein fibrosis (Figure S2). The analysis of plasma BAs revealed an increased proportion of C27-BAs (Figure 1, Table 1). The genetic studies showed that he was homozygous for the ACOX2 variant c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) (Figure 1). UDCA treatment was initiated, achieving normalization of aminotransferases (Table S5) and
reduction in the proportion of C27-BAs (Figure 1) after 3 weeks. Nevertheless, the follow-up for 6 months of treatment revealed abnormal abundance of serum C27-BAs (Figure 1, Table 1), despite the correction of serum aminotransferase levels was maintained (Table S5). The analysis of his family showed that his younger brother was homozygous for wild-type ACOX2, whereas the parents were heterozygotic carriers for c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) (Figure 1). The plasma BA profiles in the family members analyzed were normal. C24-BA plasma levels were within the normal range in the mother and brother, whereas the father presented hypercholanemia (22 µM total BAs) with general enhanced levels of all BA molecular species but without an elevated proportion of C27-BAs versus C24-BAs (Figure 1; Table S9).

Case 3

A 15-year-old boy in follow-up at Santa Creu i Sant Pau Hospital (Barcelona, Spain) since the first years of life due to abdominal distension, steatorrhea, and hypertransaminasemia was first seen in the Pediatric Hepatology and Liver Transplantation Unit from Vall d’Hebron Hospital (Barcelona, Spain) in 2017. All clinical studies performed were negative, including the analysis of classic inborn errors of BA biosynthesis. An abdominal ultrasound revealed discrete hepatic hyperchogenicity, and a liver biopsy showed slight fibrosis (Figure S2). UDCA was empirically administered before ADAH was diagnosed. The treatment resulted in the normalization of plasma aminotransferases (Table S6) and symptoms relief. Then, BA profiling (Table 1) and

**FIGURE 1** Genealogical tree of families with members showing acyl-CoA oxidase (ACOX) 2 deficiency-associated hypertransaminasemia (ADAH) (left panels) and the proportion of plasma concentrations of endogenous bile acids (BAs) with short side-chain (C24-BAs) and immature BAs with unshorten side-chain (C27-BAs) (right panels). In individuals treated with ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA; 12 or 15 mg/kg/day), this BA and its conjugates were not considered for calculating plasma endogenous C24-BA concentrations.
| UDCA treatment (months) | Controls | Case 1 | Uncle case 1 | Case 2 | Case 3 | Case 4 |
|------------------------|----------|--------|--------------|--------|--------|--------|
|                        | None     | 5      | 0.75         | 6      | 41     | 47     |
| Controls               | None     | 0.75   | 6            | 11     | ND     | ND     |
| Endogenous C24-bile acids (nM) | 2290 ± 500 | 980   | 610          | 1137   | 1895   | 620    |
| Endogenous C27-bile acids (nM) | 20 ± 3   | 1304   | 1334         | 2201   | 6122   | 791    |
| C27-bile acids (%)     | 0.9 ± 0.1| 57.1   | 68.6         | 65.9   | 76.4   | 56.1   |

C24-bile acid species (nM)

| Glyco-cholic          | 117 ± 40 | 43     | 66           | 152    | 18     | 163    |
| Glyco-chenodeoxycholic | 421 ± 90 | 256    | 201          | 662    | 40     | 461    |
| Glyco-deoxycholic     | 180 ± 44 | 27     | 2            | 74     | 11     | 11     |
| Glyco-lithocholic      | 9 ± 2    | 4      | <1           | 46     | 2      | 1      |
| Glyco-ursodeoxycholic  | 51 ± 17  | 5287*  | 6            | 7998*  | 4232*  | 16     |
| Tauro-cholic           | 18 ± 7   | 1      | 5            | 11     | <1     | <1     |
| Tauro-chenodeoxycholic | 53 ± 11  | 14     | 22           | 50     | 4      | 4      |
| Tauro-deoxycholic      | 23 ± 6   | 3      | 1            | 9      | 1      | 6      |
| Tauro-lithocholic      | 1 ± 1    | <1     | <1           | 3      | <1     | <1     |
| Tauro-ursodeoxycholic  | 2 ± 1    | 97*    | <1           | 117*   | 201*   | <1     |
| Tauro-sulfo-lithocholic| 103 ± 15 | 3      | 4            | 78     | 8      | 18     |
| Cholic                 | 403 ± 92 | 122    | 276          | 5      | 47     | 504    |
| Chenodeoxycholic       | 330 ± 180| 445    | 14           | 20     | 11     | 6      |
| Deoxycholic            | 417 ± 124| 59     | 4            | 13     | 5      | 7      |
| Lithocholic            | 93 ± 27  | 1      | 1            | 14     | 4      | 1      |
| Ursodeoxycholic        | 65 ± 21  | 6737*  | 2            | 7645*  | 96*    | 3      |

