Characterization of hepatitis B and delta coinfection in Israel

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Abstract

Background: Characteristics of hepatitis B (HBV) and delta (HDV) coinfection in various geographical regions, including Israel, remain unclear. Here we studied HDV seroprevalence in Israel, assessed HDV/HBV viral loads, circulating genotypes and hepatitis delta antigen (HDAg) conservation.

Methods: Serological anti HDV IgG results from 8969 HBsAg positive individuals tested in 2010-2015 were retrospectively analyzed to determine HDV seroprevalence. In a cohort of HBV/HDV coinfected (n=58) and HBV monoinfected (n=27) patients, quantitative real-time PCR (qRT-PCR) and sequencing were performed to determine viral loads, genotypes and hepatitis delta antigen (HDAg) protein sequence.

Results: 6.5% (587/8969) of the HBsAg positive patients were positive for anti HDV antibodies. HDV viral load was >2 log copies/ml higher than HBV viral load in most of the coinfected patients with detectable HDV RNA (86%, 50/58). HDV genotype 1 was identified in all patients, most of whom did not express HBV. While 66.6% (4/6) of the HBV/HDV co-expressing patients carried HBV-D2 only 18.5% (5/27) of the HBV monoinfections had HBV-D2 (p=0.03). Higher genetic variability in the HDAg protein sequence was associated with higher HDV viral load.

Conclusions: The overall significant prevalence of HDV (6.5%) mandates HDV RNA testing for all coinfected patients. Patients positive for HDV RNA (characterized by low HBV DNA blood levels) carried HDV genotype 1. Taken together, the significant HDV seroprevalence and the lack of effective anti-HDV therapy, necessitates strict clinical surveillance especially in patients with higher HDV viral loads and increased viral evolution.

Keywords: Hepatitis delta (HDV), HDV genotype, Seroprevalence, Hepatitis B (HBV), HBV genotype, HBV/HDV viral load

Background

More than 350 million people worldwide are chronically infected with hepatitis B virus (HBV). Fifteen to twenty millions of these individuals are considered to be coinfected with hepatitis delta virus (HDV) [1]. While HBV is a DNA virus coding for several proteins, HDV is a circular single-strand negative-sense ribonucleic acid (RNA) virus that codes for a single protein, the HDV antigen (HDAg) [2] and requires HBV surface antigen (HBsAg) for infection, thus can only be detected in HBV positive individuals. Infection with HBV and HDV leads to the most severe form of chronic viral hepatitis, causing liver cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma [3]. Patients with HBV and HDV chronic infection have a twofold higher risk to develop cirrhosis, a threefold higher risk to develop hepatocellular carcinoma and a twofold increased mortality rate compared with HBV monoinfected individuals [4, 5]. The severity of the liver disease caused by HBV/HDV is thought to be associated with the HDV genotype and viral loads [6, 7]. HBV genome is divided into 10 genotypes (A-J). The most common HBV genotype in Europe is genotype D. There are eight reported genotypes of HDV with unexplained...
viral load, genotyping and in HBV/HDV samples—
informed consent was deemed unnecessary.
Medical Center (approval number SMC 2890-15) and
was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Sheba
ology laboratory of Soroka, was also recorded. The study
HDV IgG positive samples identified in the clinical vir-
RNA, which was assessed by a qualitative assay [ 13]i n
moved prior to data analysis. The presence of HDV-
different regions in Israel. HDV IgG positivity was deter-
from a single individual were identified, they were re-
redundancy as much as possible, if multiple results
information on sex and age was also collected. To re-
sers (Carmel, Soroka, Sheba, Rabin and Sorasky) from
Israel. These laboratories are located in five medical cen-
make relevant when anti-HDV therapy will be available, is
lacking.
Here, the seroprevalence of HDV was determined in a
large sample of HBsAg positive patients. HBV and HDV
viral loads and genotypes were assessed in a separate
sample of patients positive for HDV RNA (n=58) and in
27 HBV monoinfected patients. In addition, the full
HDAg coding region was determined and compared be-
tween HDV/HBV patients.

