CONCISE COMMUNICATION

HLA B*5701 status, disease progression, and response to antiretroviral therapy

The UK Collaborative HIV Cohort Study Steering Committee

Objective: In addition to hypersensitivity reactions to abacavir, HLA B*5701 has been associated with slow or nonprogression of HIV infection. We explored the effect of HLA B*5701 on CD4+ cell count and viral load in untreated patients and on responses to nonabacavir-containing combination antiretroviral therapy (cART) in a large UK-based cohort.

Design: Analysis of a cohort of HIV-infected adults.

Methods: In untreated patients, CD4+ cell count and viral load at study entry were compared in HLAB*5701-positive and HLAB*5701-negative individuals and linear regression tested for an interaction effect of viral load and HLA B*5701 on CD4+ cell count. In patients starting a nonabacavir cART regimen, Cox proportional hazards models compared virological responses to cART among HLA B*5701-negative, HLA B*5701-positive, and those not tested. Six-month and 12-month changes in CD4+ cell count were used as outcomes in linear regression to compare immunological response to cART in these groups.

Results: ART-naive HLA B*5701-positive individuals had higher CD4+ cell count (P<0.0001) and lower viral load (P<0.0001) at study entry than negatives; however, HLAB*5701 status was not found to effect the association between viral load and CD4+ cell count (interaction P value = 0.09). HLA B*5701-positive patients were more likely to achieve viral suppression than negative patients on a nonabacavir regimen [hazard ratio = 1.29, 95% confidence interval, CI (1.15–1.54)] and less likely to experience viral rebound [hazard ratio = 0.61, 95% CI (0.37–0.99)].

Conclusion: Better virological but not immunological responses to cART were seen in HLA B*5701-positive patients on nonabacavir regimens. This study provides further evidence of the potentially beneficial effect of HLA B*5701 on HIV progression.

Keywords: antiretroviral therapy progression, HIV, HLA B*5701

Introduction

The HLA allele B*5701 is strongly associated with hypersensitivity reactions to abacavir [1–4]. Hence, most treatment guidelines recommend that patients initiating abacavir be tested for the presence of this allele, and that those who are positive should not receive abacavir. Since the widespread introduction of HLA B*5701 testing, the incidence of hypersensitivity reactions in those receiving abacavir has dropped substantially.
[5]. In addition to the association with hypersensitivity, the HLA B*5701 allele has also been found to be more common in HIV ‘slow progressors’ or ‘nonprogressors’ [6–8]. It is hypothesized that protection occurs through more effective HLA class I T-lymphocyte responses to HIV-1 antigens with less mutational escape leading to better control of viral replication and lower viral loads [7–12]. Previous studies exploring the influence of HLA B*5701 on disease progression have been relatively small [6–8]; none have explored the effect of this allele on the relationship between HIV viral load and CD4+ cell count in untreated individuals and few have assessed its influence on the response to antiretroviral therapy (ART) [13,14]. We explored the effect of HLA B*5701 status on both of these parameters in a large UK cohort.

**Methods**

The UK Collaborative HIV Cohort (UK CHIC) study collates data collected routinely as part of HIV care from several large HIV centers across the UK [15]. Data items collected include demographics, CD4+ cell count and HIV viral load, ART history, AIDS-defining events, laboratory markers, and HLA B*5701 testing. The current dataset contains information on patients from 15 centers, of which, four did not provide data on HLA B*5701 testing. There were two aspects to this study: to investigate the effect of a positive HLA B*5701 status on viral load and CD4+ cell count in untreated individuals and to compare response to combination antiretroviral therapy (cART) in those positive and negative for the allele. Individuals tested for HLA B*5701 were included in the first aspect of this study if they were found to have been ART-naïve upon entry into the UK CHIC study, regardless of when the test was performed. If, following their test, participants went on to commence a nonabacavir cART regimen, they were eligible to be included in the comparison of virological and immunological treatment responses according to HLA B*5701 status. Individuals who were not tested and who started a nonabacavir regimen after 2005 when HLA B*5701 testing became routine were also included for comparison with the HLA B*5701-negative individuals. A nonabacavir cART regimen was defined as any regimen combining at least three antiretroviral drugs, none of which were abacavir. Mono and dual-therapy regimens were not classed as cART. Analyses were performed in all patients starting a nonabacavir regimen as previously stipulated and in a subgroup of individuals who were ART-naïve at the time of starting the regimen.