C27-bile acid species (nM)

| Glyco-trihydroxycholestanolic | <1 | 118 | 156 | 189 | 763 | 38 | 1133 | 24 | 521 | 290 | 59 | 153 | 167 | 27 | 54 |
| Glyco-dihydroxycholestanolic  | <1 | 15  | 39  | 127 | 117 | 19 | 79   | 8  | 61  | 30  | 7  | 18  | 33  | <1 | 3  |
| Tauro-trihydroxycholestanolic | 16 ± 3 | 706 | 902 | 1348| 4492| 553 | 3199 | 71 | 3443| 1575| 597| 2125| 1432| 194|291|
| Tauro-dihydroxycholestanolic  | <1 | 87  | 204 | 472 | 708 | 164 | 364  | 14 | 959 | 333 | 77 | 936 | 438 | 69 | 118|
| Trihydroxycholestanolic      | 4 ± 1 | 379 | 32  | 63  | 42  | 17  | 806  | 36 | 30  | 87  | 55 | 14  | 21  | 16 | 46 |

Note: Control samples were collected from 18 healthy individuals.
UDCA-associated species were marked with an asterisk (*) when the patient was treated with UDCA (12 or 15 mg/kg/day).
Abbreviations: ND, not determined; UDCA, ursodeoxycholic acid.
directed genetic studies were performed. The patient showed an increased proportion of plasma C27-BAs (Figure 1) and two heterozygous variants, presumably on two different alleles of ACOX2, the c.673C>T variant and a deletion of 4 nucleotides (c.456_459del) (Figure 1). This was predicted to generate the same protein change (p.Thr154fs) that had been previously described for a similar variant identified in ACOX2 by Ferdinandusse et al. Liver function tests and analysis of BA profile after another 6 months of UDCA treatment revealed maintained normalization of aminotransferases besides a persistently altered BA profile (Figure 1, Table 1, and Table S6). The analysis of the proband’s family showed that the younger brother was homozygous for wild-type ACOX2, whereas the father was heterozygous for c.456_459del (p.Thr154fs) and the mother showed the c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) variant in heterozygosis (Figure 1). Their plasma BA profiles were normal (Figure 1, Table S10), with C27-BAs and C24-BAs within normal ranges.

Case 4

A 7-year-old boy presented a history of congenital heart disease (mild mitral stenosis, and moderate-severe aortic insufficiency) with slight developmental delay and oscillating hypertransaminasemia (Table S7). He was referred to the Pediatric Hepatology and Liver Transplantation Unit from Vall d’Hebron Hospital, where common causes of liver damage were ruled out. Abdominal ultrasound showed slight hepatic hyperechogenicity. Liver biopsy presented subtle polygonal morphology of the hepatocytes with no other remarkable findings (Figure S2). Due to the multiorgan affection, a complete exome sequencing study was indicated. This showed the same double heterozygous variant of ACOX2 as in Case 3; i.e., variants c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) and c.456_459del (p.Thr154fs) (Figure 1). Plasma BA profiling (Table 1) confirmed enhanced C27-BA proportion (Figure 1). Diagnosis of ADAH prompted UDCA treatment, resulting in the normalization of aminotransferase levels (Table S7) and a partial reduction in the proportion of C27-BAs in plasma (Figure 1, Table 1). The analysis of the proband’s family members showed that the father carried the c.456_459del (p.Thr154fs) variant in heterozygosis and the mother presented the c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) variant in heterozygosis (Figure 1). In both parents, plasma C27-BA and C24-BA levels were within normal ranges (Figure 1; Table S11).

