Prediction Role of Baseline Digital Substraction Angiography in GEP Neuroendocrine Liver Metastases Treated with TAE/ TACE

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Research Article

Keywords: Gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumors, liver metastasis, transarterial chemoembolization, digital substraction angiography

Posted Date: November 5th, 2021

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1028060/v1

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Abstract

Aim

Transarterial embolization (TAE) or transarterial chemoembolization (TACE) is an important treatment approach for unresectable liver metastatic gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumors (GEP-NETs). The prediction tool for therapeutic evaluation is still unclear. This study was performed to assess the prediction role of baseline digital substraction angiography (DSA) in synchronous liver metastatic GEP-NETs treated with TAE/ TACE.

Methods

Twenty-two patients with synchronous unresectable liver metastatic GEP-NETs (G1/2) and treated with TAE/ TACE were retrospectively enrolled. Clinical characteristics, baseline DSA and computed tomography (CT) information were collected.

Results

Totally, the overall response rate of TAE/ TACE on liver metastasis was 45.5%. The average baseline CT ratio (the density of the target lesion / the density of abdominal aorta during arterial phase) between responsive group and nonresponsive group were not statistically different (0.30±0.06 versus 0.36±0.11, \(P=0.149\)). Whereas, the average baseline DSA ratio (the density of target lesion / the density of liver background on DSA imaging before TAE/ TACE) of responsive group was significantly lower compared with that of nonresponsive group (0.57±0.13 versus 0.70±0.15, \(P=0.037\)). Patients with a DSA ratio \(\leq 0.64\) were more responsive to TAE/ TACE than those with a DSA ratio \(>0.64\) (58.3% versus 30%). Univariate and multivariate analysis indicated that patients with lower hepatic tumor burden had longer PFS.

Conclusions

Baseline DSA ratio is a simple and potentially useful method to predict therapeutic effect of TAE/ TACE in liver metastases from GEP-NETs. And patients with lower hepatic tumor burden might indicate better prognosis. Prospective large-scale study is warranted.

Introduction

Gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumors (GEP-NETs) are rare and heterogeneous neoplasms originating from the diffuse neuroendocrine system of the gastrointestinal tract and pancreas. It is reported that the incidence rate of GEP-NETs has been rising in the last decades[1]. According to statistics from the Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results (SEER) program, the current annual age-adjusted incidence of GEP-NETs is estimated to be 3.56 per 100,000 persons in the United States[2]. Despite the
indolent rate of tumor growth, over 20% NET patients present with distant metastasis at initial diagnosis, with liver the most common metastatic site[3].

According to current statistics, liver metastases occur in more than half of patients with GEP-NETs[4]. Current treatment approaches for management of liver metastatic GEP-NETs include surgery, somatostatin analogues, systemic chemotherapy, targeted drugs and intervention therapy. For patients with diffuse and bilobar liver metastases, transarterial embolization (TAE) or transarterial chemoembolization (TACE) is an important and appropriate treatment option to relieve symptoms and improve survival outcome, as suggested in several related guidelines[4, 5].

Previous studies have suggested that patients with severe symptoms, lower liver tumor burden on imaging examinations or lower level of serum pancreastatin may potentially benefit from TAE/ TACE[6–9]. However, the prediction tool for therapeutic evaluation of TAE/ TACE is still unclear and optimal candidates for this procedure remain undetermined. The aim of this study was to assess the prediction role of baseline digital substraction angiography (DSA) in synchronous liver metastatic GEP-NETs patients who underwent TAE/ TACE procedures.

Materials And Methods

Patient Selection

The West China Hospital of Medicine, Sichuan University Ethic Committee for Clinical Investigation approved this study. And all methods were performed in compliance with the relevant guidelines and regulations. Medical information of patients diagnosed with synchronous liver metastatic GEP-NETs from January 1, 2016 to July 31, 2020 were reviewed retrospectively. Patients who met the following criteria were enrolled: 1) histologically confirmed GEP-NET; 2) clinically or pathologically diagnosed with synchronous liver metastasis between January 1, 2016 and July 31, 2020; 3) unresectable liver metastasis; 4) good performance status with an Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) score of < 2 (on a scale of 0 to 5, with a higher score indicating poorer performance status); 5) received TAE/ TACE procedure during disease process; 6) adequate clinical data.