Methods
Patients and samples
Seroprevalence of HDV in Israel was determined by a
retrospective analysis of anti HDV immunoglobulin G
(IgG) antibody results obtained from all HBsAg positive
patients (n=8969) tested for anti HDV between 2010
and 2015. The medical reason for requesting HDV ser-
ology by the physicians was not recorded. The data was
not obtained from a specific group of individuals (e.g.
routine blood donors). The data was collected anonym-
ous from approximately a quarter of the clinical vi-
rology laboratories engaged in HBV and HDV testing in
Israel. These laboratories are located in five medical cen-
ters (Carmel, Soroka, Sheba, Rabin and Sorasky) from
different regions in Israel. HDV IgG positivity was deter-
moved using an ELISA assay (ETI-AB-DELTAK-2, Dia-
sorin, Italy). All serological tests were performed follow-
ing the manufacturer’s instructions. Whenever possible,
information on sex and age was also collected. To re-
duce redundancy as much as possible, if multiple results
from a single individual were identified, they were re-
moved prior to data analysis. The presence of HDV-
RNA, which was assessed by a qualitative assay [13] in
HDV IgG positive samples identified in the clinical vi-
rology laboratory of Soroka, was also recorded. The study
was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Sheba
Medical Center (approval number SMC 2890-15) and
informed consent was deemed unnecessary.

Molecular analysis (quantification of HDV and HBV
viral load, genotyping and in HBV/HDV samples—
comparison of HDAg predicted protein sequences) was
performed on samples from 58 patients positive for
HDV RNA and 27 HBV monoinfected patients (who
failed anti HBV therapy and for whom HBV resistance
analysis was requested). Blood samples (5 ml) collected
from these patients between January 2013 and December
2016 were transferred to the national HIV and viral
hepatitis reference center where plasma was separated
and stored at -20°C until used.

HDV and HBV viral load
Nucleic acids were extracted from 0.5 ml plasma using the
NucliSENS Easy MAG total nucleic acid extraction
system (Biomerieux, Marcy l‘Etoile, France), according
to the manufacturer’s protocol. HDV viral load was
determined with Primerdesign HDV genesig assay (Primer-
design Ltd, United Kingdom) which is characterized by
high priming efficiencies of >95% and can detect less
than 100 copies of target template and was validated
with an external control program (QCMD HDV14,
QCMD, Glasgow, Scotland). HBV viral load was deter-
mained as previously described [14]. This assay, with an
estimated 20 IU/ml detection limit, was validated using
an external control program (HBVDNA2017, QCMD,
Glasgow, Scotland).

HDV and HBV genotyping
Genotypes were determined in samples with viral load
>1000 copies/ml (HBV or HDV). HDV genotype was
determined following PCR amplification of the whole HDAg
region with ORF891F 5’- ATGCGGCACCAGAAAGGAA-
3’ and ORF1680R 5’- GTCCAGCRGTCTCCTCCTTTA-3’
by single step RT-PCR using 7 μl HDV RNA and sequen-
cing with previously published primers [13, 15]. Genotyp-
ing of HBV was performed following PCR amplification of
a fragment from the polymerase region with 2F-5’-
‘GCGGCGGGCTCTCTCTTTC and 6r 5’-
GTGGGGGTTGCGTCAGCA-3’ with 5μl HBV DNA.
Direct sequencing of all PCR products was performed
using an automatic sequencer (ABI PRISM 3100 genetic
analyzer DNA Sequencer, Applied Biosystems, Foster City,
CA, USA) and BigDye Terminator v1.1 Cycle Sequencing
kit (Applied Biosystems, Foster City, CA, USA).

Phylogenetic analyses
HDV and HBV nucleotide sequences were aligned using
the Open-gene system (Siemens, Malvern PA, United
States). Reference sequences were GeneBank accession
X04451 for HDV and the references sequences from
Open-gene system module for HBV. Representative
nucleotide sequences for HDV genotypes 1-8 from
GenBank (Genotype 1a: U81989-Etiopia, U81988-
Somalia; Genotype 1b: JX888099-Nigeria Genotype 1c:
KJ744240-Iran; M58829-Nauru; Genotype1d:
Comparison of HDAg protein sequences

Full length HDAg sequences were translated via online Expasy translation tool [16]. To investigate the mutational pattern of functional domains within the HDAg protein, the amino acid sequences of the different isolates were compared with each other using LOGO [17]. Shannon entropy was used to assess the degree of amino acid conservation [18]. Conserved residues are those with zero Shannon entropy.

Statistical analysis

The association between HDV seropositivity, age and sex was assessed using the χ² test for categorical variables and t-test for numeric variables. Univariate logistic regression model, Odds ratio (OR) and 95% confidence intervals were calculated. Fisher exact test was used to assess the association between HDV and HBV genotypes and between HDAg amino acid conservation in low (<5 log copies/ml) and high (>5 log copies/ml) HDV viral load patients. P-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Data were analyzed using the SAS software (version 9.1.3).

Results

HDV seroprevalence

Retrospective study of anti HDV IgG results obtained for samples from 8969 HBsAg positives was conducted, 587 (6.5%) were found positive (Table 1). Patients positive for anti IgG HDV were, on average, slightly older than HDV seronegative HBsAg positive patients (47.5 ±13.8 versus 45.2±16 years, p<0.01). No significant difference in HDV prevalence was found between males and females (6.2% versus 6.9%, respectively). The presence of HDV RNA was assessed in the Soroka virology laboratory for a limited number of samples found to be anti HDV positive (n=196). 23% (45/196) were HDV-RNA positive.