Continuous variables were compared using Wilcoxon rank-sum tests or t-tests and \( \chi^2 \) tests compared categorical variables according to HLA B*5701 status. The effect of viral load and HLA B*5701 status on CD4+ cell count in untreated individuals was assessed using linear regression adjusted for sex, age (per 10 years), and ethnic group (white, black African, black other, other). An interaction between viral load and HLA B*5701 status was then tested in the regression model to determine whether the effect of viral load on CD4+ cell count differed in those who were positive for the allele and those negative. A subanalysis was performed only in those of white ethnicity and the analysis was repeated as a sensitivity analysis using generalized estimating equations (GEEs) to analyze all off-ART CD4+ cell count and viral load pairs, taking into account within-subject correlation. Cox Proportional Hazards Models compared virological response to a nonabacavir regimen in HLA B*5701-negative individuals to that in HLA B*5701-positive individuals and those who had not been tested for the allele. Outcomes assessed were time to undetectable viral load (first viral load < 50 copies/ml), viral rebound (the first of two consecutive viral loads > 50 copies/ml in those who had achieved undetectable viral load), and treatment switch. Covariates adjusted for were sex; ethnicity (white, black, other); exposure (homo/bisexual, heterosexual, other); age (per 10 years); viral load at regimen start (log_{10} copies/ml); CD4+ cell count at regimen start (per 50 cells/µl); nonabacavir regimen class (protease inhibitor-based, non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor-based, nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor only, other); hepatitis B virus/hepatitis C virus (HCV) coinfection (no, yes, not tested); and, wherein ART-experienced patients were included, the number of previous regimens (0, 1–5, 6–10, > 10) and any previous virological failures (no, yes). Linear regression assessed immunological response to cART according to HLA B*5701 status, with both 6-month and 12-month change in CD4+ cell count from regimen start used as outcomes. Models were adjusted for sex, ethnicity, exposure, age, viral load, and CD4+ cell count at regimen start, nonabacavir regimen class, HCV coinfection, number of previous regimens, and any previous virological failure.

**Results**

A total of 8246 patients in the UK CHIC study had ever received a HLA B*5701 test, of whom 426 (5.2%) were positive. There were 3258 patients ever tested who were ART-naïve at study entry and who were included in the study of the effects of HLA B*5701 status and viral load on CD4+ cell count; 165 (5.1%) of this group had tested positive for HLA B*5701. Characteristics of these patients are given in Table 1(i). Median (interquartile range, IQR) CD4+ cell count at entry was 311 (365–663) cells/µl in HLA B*5701-positive individuals and 395 (282–540) cells/µl in HLA B*5701-negative (P < 0.0001). Median (IQR) viral load at study entry was 4.1 (3.3–4.6) and 4.5 (3.9–5.0) log_{10} copies/ml in those positive and negative, respectively (P < 0.0001).
Table 1. Characteristics of patients included in each aspect of study.