Collected information included patient demographics, symptoms, hormonal functionality, tumor grade, TNM stage, baseline DSA ratio, baseline computed tomography (CT) ratio, liver specific tumor response, systemic therapy, and serum tumor marker (CEA and NSE) levels. In this study, liver specific tumor response was defined as radiographic response of liver metastases to treatment according to the Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors (RECIST) version 1.1[10]. Baseline DSA ratio was defined as the density of the largest target lesion on DSA imaging (hounsfield unit, HU)/ the density of liver background (HU) before TAE/ TACE, and CT ratio meant the baseline density of the largest target lesion on CT imaging (HU)/ the density of abdominal aorta (HU) during arterial phase. When the tumor grades between primary and metastatic tumors were different, the higher grade were taken and recorded.

Statistical Analysis
Quantitative data were compared by Student’s t test and categorical data by Chi-square test. Statistical tests were two sided and $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant. All analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics 22.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA).

**Results**

**Patient characteristics**

In total, 22 patients with unresectable liver metastatic GEP-NETs were enrolled. Table 1 listed patients’ clinical and pathological characteristics. The mean age at diagnosis was $49.3 \pm 9.8$ years (95% confidence interval (CI): 44.9-53.6 years). More than half of the patients (68.2%) were females. All of the patients were in good performance status with ECOG scores 0~1. The vast majority of primary tumors were located in pancreas (86.4%, 19/22) and non-functional (91.0%, 20/22). Most of patients (81.8%) presented with G2, while 13.6% with G3 and 4.5% with G1. The mean largest diameter of liver metastases before TAE/ TACE was $6.3 \pm 4.7$ cm (95% CI: 3.8-7.5 cm). Most patients presented with elevated serum NSE (59.1%) and normal serum CEA (86.4%) before TACE.
Table 1
Baseline characteristics of patients with liver metastatic GEP-NETs

| Variables                  | Patients          |
|----------------------------|-------------------|
|                            | Number | %     |
| Age (Year)                 | 49.3±9.8#        | -     |
| Gender                     |         |       |
| Male                       | 7       | 31.8  |
| Female                     | 15      | 68.2  |
| ECOG score                 |         |       |
| 0                          | 12      | 54.5  |
| 1                          | 10      | 45.5  |
| Primary tumor location     |         |       |
| Pancreas                   | 19      | 86.4  |
| Duodenum                   | 1       | 4.5   |
| Rectum                     | 2       | 9.0   |
| Tumor grade                |         |       |
| G1                         | 1       | 4.5   |
| G2                         | 18      | 81.8  |
| G3                         | 3       | 13.6  |
| Hormonal functionality     |         |       |
| Yes                        | 2       | 9.0   |
| No                         | 20      | 91.0  |
| Hepatic tumor burden       |         |       |
| <50%                       | 11      | 50.0  |
| ≥50%                       | 11      | 50.0  |
| Serum NSE                  |         |       |
| Normal                     | 9       | 40.9  |

Note: #Data are mean ± standard deviation. Abbreviations: GEP-NETs, gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumors; ECOG, Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group; NSE, neuron specific enolase; CEA, carcinoma embryonic antigen
| Variables                        | Patients |
|---------------------------------|----------|
|                                 | Elevated | 13 | 59.1 |
| Serum CEA                       |          |    |      |
| Normal                          | 19       | 86.4 |     |
| Elevated                        | 3        | 13.6 |     |
| Extrahepatic metastases         |          |    |      |
| Present                         | 5        | 22.7 |     |
| Absent                          | 17       | 77.3 |     |
| Primary tumor resection         |          |    |      |
| Yes                             | 9        | 40.9 |     |
| No                              | 13       | 59.1 |     |
| Somatostatin analogues treatment|          |    |      |
| Yes                             | 16       | 72.7 |     |
| No                              | 6        | 27.3 |     |
| Targeted agents treatment       |          |    |      |
| Yes                             | 5        | 22.7 |     |
| No                              | 17       | 77.3 |     |
| Systemic chemotherapy           |          |    |      |
| No                              | 16       | 72.7 |     |
| Yes                             | 6        | 27.3 |     |
| Total                           | 22       | 100 |     |

