Sub-staging specific differences in recurrence-free, progression-free and cancer-specific survival for patients with T1 bladder cancer: a systematic review and meta-analysis

CURRENT STATUS: UNDER REVIEW

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DOI: 10.21203/rs.3.rs-17652/v1

SUBJECT AREAS
Urology & Nephrology

KEYWORDS
Urinary bladder neoplasms, Sub-staging, Muscularis mucosa, Progression, Recurrence, Cancer-specific survival
Abstract

Background: The efficiency of the T1 sub-staging system on categorizing bladder cancer (BC) patients into subgroups with different clinical outcomes was unclear. We summarized relevant evidences, including recurrence-free survival (RFS), progression-free survival (PFS) and cancer-specific survival (CSS), to analyze the prognostic significance of T1 sub-stage.

Methods: Systematic literature searches of MEDLINE, EMBASE and the Cochrane Library were performed. We pooled data on recurrence, progression, and CSS from 35 studies.

Results: The pooled hazard ratios (HRs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) indicated the difference in RFS between T1a sub-stage and T1b sub-stage (HR 1.28, 95%CI 1.14-1.43). The significant difference was observed in PFS between the two arms (HR 2.18, 95%CI 1.95-2.44). Worse CSS was found in T1b patients than T1a patients (HR 1.45, 95%CI 1.28-1.64).

Conclusions: T1 sub-staging system based on the invasion depth into muscularis mucosae (MM) can be a significant prognostic factor for RFS, PFS, and CSS of patients with T1-BC. Urologists and pathologists are encouraged to work together to give a precise sub-stage classification of T1-BC, and T1 sub-staging system should be a routine part of any histopathological report when possible. Different treatment strategies need to be developed for both T1a-BC and T1b-BC.

1. Background

Up to 75% of bladder cancers (BCs) are non-muscle invasive at initial diagnosis(1). T1-BC, which invades the lamina propria but not the muscularis propria, comprises 20% of non-muscle invasive BC(2). And the prognostic situation is challenging, reflected on the relatively high 5-year recurrence rates (39-45%), 5-year progression rates (18-23%) and
the cancer-specific mortality (15%) (3). Therefore, some experts recommended that radical cystectomy should be performed for all T1-BC patients (4, 5), while some experts believed that radical cystectomy was an unnecessary treatment strategy for non-progressive T1-BC and negatively affected the quality of life (6). However, the predictive value of Tumor Node Metastasis (TNM) stage is limited in T1-BC. The T1 sub-stage may help categorize patients into different subgroups with different clinical outcomes. And T1 sub-stage has been identified as an important prognostic factor (7). The most widely studied sub-staging system for T1-BC is based on muscularis mucosae (MM) invasion. The MM is a discontinuous layer of smooth muscle bundles, approximately situated in the middle between the urothelium and the muscularis propria. Two invasion stages can be defined as invasion above the MM (referred as T1a) and invasion in or through the MM (referred as T1b). The main objective of this review was to analyze the prognostic significance of T1 sub-staging system based on MM invasion in recurrence-free survival (RFS), progression-free survival (PFS) and cancer-specific survival (CSS) for T1-BC patients.

2. Materials And Methods

2.1 Data sources and searches This systematic review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) guidelines. A research librarian searched multiple electronic databases including MEDLINE, EMBASE and the Cochrane Library. The main key words used for the search were (urinary bladder neoplasms OR bladder tumors OR urinary bladder cancer OR bladder carcinoma) AND (sub-stage OR sub-staging) AND muscularis mucosa AND prognosis. The full search algorithm was shown in (S1 word). The search was conducted in September 2019, without limiting the starting time of the literature. We also reviewed reference lists and previous systematic reviews for additional studies and searched documents for unpublished studies. The language was not restricted.
2.2 Study selection The inclusion criteria was as follows: Firstly, the participants must be identified as T1 primary BC patients. Secondly, the category was according to T1 substaging system based on MM invasion. Thirdly, the predefined outcomes were differences in RFS, PFS, and CSS between T1a and T1b. Publications were required to report hazard ratios (HRs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) or documented data, which allowed an HR to be readily calculable for one of the specified outcomes(8). The recurrence was defined as histological detection of BC after three months of transurethral resection of bladder tumor (TURBT). The progression was defined as later occurrence of any higher stage disease. Two reviewers evaluated each study on the basis of predefined inclusion criteria. Only studies which fulfilled inclusion criteria, evaluation of at least one outcome (RFS, PFS or CSS) after TURBT were included. Case reports, review articles and meta-analyses were excluded.

