**CO₂ vs. air insufflation in endoscopic ultrasonography: a prospective study**

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**ABSTRACT**

**Background and study aims** Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is being increasingly used for insufflation during endoscopy for safety and better tolerance. The role of CO₂ during endoscopic ultrasonography (EUS) has not been studied yet. Our main aim was to compare the effects of CO₂ vs. air insufflation on abdominal discomfort in patients undergoing EUS. Our secondary outcomes were to ascertain the effects of CO₂ insufflation on image quality/visual artifacts and on the amount of sedation.

**Patients and methods** This was a prospective, controlled, single-blind, observational study. Abdominal discomfort was assessed before diagnostic EUS, and 1 and 3 hours post-procedure and recorded as a visual analogue scale. Image quality was also recorded as a 4-point scale from optimal to poor at four different scanning sites (esophagus, stomach, duodenal bulb and second portion).

**Results** A total of 198 patients were enrolled. We observed that CO₂ resulted in less abdominal discomfort than air insufflation that was statistically significant at 3 hours ($P=0.048$) but not at 1 hour after EUS ($P=0.112$), probably due to the ongoing effects of sedation at the latter stage. On the other hand, no differences were found in the dose of sedation administered in the two groups. Image quality was significantly better in the CO₂ group compared to the air group at all four different scanning sites ($P<0.01$). Similarly, CO₂ correlated with less visual artifacts and need of suction ($P<0.01$).

**Conclusions** Similarly to previous findings with other endoscopic procedures, EUS was associated with improved scores for abdominal discomfort with CO₂ rather than air insufflation. Moreover, overall EUS image quality was improved using CO₂ insufflation. Future studies are warranted to ascertain whether CO₂ insufflation should be regarded as the standard of care for diagnostic EUS.

**Introduction**
Digestive endoscopy procedures require gas insufflation to allow the progression of the endoscope and proper examination of the mucosa.

Room air is the most common gas used in standard endoscopic settings, however, subsequent distension of the bowel often causes abdominal discomfort because of air slow re-absorption [1]. Therefore, employment of carbon dioxide (CO₂) instead of air is increasing. In fact, it is well established that CO₂ causes less abdominal discomfort because it is absorbed faster (160 times) than air from the gut and then expired through the lungs [2]. Several studies demonstrated that CO₂ insufflation induces less abdominal discomfort than air during colonoscopy, endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography (ERCP) and enteroscopy [3–6].

Endoscopic ultrasonography (EUS) matches endoscopic and ultrasound view to investigate pancreatic and biliary diseases, stage gastrointestinal tumors and diagnose submucosal lesions and lymph nodes [7–11].

Instrumentation consists of a dedicated echoendoscope with a high-frequency ultrasound transducer on its tip. Gas
pockets may persist between the probe and the target organ as a consequence of insufflation; thereby acoustic coupling is impa-ired, generating visual artifacts that can hamper diagnostic accuracy. As a consequence, endosonographers need to acti-
vate multiple suckers in attempt to reduce bowel gas through-
out the entire procedure.

We hypothesized that CO₂ insufflation could influence not only patients’ discomfort but also the quality of EUS images. To our knowledge, the outcomes of CO₂ insufflation in EUS have not been evaluated in a clinical study so far. Therefore, to date, no recommendation is available regarding the choice of gas insufflation for EUS (air or CO₂).

The main aim of this study was to compare the effects of CO₂ vs. air insufflation on abdominal discomfort in patients undergoing EUS. The secondary outcomes were to ascertain the effects of CO₂ on dose of sedation, EUS image quality and presence of visual gas artifacts.

Patients and methods
This was a prospective, controlled, single-blind, observational study. Consecutive patients who were scheduled for EUS in our center from April 2016 to January 2017 were eligible. The trial was approved by the local ethic committee and registered at www.clinicaltrials.gov (NCT02773563).

Exclusion criteria were:
- age <18 or > 85
- pregnancy/lactation
- non-feasibility of EUS
- patient’s unwillingness to participate

Patients enrolled were allocated to either of two groups:
- group A (air insufflation)
- group B (CO₂ insufflation)

Two endoscopic rooms were available for EUS during the study period, of which one was equipped with a CO₂ delivery system and another one with a standard air-insufflation system. At the time of reservation, patients were randomly allocated in one of these two rooms according to the availability of booking slots.

All the procedures were performed by one of three experienced operators (PF, AL, MS). Before starting enrollment, all endoscopists met to come to agreement related to the study standards of care and definitions. Moreover, at the end of each examination, all the images were reviewed collectively by the three endosonographers in order to share quality evaluation by consensus and not only based on the judgment of a single operator.