HDV and HBV viral load and genotypes

The mean and median HDV and HBV viral loads, assessed in a separate cohort of HBV/HDV patients (n=58) positive for HDV RNA, were 5.78±1.42 and 5.79 (IQR 2.3); 1.34±1.39 and 1.51 (IQR 1.58) log copies/ml, respectively, p<0.05. In most of these coinfection cases (86%, 50/58) HDV viral load was at least 2 log higher than HBV viral load. In samples from HBV monoinfected patients who failed anti HBV therapy (n=27), the mean and median HBV viral load was 4.8±1.66 and 4.6 (IQR 2.0) log copies/ml, respectively.

HDV genotype was successfully determined for 95% (55/58) of the HDV/HBV patients, all with >1000 copies/ml HDV viral load (Fig. 1). All were infected with HDV genotype 1. Le Gal et al., recently suggested classification of HDV-1 into four subtypes [19]. Accordingly, the majority (n=48) of the patients carried subtype HDV-1d and a small group (n=5) carried HDV-1c or HDV-1a (n=2). Of 55 samples in which HDV genotypes were determined, 41 had known birth place. While those from Eastern Europe (35/41, former Soviet Union, Ukraine, Romania) and Israel (2/41) carried HDV-1d or HDV-1c (2/41, Russia), both of the two patients born in Ethiopia carried HDV-1a which corresponds mainly to Africa [19, 20].

HBV genotype could be determined in samples from 33 patients: 6 HBV/HDV patients (those with plasma viral load >1000 copies/ml, enabling sequencing of both viruses) and in 27 HBV monoinfected patients. Of 6 HBV/HDV patients, the distribution of HBV genotypes and subgenotypes was as below: 4 (66.7%), 1 (16.7%), and 1 (16.7%) were D2, D1 and D3 respectively.

Table 1 Prevalence of HDV infection in Israel

|                  | Samples tested, N | HDV negative samples | HDV seropositive samples | % seropositive (95% CI) | Odds Ratio (95% CI) | p-value |
|------------------|-------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|---------|
| Total            | 8969              | 8382                 | 587                      | 6.5 (6.1-7.1)           | 1.0 (1.0-1.1)       | <0.01   |
| Age (mean± SD)   | 8452±770         | 45.2± 16 (n=7919)    | 47.5± 13.8 (n=533)       | 6.2 (5.6-6.9)           | Reference           | 0.18    |
| Gender (n=8744)  |                   |                      |                          |                         |                     |         |
| Male             | 5046              | 4734                 | 312                      | 6.2 (5.6-6.9)           | Reference           | 0.18    |
| Female           | 3698              | 3443                 | 255                      | 6.9 (61.7-8)            | 1.1 (0.9-1.3)       |         |

*The number of samples for which this information was available*
In contrast, of 27 HBV mono-infected patients, the distribution was as follow: D1 (59.3%), D2 (18.5%) D3 (11.1%) and A1, A2 and C2 (3.7% each). The prevalence of genotype HBV-D2 was significantly different between mono-infected and co-infected groups (4 (66.7%) vs 5 (18.5%), \( p=0.03 \)).

**HDAg analysis**

Full HDAg sequence (214 amino acids) was successfully determined in 48 of the 55 HBV/HDV patients with HDV sequences. It is possible that the considerable heterogeneity and strong internal base pairing of HDV did not allow analysis of the complete HDAg region in seven of the sampled [21]. Multiple sequence alignment of the full HDAg sequences revealed that although major regulatory sites [2, 22–28] were conserved in all patients, high amino-acid diversity was observed between the sequences. To better assess this phenomenon, the amino acid variability (as measured by Shannon Entropy) between 12 patients with low HDV viremia (<5 log copies/ml, mean viral load 4.2±0.63 log copies/ml) and 36 with high HDV viremia (=>5 log copies/ml, mean viral load 6.6±1.42 log copies/ml) was compared. For this comparison, the same reference sequence was used (CAQ16911.1 large Hepatitis delta antigen dTk5 Turkey). In the 12 patients with low HDV viremia, the HDAg predicted protein sequence was more conserved (69.2%, 148/214 conserved residues) compared to the amino acid sequence of HDAg in the high viremic patients (56.1%, 120/214 conserved residues, \( p<0.05 \)) versus. Substitutions in amino acids K26R, E29D, L34I/S/V, N58H/Y and Q100R/E located in the coiled coil and RNA binding domains were observed in high viremic patients only (Fig. 2).