2.3 Data abstraction and study quality assessment Two reviewers extracted data on baseline characteristics, methods, and outcomes (HRs, number of events for recurrence, progression, and CSS) from included articles. The disagreements were resolved by consensus. We used the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale system to rate the quality of all studies. Studies with scores more than 7 were assessed as “low-risk”, scores of 4 to 6 were assessed as “moderate-risk”, and scores of less than 4 were assessed as “high-risk”. The study quality assessment was independently performed by two reviewers. And the inconsistencies were resolved by consensus.

2.4 Data synthesis and analysis We conducted meta-analyses on HRs and 95% CIs for RFS, PFS, and CSS using Stata software (version 11.0). A random effects model was used to combine the results.

2.5 Heterogeneity and publication bias The Cochrane Q test was used to evaluate statistical heterogeneity (P<.10). The I² statistic was used to assess the contribution of
between-study heterogeneity to overall heterogeneity (9). To evaluate publication bias, Begg’s test was performed. Meta-regression was used to analyze the heterogeneity.

3. Results

900 potentially relevant articles were initially included after database searches. The study flow chart was presented in (Fig 1). We selected 68 articles for full-text review, of which 35 studies met the inclusion criteria. For each study, the data were extracted (S2 Table). Five studies were performed in Asia (10-14), 20 were performed in Europe (2, 7, 15-32), and 10 were performed in North America (33-42). RFS was evaluated in 20 studies, PFS was evaluated in 31 studies and CSS was evaluated in 12 studies. Median follow-up time ranged from 12 to 114 months, with a median of 57.3 months. The 35 studies included 100% of patients with T1-BC.

The difference was found in RFS between T1a and T1b sub-stage (HR 1.28, 95% CI 1.14-1.43) (Fig 2). The significant difference was observed in PFS between the two arms (HR 2.18, 95% CI 1.95-2.44) (Fig 3). And T1b patients had worse CSS than T1a patients (HR 1.45, 95% CI 1.28-1.64) (Fig 4).

3.1 Study quality, heterogeneity and publication bias The risk of bias was calculated to be low or moderate for included studies. 33 studies were rated low-risk of bias, and two were moderate-risk. The scale scores were conveyed in (S3 Table). We did not find any heterogeneity among studies by evaluating the RFS ($I^2 = 27.9\%$). Heterogeneity was observed for PFS and CSS ($I^2 = 60.7\%, I^2 = 50.1\%$). The Begg’s funnel plots did not reveal any statistically significant publication bias in studies (that evaluated RFS ($p=0.230$) and CSS ($p=0.150$)) (Fig 5A, Fig 5B). When evaluating PFS, statistically significant publication bias was identified by the Begg’s funnel ($p=0.002$) (Fig 5C).

Discussion
The current classification recommends the reporting of the extent of invasion of T1-BCs. However, the system for sub-staging to be used remains optional. T1 sub-stage based on MM invasion was identified as an important prognostic factor for T1-BC. The T1 sub-staging system may help categorize patients into different subgroups with different clinical outcomes. The typical symptom of MM invasion is the change of MM distribution pattern from a continuous layer to a dispersed smooth muscle cell bundle. It was reported that the presence of MM could be found only in 32% of TURBT specimens, and 17% of biopsy specimens\(^\text{43-47}\). In some areas of the bladder, such as trigone, the MM may be difficult to be identified\(^\text{48}\), while the rate of MM discovery has increased up to 100% in more recent reports now. Most of them agreed on a 90% discovery rate\(^\text{15}\). It is important for urologists and pathologists to work together to identify the MM invasion. Firstly, the urologists need to minimize the cautery injury when performing TURBT, and submit the tumor base separately. These will enable the pathologist to have a better opportunity to identify the MM invasion depth. En-bloc resection using monopolar or bipolar current, Thulium-YAG or Holmium-YAG laser is proven to be feasible. It provides resected specimens of high quality with detrusor muscle preserved\(^\text{49, 50}\). Secondly, well trained pathologists need to sub-stage the tumor in most patients with stage T1-BC.