**Figure 2** Immunohistochemistry analysis of acyl-CoA oxidase (ACOX) 2 expression in liver biopsies collected from patients with ACOX2 deficiency–associated hypertransaminasemia (ADAH). Two samples from patients with hypertransaminasemia but not ADAH, namely, NAFLD F1 and alcoholic cirrhosis used as Control 1 (A) and Control 2 (B), respectively. When expressed, ACOX2 was detected as intense granular staining inside the hepatocytes. Negative staining for ACOX2 was seen in liver biopsies from probands of Case 1 (C), Case 2 (D), Case 3 (E), and Case 4 (F). All images were obtained at 20× magnification. Scale bar indicates 50 µm.
Immunohistochemistry studies

Immunohistochemistry of liver biopsies showed a complete absence of ACOX2 staining in patients with ADAH (Figure 2). In contrast, staining was positive in a series of biopsy samples collected from adult patients with different liver diseases (data not shown), two of which have been included in Figure 2 as controls. In contrast, immunohistochemistry for ACOX3, another acyl-CoA oxidase that does not metabolize C27-BA,[10] showed positive signal (with different intensity) in hepatocytes in all cases (Figure S3).

C27-BA–induced toxicity

To analyze the cytotoxic effects of THCA, the main unconjugated C27-BA synthesized in ADAH cases, we first analyzed the ability of THCA to enter liver cells. CA and GCA uptake by HuH-7 cells was inhibited by TCA, which was also taken up by these cells. THCA uptake was higher and not affected by TCA, which was also taken up by these cells. CA and GCA uptake by HuH-7 cells was incomplete absence of ACOX2 staining in patients with ADAH. To analyze the cytotoxic effects of THCA, the main biotransformation into CA. Monoclonal HuH-7 cells stably overexpressing ACOX2-WT or ACOX2-V1 were used as positive and negative controls, respectively (Figure 5C,D). The activity of variants V11 and V14 was similar to that of ACOX2-WT, suggesting that these variants do not have a functional impact on enzyme activity, as was predicted by in silico analysis. In contrast, variants V5 and V8 showed a moderately decreased activity, whereas variants V2, V4, V6, and V10 were significantly less functional (Figure 5E).

DISCUSSION

This study identified seven individuals from four unrelated families carrying ACOX2 variants involved in ADAH. Among them, five individuals showed persistent oscillating hypertransaminasemia. Three patients were homozygous carriers of c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp), the same variant found in the first ADAH case reported,[8] whereas the other two carried heterozygous c.673C>T and c.456_459del ACOX2 variants in different alleles. Interestingly, the latter generates p.Thr154fs, which results in a premature stop codon and a truncated protein. This change is also caused by another similar deletion (c.461_464del) in ACOX2, monoclonal HuH-7 cell sublines overexpressing wild-type ACOX2 (ACOX2-WT) or the p.Arg225Trp mutated variant (ACOX2-V1) were generated (Figure 5). ACOX2-WT overexpression partly protected cells from THCA-induced cytotoxicity, whereas this C27-BA caused a similar reduction in cell viability in control (Mock) and ACOX2-V1 cells (Figure 4N). THCA-induced oxidative stress was not prevented by coincubation with UDCA (Figure 4O). Moreover, THCA markedly upregulated BAX mRNA, which was not reduced by UDCA (Figure 4P), whereas BCL2 was scarcely expressed by HuH-7 cells (Figure 4Q). Consistently, THCA-induced cell death was not inhibited by UDCA (Figure 4R).