| (i) Patients ever tested who were untreated at study entry (n = 3258) | (ii) Patients commencing nonabacavir regimen (n = 9565) |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| HLA B*5701-positive | HLA B*5701-negative | P | HLA B*5701-positive | HLA B*5701-negative | Not tested | P |
| N (%) | 165 (5.1) | 3093 (94.9) | 0.001 | 220 (2.3) | 2981 (31.2) | 6364 (66.5) | 0.0001 |
| ART-naive | – | – | – | 89 (40.3) | 1393 (46.7) | 2157 (33.9) | <0.0001 |
| Age [median (IQR)] | 34 (29–40) | 34 (28–40) | 0.28 | 43 (37–50) | 3093 (94.9) | 220 (2.3) | 2981 (31.2) | 6364 (66.5) | 0.0001 |
| Sex | Male | 140 (84.8) | 2259 (73.0) | 0.001 | 192 (87.3) | 2022 (67.8) | 4538 (71.3) | <0.0001 |
| Ethnicity | White | 127 (77.0) | 1676 (54.2) | <0.0001 | 161 (73.2) | 1407 (47.2) | 3402 (35.3) | <0.0001 |
| Black African | 15 (9.1) | 846 (27.4) | 17 (7.7) | 1044 (35.0) | 1876 (29.5) | <0.0001 |
| Black other | 7 (4.2) | 208 (6.7) | 12 (5.5) | 223 (7.5) | 316 (5.0) | <0.0001 |
| Other | 16 (9.7) | 363 (11.7) | 30 (13.6) | 307 (10.3) | 770 (12.1) | <0.0001 |
| Exposure | MSM | 123 (74.5) | 1700 (55.0) | <0.0001 | 161 (73.2) | 1352 (45.4) | 3235 (50.8) | <0.0001 |
| Heterosexual | 34 (20.6) | 1217 (39.4) | 47 (21.4) | 1393 (46.7) | 2614 (41.1) | <0.0001 |
| Other/unknown | 8 (4.9) | 176 (5.7) | 12 (5.5) | 236 (7.9) | 515 (8.1) | <0.0001 |
| Hepatitis B coinfection | No | 82 (49.7) | 1275 (55.8) | 0.034 | 162 (73.6) | 2314 (71.6) | 3762 (59.1) | <0.0001 |
| No test/unknown | 83 (50.3) | 1306 (42.2) | 5 (2.3) | 133 (4.5) | 317 (4.9) | <0.0001 |
| Hepatitis C coinfection | No | 88 (53.3) | 1749 (56.5) | 0.53 | 161 (73.2) | 2036 (68.3) | 3788 (60.1) | <0.0001 |
| No test/unknown | 73 (44.2) | 1304 (41.2) | 11 (5.0) | 135 (4.5) | 315 (5.0) | <0.0001 |
| Year of entry | Prior to 2004 | 69 (41.8) | 1197 (38.7) | 0.48 | 146 (66.4) | 1393 (46.7) | 4043 (63.5) | <0.0001 |
| 2005–2007 | 52 (31.5) | 1119 (36.2) | 48 (21.8) | 879 (29.5) | 1164 (18.3) | <0.0001 |
| 2008–2011 | 44 (26.7) | 777 (25.1) | 26 (11.8) | 709 (23.8) | 1157 (18.2) | <0.0001 |
| Previous AIDS | Yes | 11 (6.7) | 290 (9.4) | 0.24 | 38 (17.2) | 537 (18.0) | 1468 (23.1) | <0.0001 |
| No | 511 (365–663) | 395 (282–540) | <0.0001 | 319 (209–515) | 300 (198–460) | 350 (220–559) | <0.0001 |
| CD4+ cell count cells/µl [Median (IQR)] | 4.1 (3.3–4.6) | 4.5 (3.9–5.0) | <0.0001 | 2.9 (1.7–4.6) | 3.9 (1.7–4.9) | 1.8 (1.7–4.5) | <0.0001 |

(i) Characteristics for this patient group are calculated at study entry; (ii) characteristics for this patient group are calculated upon commencement of nonabacavir combination antiretroviral therapy (cART) regimen.

In linear regression, both HLA B*5701 status and viral load were independently associated with CD4+ cell count at entry after adjustment for age, sex, and ethnicity, with a mean (95% confidence interval, CI) CD4+ cell count increase of 42 (10–74) cells/µl in HLA B*5701-positive individuals over negative and an 80 (72–88) cells/µl decrease for every log10 copy increase in viral load (results not shown). However, a test for an interaction between HLA B*5701 status and viral load did not suggest strong evidence that viral load had a differential impact on CD4+ cell count in those who were positive for the allele and those negative (P = 0.088). Further, in linear regression models of all off-ART CD4+ and viral load pairs and models restricted to those of white ethnicity, there was no evidence of an interaction between viral load and HLA B*5701 status (P = 0.76 and P = 0.95, respectively).