Procedures and data collection
All the procedures were performed either with a radial (GF-UE160, Olympus Medical Systems Corp., Tokyo, Japan) or with a curvilinear-array echoendoscope (GF-UCT180, Olympus Medical Systems Corp., Tokyo, Japan). Study data were directly collected by the endosonographers and recorded in a case report form. Abdominal discomfort intensity was assessed before the procedure, and 1 and 3 hours post-procedure and recorded as a visual analogue scale (VAS) ranging from 0 to 10 (0: no pain, 10: maximum pain). All the patients were blinded as to which gas was used. The endosonographers showed a printed numeric scale to the patients before and after examinations (at 1 and 3 hours post-procedure). By doing so, a verbal explanation was also provided to the patients during each administration of the VAS.

Image quality assessment was performed at four standard stations (second part of the duodenum, duodenal bulb, stomach, and esophagus) and recorded as optimal, suboptimal, poor, and impossible. Optimal was defined as a clean EUS view of the target organ with adequate resolution; suboptimal was defined as a minimal loss in image resolution, but still adequate for diagnosis; poor was defined as a significant loss in image quality barely adequate for diagnosis; impossible was defined as inadequate for diagnosis. Visual artifacts were defined as white convex shadows between the probe and the target organ impairing acoustic coupling. Need for suction was considered as the frequency of gas aspiration from the lumen in order to remove the gas pockets. Dosage and type of sedation were also recorded.

CO₂ delivery system
The CO₂ regulator available in our Unit was the Olympus UCR, connected by tubing to the CO₂ central supply of our hospital. The gas flow setting was 1.5 L/min.

Statistical analysis
Continuous variables were reported as mean ± standard deviation or median (range). Categorical variables were reported as number (percentage). The Mann-Whitney test was used for comparison of continuous variables. Fisher’s exact test or Chi-square test was used for the comparison of categorical variables. To compare the effects of CO₂ vs. air insufflation in patients undergoing EUS, the subjects were randomized to treatment, and the two-sided two-sample Mann Whitney test was used. To achieve 90% power of test, at significance levels of 0.01, the sample size required for each patient group was calculated to be 94 units; we hypothesized up to 10% of incomplete examinations, therefore we planned to enroll 200 patients. All the analyses were performed using STATA version 14.0 software (Stata Corporation, College Station, Texas).

Results
From April 2016 to January 2017, 200 patients were enrolled. Two patients were excluded because of the premature inter-
ruption of the procedure, one due to esophageal stenosis, one due to status post-gastric surgery that was previously un-
known.

The two groups were well balanced with regard to demo-
graphic characteristics (Table 1). Ninety-four patients were enrolled in the CO₂ group and 104 patients were enrolled in the air group. Indications and results of EUS are also reported in Table 1. There were no statistically significant differences between group A and B concerning the duration of exams.
Abdominal discomfort

There was no statistically significant difference between the two groups concerning abdominal discomfort before EUS (1.04 ± 1.82 vs. 1.03 ± 1.83). We observed a trend to a reduced discomfort in the CO2 group at 1 hour after the procedure compared to the air group (1.17 ± 1.68 vs. 1.54 ± 1.77; P = 0.112). Interestingly, a significant reduction in abdominal discomfort in the CO2 group compared to the air group was seen at 3 hours after EUS (0.88 ± 1.57 vs. 1.17 ± 1.54; P = 0.048) (Table 2).

Image quality and visual artifacts

Analysis of our data showed that the quality of EUS images was significantly superior in each single station (second part of the duodenum, duodenal bulb, stomach, esophagus) with CO2 insufflation (P < 0.001) compared to air insufflation (Fig. 1, Fig. 2). There was also a statistically significant difference with respect to visual artifacts and need of gas suction, with CO2 correlating with less artifacts and requiring less gas aspiration from the lumen of the gut (P < 0.001).

### Table 1 Baseline characteristics of the study population.

| Patient characteristics         | Total (no. 198) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Age (years)                     | 64 (21 – 90)    |
| Gender (male)                   | 97 (48.9%)      |
| EUS indication                  |                 |
| Biliary tree                    | 72 (36.4%)      |
| Pancreatic parenchyma           | 86 (43.4%)      |
| Gastric cancer                  | 30 (15.2%)      |
| Subepithelial tumor             | 10 (5.1%)       |
| Fine needle aspiration          | 49 (24.7%)      |
| Echoendoscope type              |                 |
| Curvilinear array               | 113 (57.1%)     |
| Radial scanning                 | 85 (42.9%)      |

EUS, endoscopic ultrasound; CO2, carbon dioxide; SD, standard deviation.