Potentially harmful ACOX2 variants

The search for variants that could cause ADAH, carried out in the databases, led to the selection of 46 variants, of which most (32 variants) had an extremely low MAF. Hence, a maximum contribution of 1.56% of all predicted cases of dysfunctional ACOX2 could be expected. Accordingly, this set was discarded from the study and attention was focused on the functional analysis of the remaining 14 variants (Table 2). This specific set included the c.673C>T (p.Arg225Trp) variant initially identified (ACOX2-V1). According to SIFT and PolyPhen-2 predictions, only 11 of these variants are expected to have a functional impact on ACOX2 enzymatic activity. These predictions were further validated by measuring the ability of the variants, when expressed in HuH-7 cells (Figure 5A,B), to enhance THCA biotransformation into CA. Monoclonal HuH-7 cells stably overexpressing ACOX2-WT or ACOX2-V1 were used as positive and negative controls, respectively (Figure 5C,D). The activity of variants V11 and V14 was similar to that of ACOX2-WT, suggesting that these variants do not have a functional impact on enzyme activity, as was predicted by in silico analysis. In contrast, variants V5 and V8 showed a moderately decreased activity, whereas variants V2, V4, V6, and V10 were significantly less functional (Figure 5E).
FIGURE 3  Uptake of glycocholic (GCA), taurocholic acid (TCA), cholic (CA), and trihydroxycholestanoic (THCA) acid by wild-type HuH-7 hepatoma cells (A) and Chinese hamster ovary (CHO) cells (Control) or CHO cells stably expressing NTCP (B), OATP1B1 (C), or OATP1B3 (D). Cells were incubated with 50 µM GCA, CA, or THCA, without or with 250 µM TCA for 1 h. Bile acid (BA) concentrations in cell lysates were determined by high-performance liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (HPLC-MS/MS). Values are mean ± SD from eight measurements per condition, carried out in four different cultures. *p < 0.05 by comparing with and without transporter expression; †p < 0.05 by comparing uptake in the presence and the absence of TCA, using paired t test.
FIGURE 4  Effect of trihydroxycholestanoic (THCA), cholic (CA), chenodeoxycholic (CDCA), and deoxycholic (DCA) acids on the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS) in HepG2 (A), HuH-7 (B), IHH (C), and HuH-6 (D) cells. Effect of THCA, CA, CDCA and DCA on the expression (mRNA) of endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress markers: GRP78 (E,F); XBP1 (unspliced form XBP1-U and spliced form XBP1-S) (G,H); and CHOP (I,J). Changes in the expression of GRP78 and CHOP were confirmed by immunoblot (K). ER stress induced by 2 μM thapsigargin (TG) was used as a positive control. Effect of THCA on the viability of HepG2 (L), and HuH-7 (M) cells. Effect of THCA on the viability of monoclonal HuH-7 cells overexpressing wild-type acyl-CoA oxidase (ACOX) 2 (ACOX2-WT), the p.Arg225Trp variant of ACOX2 (ACOX2-V1) or transduced with empty lentiviral vectors (Mock) (N). Effect of ursodeoxycholic acid (UDCA) on THCA-induced oxidative stress (O), BAX (P), and BCL2 (Q) mRNA levels in wild-type HuH-7 cells and on cell viability reduction (R) in HuH-7 without (Mock) or with stable expression of ACOX2-WT or ACOX2-V1. Values (mean ± SD from 6 to 12 determinations performed in 3–6 different cultures) are expressed as the percentage of data determined in cells treated with the vehicle alone (Control). *p < 0.05, compared to Control; †p < 0.05, comparing to Mock by paired t test.
markedly differ from that case, showing severe symp-
toms unrelated to liver function only in Case 4. Besides
hypertransaminasemia, no symptoms were observed
in several of our patients, as in the first reported case
of ADAH.\(^8\) Other defects in the peroxisomal pathway
of BA biosynthesis also show great interindividual
variability, as in the case of alpha-methylacyl-CoA
racemase (AMACR)\(^{30}\) and bile acid-CoA:amino acid
N-acyltransferase (BAAT)\(^{31}\) deficiencies.