Note: #Data are mean ± standard deviation. Abbreviations: GEP-NETs, gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumors; ECOG, Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group; NSE, neuron specific enolase; CEA, carcinoma embryonic antigen

**Treatment**

All patients underwent TAE/ TACE procedure after assessment of oncologists and interventional radiologists. During TACE procedure, with the help of DSA examination, hepatic artery was selected using a 5 French catheter through femoral arterial access. Next, tumor-feeding vessels were super-selected and infused with a mixture of iodized oil (10–20 mL) and cytotoxic agents (fluorouracil 1000 mg and doxorubicin 50 mg). Then embolization was performed using gelatin sponge particles to complete blood
flow stagnation. TAE procedure was similar to TACE, but without administration of iodized oil or cytotoxic agents, and completed by occlusion of the hepatic artery branch with polyvinyl alcohol particles.

As systemic therapy, 16 (72.7%) patients received somatostatin analogues, 5 patients were prescribed with targeted agents, and 6 patients received chemotherapy. Table 2 listed all the patients' systemic treatment agents.
### Table 2
Systemic treatment of all the patients

| Patients | Systemic treatment | Targeted agents | Systemic chemotherapy |
|----------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| No. 1    | Octreotide LAR     | Bevacizumab     | Capecitabine+ temozolomide |
| No. 2    | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 3    | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 4    | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 5    | Octreotide LAR     | Sunitinib       |                       |
| No. 6    | Lanreotide         |                 |                       |
| No. 7    | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 8    | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 9    | Octreotide LAR     |                 | Capecitabine+ temozolomide |
| No. 10   | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 11   | Octreotide LAR     | Sunitinib       |                       |
| No. 12   | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 13   | Octreotide LAR     |                 | Temozolomide          |
| No. 14   | Octreotide LAR     |                 | Capecitabine+ oxaliplatin |
| No. 15   | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 16   | Octreotide LAR     | Bevacizumab     | Capecitabine+ temozolomide |
| No. 17   | Octreotide LAR     |                 | Capecitabine+ temozolomide |
| No. 18   | Lanreotide         |                 |                       |
| No. 19   | Lanreotide         |                 |                       |
| No. 20   | Octreotide LAR     | Sunitinib       |                       |
| No. 21   | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |
| No. 22   | Octreotide LAR     |                 |                       |

Abbreviations: No., number; Octreotide LAR, octreotide long-acting repeatable
Therapeutic response was evaluated by abdominal computerized tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) at 2- to 3-month intervals according to RECIST 1.1 criteria. The largest target liver lesion of every patient was selected for therapeutic evaluation. The liver specific overall response rate (ORR) was 45.5% (10/22), with 10 patients evaluated as partial response (PR) and 0 complete response (CR). Figure 1 showed the best diameter change of target liver lesions from baseline. Among all the patients, the liver specific median progression free survival (PFS) was 17.5 months (95% CI 4.8-30.2 months), and overall survival (OS) were not reached (Figure 2). Kaplan-Meier analysis showed that patients with lower hepatic tumor burden (<50%) had significant longer PFS than higher hepatic tumor burden (≥50%) (62.2 vs 13.3 months, P=0.030, Figure 2c). Other groups stratified by CT ratio, DSA ratio, age, sex, or NSE level showed no significant differences in PFS (Figure 2), which might be partly attributed to small sample size. Multivariate COX regression analysis revealed that hepatic tumor burden was an independent prognostic factor for PFS (Table 3).