There were 3476 tested individuals who commenced a nonabacavir cART regimen following a test for HLA B*5701, 3201 of whom had follow-up of at least one CD4+ cell count and viral load measurement. A further 6364 individuals who had not been tested commenced a nonabacavir regimen after 2005. Characteristics of all 9565 patients upon starting a nonabacavir regimen are shown in Table 1(ii). In the subgroup of ART-naive patients, HLA B*5701-positive individuals were more likely to achieve an undetectable viral load than negative [adjusted hazard ratio (AHR) = 1.60, 95% CI (1.28–2.01)]. HLA B*5701-positive patients also showed a decreased likelihood of experiencing viral rebound compared with negatives, although this result did not reach statistical significance [AHR = 0.57, 95% CI (0.23–1.39)]. There was a small reduction in the risk of treatment switch that was not significant [AHR = 0.86, 95% CI (0.60–1.22)]. Those not tested had a similar risk of viral rebound and treatment switch to HLA B*5701 negatives, but a slightly increased likelihood of achieving an undetectable viral load (hazard ratio = 1.15, 95% CI 1.06–1.24). Including ART-experienced patients in the analysis of virological response yielded similar results (Table 2). An increased likelihood of viral suppression was still present in positive patients compared with negative [AHR = 1.29, 95% CI (1.15–1.54)], as was
5701-positive individuals had improved markers requiring 5701-negative patients. The observation that cell count, regimen type, age, hepatitis B and C coinfection, number of previous regimens and any previous cell decline was in fact lower < 11.5–45.0) on average value 5701 on < 5701-positive individuals in some ¼ 5701-negative individuals. This is the first study ¼/C0 cell count, regimen type, age, hepatitis B and C coinfection at regimen start and sex, ethnicity, and exposure group. 5701 status on virological outcomes 62.3–5.8) in 5701-positive patients compared with negative. There was no difference in 6-month [β = −10.6, 95% CI (−20.0–1.2)] or 12-month [β = 1.2, 95% CI (−10.5–12.9)] CD4⁺ cell count change between those negative and those not tested for the allele.

## Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first large study of a representative HIV-infected population to assess the influence of HLA B^5701 status on virological outcomes and immunological response to cART. When treated with nonabacavir-containing cART and after adjustment for baseline viral load, HLA B^5701-positive patients were more likely to achieve an undetectable viral load, and less likely to experience viral load rebound than HLA B^5701-negative individuals. This is the first study to indicate a beneficial effect of HLA B^5701 on achieving and maintaining viral load suppression. Interestingly, the only other study assessing virological outcomes, the female WHIS Cohort (some of whom were treated with abacavir), showed poorer virological responses in those with HLA B^5701 [14]. Previous studies, like ours, failed to show any effect of HLA B^5701 on CD4⁺ cell recovery after starting ART [13,14]. A possible mechanism for our findings may be that the allele provides a more effective immunological (cytotoxic T lymphocyte) response to augment the effect of ART in diminishing cells that support active viral replication [13,14,16]. Our finding of improved virological outcomes in HLA B^5701-positive individuals requires confirmation in other large cohorts.

Our data also demonstrate that HLA B^5701-positive individuals had a significantly higher CD4⁺ cell count and lower viral load at presentation compared with HLA B^5701-negative patients. The observation that HLA B^5701-positive individuals had improved markers of HIV disease over HLA B^5701-negative individuals at study entry is consistent with slower HIV disease progression in this group, which has been seen in other studies [6,7,14]. However, a main limitation of this study is that this hypothesis could not be confirmed, as data on the likely date of HIV infection were not available. Another limitation of this study is the relatively small numbers of HLA B^5701-positive individuals in some analyses. We did not assess rate of CD4⁺ cell decline