As a standard feature, all individuals with ADAH
showed an increased proportion of C27-BAs (56%–86%
of total plasma BAs) (Figure 1, Table 1). Interestingly,
C24-BA biosynthesis was reduced but not completely abolished (Table 1, Tables S8–S11). This finding points to a certain remnant ACOX2 activity or the existence of a yet unknown mechanism capable of overcoming ACOX2 deficiency, the only recognized enzyme able to metabolize C27- BAs.[7,8,10] In this sense, Shefer et al. previously proposed, in 1976,[32] an alternative pathway in both humans and rats for BA β- oxidation, named the 25-hydroxylation pathway, that does not require the participation of peroxisomes.

UDCA has been used for the treatment of several cholestatic liver diseases[33] due to its multiple beneficial effects, which include strong choleretic activity and protection of hepatocytes and cholangiocytes from the toxic effects of more hydrophobic BA species. This has been suggested to occur owing to its antioxidant, anti-apoptotic, and immunomodulatory properties,[34] which has justified its use as an anti-inflammatory drug in treating several liver diseases.[35]

Here, we report the positive effects of UDCA in the treatment of patients with ADAH, reverting aminotransferases to normal levels and ameliorating accompanying symptoms, after 3 weeks of UDCA treatment, despite the lack of correction in the abnormal proportion of C27-BAs (Figure 1). Results from our in vitro studies suggest that UDCA-mediated prevention of harmful THCA-induced effects does not mainly occur at hepato-cellular level but rather owing to mechanisms acting at the organ (e.g., hepatobiliary washing associated with marked UDCA-induced stimulation of bile formation) or systemic (e.g., change in BA pool composition, which is enriched in UDCA-related species, more polar and less toxic than C27-BAs) levels. Another interesting finding associated with UDCA treatment is that, as expected, based on its poor ability to activate FXR, administered UDCA cannot inhibit de novo synthesis of BAs and hence cannot inhibit C27-BAs production, which recommends additional pharmacological intervention for a better long-term management of patients with ADAH.

The fact that gallbladder disease was reported in some adult individuals with ADAH prompted the suspicion of a possible link between C27-BA accumulation and cholelithiasis. The low number of cases analyzed here and their occurrence in only one family preclude robust conclusions in this respect.

Although p.Arg225Trp variant affected just one amino acid, the staining of ACOX2 in liver biopsies was negative in all affected patients. The protein structure analysis revealed that the amino acid change might be relevant for ACOX2 dimerization.[8] Thus, the variant could hinder dimerization or result in altered dimers with a greater probability of being degraded by the proteasome. Recently, some studies have also described the absence of protein expression due to the presence of missense gene variants.[36,37] The mechanism accounting for enhanced mRNA degradation in these cases is still poorly understood.

In contrast with conjugated and unconjugated forms of CA, THCA is taken up by a process markedly independent of NTCP, OATP1B1, and OATP1B3. Regarding the
mechanisms accounting for C27-BAs noxious effects, our results show that THCA is more toxic than DCA and CDCA, which are primary mediators of hepatotoxicity in situations of C24-BA accumulation.[12,38] C27-BA-induced hepatocellular toxicity can be partly due to impaired mitochondrial respiratory function and increased ROS production.[39] Although intrahepatic concentrations of C27-BAs in patients with ADAH may be variable and lower than those used in our in vitro experiments, chronic exposure to C27-BAs and the concurrence of other deleterious factors may promote hepatocellular vulnerability and eventually result in liver damage.