| Variables | Univariate analysis | Multivariate analysis |
|-----------|---------------------|----------------------|
|           | mPFS (95%CI) # | P | HR (95%CI) | P |
| Hepatic tumor burden |  | | | |
| <50% | 62.2(NA) | 0.030 | 0.177(0.035-0.889) | 0.035 |
| ≥50% | 13.3(5.9-20.8) | 1 (Reference) |  |  |
| CT ratio |  | | | |
| ≤0.34 | 25.2(3.2-47.2) | 0.096 | 0.220(0.036-1.325) | 0.098 |
| >0.34 | 11.0(3.9-18.1) | 1 (Reference) |  |  |
| DSA ratio |  | | | |
| ≤0.64 | 17.5(10.4-24.6) | 0.825 | 0.296(0.040-2.192) | 0.233 |
| >0.64 | 13.3(0-31.7) | 1 (Reference) |  |  |
| Age |  | | | |
| <49.3 | 17.5(1.8-33.2) | 0.925 | 0.621(0.121-3.199) | 0.569 |
| ≥49.3 | 13.3(9.8-16.8) | 1 (Reference) |  |  |
| Sex |  | | | |
| Male | 17.5(1.7-33.3) | 0.179 | 2.513(0.459-13.749) | 0.288 |
| Female | 29.9(10.3-49.5) | 1 (Reference) |  |  |

Note: #In months. Abbreviations: mPFS, median progression free survival time; HR, hazard ratio; CI, confidence interval
The average baseline DSA ratio of the largest target lesion (the density of the target lesion on DSA imaging / the density of liver background before TAE/ TACE) was 0.64±0.15. And the average baseline DSA ratio in responsive group was significantly lower compared with that in nonresponsive group (0.57±0.13 versus 0.70±0.15, P=0.037, Figure 3a). Furthermore, patients with a DSA ratio ≤0.64 were more responsive to TAE/ TACE than those with a DSA ratio ≥0.64 (58.3% versus 30%), but the P value was greater than 0.05 probably due to small sample size. Figure 3b showed therapeutic evaluation in patients with a low DSA ratio (≤0.64) and a high DSA ratio (≥0.64). Figure 4a~c and 4d~f were representative images of patients with high and low DSA ratios. Meanwhile, we also assessed the role of baseline CT ratio of the largest target lesion (the density of the target lesion on CT imaging / the density of abdominal aorta during arterial phase) in therapeutic evaluation. The results showed that among all the patients, the average baseline CT ratio was 0.34±0.09. The CT ratios between responsive group and nonresponsive group were not statistically different (0.30±0.06 versus 0.36±0.11, P=0.149, Figure 3b).

Discussion

In this study, we summarized the characteristics and therapeutic response of patients with unresectable liver metastatic GEP-NETs treated with TAE/ TACE. We found that baseline DSA ratio of the target lesion could predict treatment response usefully. And patients with lower hepatic tumor burden might indicate better prognosis. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study investigating the association between baseline DSA features and therapeutic response to TAE/ TACE.

Several studies investigated characteristics and survival outcome of patients with neuroendocrine liver metastases treated with TAE/ TACE[6–9, 11–13]. The hepatic ORR after TAE/ TACE procedure was reported to be 20-40%, which was in accordance in our study. In the study conducted by Dhir M. et al, age, grade, liver tumor burden, and serum chromogranin A level were independent prognostic factors for overall survival in neuroendocrine tumor liver metastases received TACE[11]. The study performed by Luo Y. et al showed that baseline MRI parameters (tumor volume and arterial enhancement) could act as independent prognostic factors for survival in patients with neuroendocrine liver metastases treated with TACE[8]. However, these studies only determined factors associated with survival outcome, not with response to TACE.