Martin-Doyle et al\(^3\) previously conducted a meta-analysis in comparing the recurrence rate between T1a and T1b/c high-grade BC based on six studies published before 2015. They found that T1a high-grade BC patients had no difference in recurrence compared with T1b/c high-grade BC patients (HR, 1.29; 95% CI, 0.93–1.78; P = 0.127). We evaluated 20 studies including both T1 low-grade BC and T1 high-grade BC. We found the difference in recurrence between T1a BC and T1b BC patients (HR, 1.28; 95%CI, 1.14–1.43 ). The different clinical outcomes in our study was explained as follows: Firstly, the population in our study covered all types of T1-BC, rather than T1 high-grade BC. Secondly, most
studies focused on progression rate, with fewer studies reporting the recurrence of BC. Thirdly, the invasion of MM was more frequently discovered.

We analyzed the heterogeneity in studies, which evaluated RFS and CSS with meta-regression. As individual patient data were not accessible, the assessment of heterogeneity was limited. We only analyzed the factors of publication year and race using covariate meta-regression respectively. We found the publication year was related to the heterogeneity in studies which evaluated PFS ($P = 0.014$), while the race was not related to the heterogeneity ($p = 0.822$). We found that neither publication year ($p = 0.538$) nor race ($P = 0.705$) was related to the heterogeneity in studies which evaluated CSS.

Although we identified little evidence of publication bias, we might have limited capabilities to detect the bias, given the limitations of available techniques (51). This publication bias might be originated from selective reporting of results.

The treatment of T1-BC remains controversial. For patients receiving no adjuvant intravesical treatment, the progression rate was 9.1% in patients with T1a tumor, whereas it was 50% in patients with T1b tumor (11). Orsola et al (15) reported that in BCG-treated patients, the progression rate was 8% in patients with T1a tumor, whereas it was 34% in patients with T1b tumor. Overall the progression rate of T1b patients was higher than that of T1a patients. In our study, T1b patients had worse RFS, PFS and CSS than T1a patients. So patients with T1a tumor could be managed conservatively with TURBT and intravesical BCG treatment. But patients with T1b tumor should be recommended to receive more aggressive treatment.

There were some limitations in our study. Firstly, all included studies were retrospective observational studies with selection biases. Secondly, insufficient data which lacked details on presence of carcinoma in situ and employment of whether re-TURBT or intravesical treatment, limited further analyses. Thirdly, we did not distinguish between
low grade and high grade cancers, which might also influence disease recurrence and progression.

Conclusions

From our meta-analysis, we confirmed that T1 sub-staging system based on MM invasion could be a significant and adverse prognostic factor for RFS, PFS, and CSS of patients with T1-BC. Therefore, urologists and pathologists should be encouraged to work together to evaluate MM invasion. And T1 sub-staging system based on MM invasion should be recognized as a routine part of any histopathological report when possible. And future researches such as multicenter randomized clinical trials should be conducted to confirm our opinions.

Abbreviations

BC: bladder cancer; MM: muscularis mucosae; RFS: recurrence-free survival; PFS: progression-free survival; CSS: cancer specific survival; HRs: hazard ratios; CIs: confidence intervals; TURBT: transurethral resection of bladder tumor

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

All data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article and its supplementary information files.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Authors' contributions

JF: Conceptualization, methodology, visualization, supervision, and project administration.

GC: Methodology, investigation, data curation, formal analysis, resources, writing-original draft.

TY: Investigation, data curation, writing-review and editing.

PZ: Investigation, data curation, visualization, writing-review and editing.

MZ: Investigation, data curation, editing and visualization.

BY: Data curation, and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figure 1

The study flow chart. A total of 35 studies met the inclusion criteria.
Figure 2

T1a/b sub-staging: recurrence-free survival. Difference in RFS between T1a and T1b sub-stage.
Figure 3

T1a/b sub-staging: progression-free survival. Difference in PFS between T1a and T1b sub-stage.
**Figure 4**

T1a/b sub-staging: cancer-special survival. Difference in CSS between T1a and T1b sub-stage.

**Figure 5**

Publication bias assessment: funnel plots. A: recurrence-free survival; B: progression-free survival; C: cancer-specific survival

**Supplementary Files**

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