Finally, we have identified six ACOX2 variants that, when expressed in HuH-7 cells, show impaired ability to enhance THCA biotransformation into CA and therefore can be considered candidates to cause ADAH. This in vitro study has some limitations, such as measuring the final product of the biochemical pathway, CA, instead of the direct product of ACOX2 activity, the 24-enoyl-CoA derivative of THCA. This may limit the capacity to discriminate the activity of the overexpressed ACOX2 variant due to the necessary action of enzymes downstream of the pathway, i.e., D-bifunctional protein (DBP) and sterol carrier protein x (SCPx). Thus, even though our results add a valuable piece of evidence about the predicted negative impact of ACOX2 variants, their deleterious consequences cannot be confirmed until the diagnosis of additional ADAH individuals carrying these variants could be made. Therefore, more extensive genetic studies in subjects presenting idio-pathic hypertransaminasemia and other hepatic pathologies of unknown origin, should be encouraged to gather accurate data on ADAH prevalence. Still, it is foreseeable that more cases of ADAH will appear in the future among patients with unexplained hypertransaminasemia carrying ACOX2-V1 or other variants with predicted functional impact and high MAF, such as ACOX2-V2 and ACOX2-V6, which are expected to be present in approximately 1 and 5 out of 2000 exomes, respectively.

Finally, the two most relevant clinical contributions of the present study are that a noninvasive and effective diagnostic strategy based on plasma BA profiling and ACOX2 sequencing can accurately identify patients with ADAH and that their liver damage can be efficiently attenuated by UDCA treatment.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Concept and design: Marta Alonso-Peña, Ricardo Espinosa-Escudero, Elisa Herraez, Oscar Briz, Maria J. Monte, Jose J. G. Marin. Clinical samples and data: Maria Luisa Cagigal, Jesus M. Gonzalez-Santiago, Aida Ortega-Alonso, Conrado Fernandez Rodriguez, Luis Bujanda, Marta Calvo Sanchez, Delia D’Avola, Maria-Carlota Londoño, Moises Diago, Jose C. Fernandez-Checa, Carmen Garcia-Ruiz, Raul J. Andrade, Frank Lammert. Cases identification and characterization: Javier Juamperez, Marta Alonso-Peña, Ricardo Espinosa-Escudero, Alvaro Diaz-Gonzalez, Javier Crespo, Maria J. Monte, Jose J. G. Marin. Experiments and procedures: Marta Alonso-Peña, Ricardo Espinosa-Escudero, Elisa Herraez, Oscar Briz, Maria Luisa Cagigal, Jesus M. Gonzalez-Santiago, Aida Ortega-Alonso, Conrado Fernandez Rodriguez, Luis Bujanda, Marta Calvo Sanchez, Delia D’Avola, Maria-Carlota Londoño, Moises Diago, Jose C. Fernandez-Checa, Carmen Garcia-Ruiz, Raul J. Andrade, Frank Lammert, Jesus Prieto, Javier Crespo, Javier Juamperez, Alvaro Diaz-Gonzalez, Maria J. Monte, Jose J. G. Marin. Writing of the article: Marta Alonso-Peña, Maria J. Monte, Jose J. G. Marin. Revision of the article: Marta Alonso-Peña, Ricardo Espinosa-Escudero, Elisa Herraez, Oscar Briz, Maria Luisa Cagigal, Jesus M. Gonzalez-Santiago, Aida Ortega-Alonso, Conrado Fernandez Rodriguez, Luis Bujanda, Marta Calvo Sanchez, Delia D’Avola, Maria-Carlota Londoño, Moises Diago, Jose C. Fernandez-Checa, Carmen Garcia-Ruiz, Raul J. Andrade, Frank Lammert, Jesus Prieto, Javier Crespo, Javier Juamperez, Alvaro Diaz-Gonzalez, Maria J. Monte, Jose J. G. Marin.

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**CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

Dr. Bujanda consults for Ikan Biotech.

**ORCID**

Marta Alonso-Peña [https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0934-2202]

Jesus M. Gonzalez-Santiago [https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4667-4492]

Maria-Carlota Londoño [https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6533-1586]

Javier Crespo [https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8248-0172]

Maria J. Monte [https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1844-7428]

Jose J. G. Marin [https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1186-6849]

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