DSA is generously applied in TAE/ TACE procedure and a direct method to determine tumor vascularity. In hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), the baseline characteristics of DSA imaging could potentially predict tumor response to TAE/ TACE[14–16]. The study conducted by Wang E. et al showed that hypervascular lesions on DSA imaging responded better than hypovascular ones (ORR: 68.2% vs. 25.6%, P < 0.001). Lesions with certain imaging features such as staining obviously, dilated and tortuous vessels, clear boundary, and et al. were defined as hypervascular lesions[15]. But this method greatly depended on the professional level of radiologists and consequently had low consistency. In our study, we used a quantitative data (DSA ratio) to measure tumor vascularity and evaluate response, which was simple and accurately measurable. Even doctors not majored in radiology could easily learn and master this new method.
Some limitations exist in our study. First, selection bias is inevitable due to the retrospective nature. Second, for the rarity of liver metastatic GEP-NETs, the sample size of our study is very small. We are making our effort to collecting more cases in the future.

Conclusions

In conclusion, baseline DSA ratio of the largest target lesion is a simple and potentially useful approach to predict therapeutic effect of TAE/ TACE in liver metastases from GEP-NETs. In addition, patients with lower hepatic tumor burden might indicate better prognosis. Large prospective study is warranted to confirm this.

Abbreviations

TAE, transarterial embolization; TACE, transarterial chemoembolization; GEP-NETs, gastroenteropancreatic neuroendocrine tumors; DSA, digital substraction angiography; ORR, overall response rate; CI, confidence interval; NSE, neuron specific enolase; CEA, carcinoa embryonic antigen; PFS, progression free survival; OS, overall survival; RECIST, Response Evaluation Criteria in Solid Tumors; SEER, Surveillance, Epidemiology, and End Results program; HU, hounsfield unit; CT, computerized tomography; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; ECOG, Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group; PR, partial response; CR, complete response

Declarations

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the West China Hospital, Sichuan University Ethic Committee for Clinical Investigation.

Consent to participate

Not applicable.

Consent for publication

Written informed consent for publication was obtained from all patients at the time of admission as a routine practice at West China Hospital, Sichuan University.

Availability of data and material
The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

**Code availability**

Not applicable.

**Authors’ contributions**

Li X and Cao D conceived of and designed the study. Li X, Luo X, You X and Liao Z performed the analyses. Li X, Li L, Pu J and Suo J prepared tables and figures. Li X and Li L wrote the main manuscript. All authors approved to the submission.

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**Figures**

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1**

The best diameter change of target liver lesions from baseline (overall response rate=45.5%).
Figure 2

Progression free survival and overall survival curves. (a) Progression free survival of all the patients: 17.5 months (95% CI 4.8-30.2 months); (b) Overall survival of all the patients: not reached; (c) Progression free survival stratified by hepatic tumor burden (hepatic tumor burden< 50% vs. ≥50%: 62.2 vs 13.3 months, P=0.030); (d) Progression free survival stratified by CT ratio (CT ratio≤0.34 vs. >0.34: 25.2 vs 11.0 months, P=0.096); (e) Progression free survival stratified by DSA ratio (DSA ratio≤0.64 vs. >0.64: 17.5 vs 13.3 months, P=0.825); (f) Progression free survival stratified by age (age < 49.3 vs. ≥49.3: 17.5 vs 13.3 months, P=0.925); (g) Progression free survival stratified by sex (male vs. female: 17.5 vs 29.9 months, P=0.179); (h) Progression free survival stratified by serum NSE level (normal vs. elevated: 11.1 vs 25.2 months, P=0.289).

Figure 3

(a) Average CT and DSA ratios in responsive and nonresponsive groups (CT ratio: 0.30±0.06 vs. 0.36±0.11, P=0.149; DSA ratio: 0.57±0.13 vs. 0.70±0.15, P=0.037). (b) Hepatic response in low and high DSA ratio groups.
Figure 4

Representative images of patients with high and low DSA ratios. (a) Representative images of a patient evaluated as progressive disease (DSA ratio=0.92); (b) Representative images of a patient evaluated as partial response (DSA ratio=0.33).