| Table 2. Risk of achieving different virological end-points according to HLA-B^5701 status. |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|
| **HLA B^5701 status** | Unadjusted hazard ratio | 95% Confidence interval | P value | Adjusted hazard ratio | 95% Confidence interval | P value |
|------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------|-----------------------|-------------------------|---------|
| **ART-naive only**     |                         |                         |         |                       |                         |         |
| Negative               | 1.00                    | –                       | –       | 1.00                  | –                       | –       |
| Positive               | 1.50                    | (1.21–1.87)             | 0.0003  | 1.60                  | (1.28–2.01)             | <0.0001 |
| Not tested             | 0.96                    | (0.89–1.03)             | 0.29    | 1.15                  | (1.06–1.24)             | 0.001   |
| Viral load rebound     |                         |                         |         |                       |                         |         |
| Negative               | 1.00                    | –                       | –       | 1.00                  | –                       | –       |
| Positive               | 0.44                    | (0.18–1.08)             | 0.073   | 0.57                  | (0.23–1.39)             | 0.22    |
| Not tested             | 0.95                    | (0.77–1.17)             | 0.63    | 0.90                  | (0.72–1.13)             | 0.37    |
| Treatment switch       |                         |                         |         |                       |                         |         |
| Negative               | 1.00                    | –                       | –       | 1.00                  | –                       | –       |
| Positive               | 0.72                    | (0.51–1.02)             | 0.063   | 0.86                  | (0.60–1.22)             | 0.39    |
| Not tested             | 1.11                    | (0.89–1.07)             | 0.056   | 1.05                  | (0.94–1.17)             | 0.44    |
| **All patients**       |                         |                         |         |                       |                         |         |
| Negative               | 1.00                    | –                       | –       | 1.00                  | –                       | –       |
| Positive               | 1.45                    | (1.26–1.67)             | <0.0001 | 1.29                  | (1.15–1.54)             | 0.0005  |
| Not tested             | 1.01                    | (0.97–1.06)             | 0.59    | 0.97                  | (0.92–1.01)             | 0.15    |
| Viral load rebound     |                         |                         |         |                       |                         |         |
| Negative               | 1.00                    | –                       | –       | 1.00                  | –                       | –       |
| Positive               | 0.47                    | (0.29–0.77)             | 0.003   | 0.61                  | (0.37–0.99)             | 0.044   |
| Not tested             | 0.91                    | (0.81–1.04)             | 0.15    | 0.87                  | (0.77–1.00)             | 0.044   |
| Treatment switch       |                         |                         |         |                       |                         |         |
| Negative               | 1.00                    | –                       | –       | 1.00                  | –                       | –       |
| Positive               | 0.80                    | (0.66–0.98)             | 0.030   | 0.91                  | (0.74–1.12)             | 0.38    |
| Not tested             | 1.03                    | (0.96–1.09)             | 0.43    | 0.98                  | (0.92–1.05)             | 0.60    |

ART, antiretroviral therapy.

**a**Adjusted for viral load, CD4⁺ cell count, regimen type, age, hepatitis B and C coinfection at regimen start and sex, ethnicity, and exposure group.

**b**Adjusted for viral load, CD4⁺ cell count, regimen type, age, hepatitis B and C coinfection, number of previous regimens and any previous virological failure at regimen start and sex, ethnicity, and exposure group.
according to HLA B^5701 status as a measure of HIV disease progression in our untreated patient group. In an observational cohort such as this that utilizes only clinical data, we are unlikely to attain sufficient pre-ART CD4⁺ cell data to achieve reliable results from an analysis of this kind. Further work to assess CD4⁺ cell count decline from time of HIV seroconversion in untreated HLA B^5701-positive and negative individuals is needed.

In conclusion, we have found that HLA B^5701 status may affect CD4⁺ cell count, HIV viral load, and responses to cART. This is further evidence that the HLA B^5701 allele may be beneficial in terms of slower progression of HIV infection.

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C.S., S.J., and D.C. designed the study and wrote the article. S.J. did the main analyses and C.L. advised on analysis and critically reviewed the article. T.H. (study coordinator) is responsible for collecting and preparing UK CHIC data for analysis. As steering committee members for participating centers A.P., R.G., C.O., F.P., D.D., J.A., J.Ai., M.F., M.G., C.L., and J.W. advised on study concept and critically reviewed the article.

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Conflicts of interest

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