### Table 2 Comparison between CO2 and air insufflation.

|                                      | CO2 Group (mean ± SD) | Air Group (mean ± SD) | P value |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|---------|
| Abdominal discomfort – VAS 0 – 10¹   |                        |                        |         |
| Before EUS                           | 1.04 ± 1.82            | 1.03 ± 1.83            | 0.956   |
| 1 hour after EUS                     | 1.17 ± 1.68            | 1.54 ± 1.77            | 0.112   |
| 3 hours after EUS                    | 0.88 ± 1.57            | 1.17 ± 1.54            | 0.048   |
| Image quality assessment²            |                        |                        |         |
| Duodenum – second portion            | 1.31 ± 0.55            | 1.72 ± 0.68            | <0.0001 |
| Duodenum – bulb                      | 1.30 ± 0.55            | 1.74 ± 0.69            | <0.0001 |
| Stomach – celiac trunk               | 1.42 ± 0.60            | 1.87 ± 0.75            | <0.0001 |
| Esophagus – mediastinum              | 1.53 ± 0.69            | 1.98 ± 0.82            | 0.0001  |
| Visual artifacts³                    | 0.54 ± 0.67            | 0.96 ± 0.67            | <0.0001 |
| Need of suction⁴                     | 0.15 ± 0.36            | 0.48 ± 0.50            | <0.0001 |
| EUS duration (minutes)               | 22.56 ± 10.87          | 21.18 ± 10.93          | 0.310   |
| Sedation                             |                        |                        |         |
| Fentanyl dose (mcg)                  | 107.98 ± 23.54         | 107.69 ± 25.85         | 0.868   |
| Midazolam dose (mg)                  | 4.26 ± 1.74            | 4.13 ± 1.82            | 0.723   |

¹ Abdominal discomfort was recorded as a Visual Analogue Scale ranging from 0 (no pain) to 10 (maximum pain).
² Image quality assessment was recorded as optimal (1), suboptimal (2), poor (3) or impossible (4).
³ Visual artifacts were recorded as none (0), few (1) or several (2).
⁴ Need of suction was recorded as infrequent (0) or frequent (1).

P value from the comparison between CO2 vs. air group, made with the Mann-Whitney test.
There were no statistically significant differences between group A and B concerning the amount of sedation. In particular we administered on average/pro patient 107.9 mcg of fentanyl in the CO2 group and 107.6 mcg in the air group, and 4.2 mg of midazolam in the CO2 group and 4.1 mg in the air group (▶ Table 2).
dominal pain/distension at 1, 2, 3 and 6 hours post-enteroscopy. In the CO₂ group, a higher total enteroscopy rate was observed and the VAS score for pain and distension were milder, although not statistically significant [16].

Recently, the American Society for Gastrointestinal Endoscopy issued a review on the use of CO₂ in gastrointestinal endoscopy. CO₂ use was described in colonoscopy, ERCP, balloon-assisted enteroscopy and endoscopic submucosal dissection. As a conclusion of the review, a big amount of data indicated that CO₂ insufflation in many types of digestive endoscopy procedures is safe and associated with less abdominal pain compared with air insufflation [17].

Our study has limitations. First, no validated criteria for image quality and visual artifacts were available. As a result, the evaluation of EUS image quality may have been operator-dependent. However, we developed rigorous criteria for image analysis, which were shared by three experienced endosonographers who subsequently performed all the exams. Second, the operator was aware of the type of gas being used during the procedures, with a potential risk for an evaluation bias. However, all the endosonographers reviewed images and videos after each procedure to give an objective evaluation of the parameters of image quality and artifacts. Our study was conducted in patients who underwent EUS with conscious sedation. We acknowledge that results may change with deep sedation as far as patient satisfaction scores are concerned. On the other hand, we believe that the results concerning image quality evaluation are not related to the type of sedation used.

If our results are confirmed by future studies, it may be speculated that CO₂ insufflation should become a standard for diagnostic EUS to improve the quality of imaging, potentially leading to even more accurate diagnosis. Similarly, as the number of operative and therapeutic EUS procedures is steadily increasing, CO₂ insufflation should be the standard of care similarly to other types of therapeutic endoscopy.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we showed that CO₂ insufflation for EUS provided better scores for abdominal discomfort at 3 hours after the procedure. No differences were found in the amount of sedation administered in the CO₂ group compared to the air group. We also showed that EUS image quality, visual artifacts and need of suction were improved using CO₂ insufflation compared to air. Future studies are warranted to ascertain whether CO₂ insufflation should be regarded as standard of care for both diagnostic and therapeutic EUS.

**Competing interests**

None

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