**Discussion**

HDV infection in patients with chronic HBV infection, which continues to be a public health concern.

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**Fig. 1** Phylogenetic Analysis of HDV nucleotide sequences. Phylogenetic tree of 55 HDV nucleic acid (n.a) patient sequences, 1 HDV-RNA sequence derived from HK293 cells transfected with HDV plasmid (2000504), and 17 prototype sequences obtained from GeneBank (dots, HDV genotype 1; triangle, HDV genotype 2-8) was constructed by Clustal W pairwise alignment with the 375 n.a. from HDVAg. The prototype sequences are identified by the HDV genotype and subtype [19]. GeneBank accession number and the name of the country of origin (if known). The Israeli-identified sequences are defined by their patient and sample numbers. Bootstrap values are indicated for the major nodes as data obtained from 1000 replicates.
worldwide, results in the most severe form of viral hepatitis. However, testing for hepatitis delta is limited and the rate of HDV infection in many countries is unknown [29]. To the best of our knowledge the rate of HDV seropositivity in Israel has not yet been reported nor have the circulating genotypes been assessed. Moreover, molecular detection of HDV by real-time PCR is rarely performed and HDV viral load is not monitored.

Here, 6.5% of HBsAg positive patients in Israel were found to be HDV seropositive, a higher rate than the estimated 5% worldwide prevalence [30]. Reported HDV prevalence varies in different European countries between very low (0.23%) in Slovenia to high (35.3%) prevalence in Greece [31]. In Lebanon HDV prevalence reported in 258 HBV positive individuals was only 1.2% [32]. A higher seroprevalence, 8.3%, was reported in Egypt among 121 HBV carriers [33]. As both studies assessed HDV seroprevalence in a small number of HBV seropositive individuals, the results may not fully represent the overall HDV infection rate in these countries.

Almost all (>90%) of HBV positive cases were infected with genotype D, the most prevalent genotype worldwide. However, while D1 was the most frequent subtype in HBV monoinfected patients (59.3%, 16/27) and D2 was identified in only 18.5% of these monoinfected patients, HBV/HDV patients were mainly (66.7%) infected with HBV-D2. HBV genotypes other than genotype D were not observed. This analysis was performed in a limited number of patients only, as most HBV/HDV
coinfections had low or undetectable HBV viral load. Low viral loads of HBV in samples positive for plasma HDV RNA were previously reported by others [38], suggesting that HDV replication is associated with suppression of HBV replication [39]. Evidence has indicated that HDAg down regulates HDV replication by repressing activity of the two HBV enhancer regions, and by trans-activating the interferon-inducible MxA gene, which inhibits HBV replication by reducing the export of viral mRNA from the nucleus [40]. In a study conducted in Spain which assessed viral loads of HDV in HBV-D carriers [7], higher HDV levels were significantly and persistently found compared to HBV. Specifically, this effect was HBV genotype dependent and was more pronounced in HBV-A than HBV-D genotypes (median of 4.48 and 3.49 log copies/ml for HBV-A and HBV-D, respectively). The authors concluded that higher inhibitory effect of HDV on HBV replication is HBV genotype specific. Our results show that subtype HBV-D2 was more frequently found in HBV/HDV coinfected individuals than in HBV monoinfected patients. It is possible that HBV-D2 overcomes the repression conferred by HDV-1 better than other HBV genotypes. The correlation between HDV and HBV genotypes and reciprocal repression has practical consequences. It may cause misdiagnoses of the viral load of HDV or HBV in coinfection and underrepresentation of slow replicating genotypes. Future studies are needed to better establish the association between HBV/HDV genotypes and co-replication interference.

HDAg protein is considered to display more amino acid changes compared to structural proteins of other RNA viruses [39]. Analysis of HDAg predicted amino acid sequences of 48 patients showed increased variability in high compared to low viremic patients in protein domains involved in viral replication. The functional and clinical relevance of the specific amino acid changes observed herein (including the changes in amino acid 202 observed in several patients not connected to viral load status) requires further studies especially as no direct acting HDV antiviral is yet available. Indeed, a major obstacle in developing treatment of HDV infection is lack of self-replicative function to be directly targeted by antivirals. Peg-Interferon remains the mainstay of treatment however interferon therapy is associated with frequent side effects and low response rate. Clinical studies exploring prenylation inhibitors, viral entry inhibitors and nucleic acid polymers to block particle release demonstrate progress towards cure of HDV infection [41].

One of the limitations of this study is that HDV-RNA measurements are not done routinely in all HDV seropositive cases, therefore, the rate of RNA positivity could be defined in only a limited number of cases. Also, HDV viral load was not routinely assessed. In addition, another limitation of this study is that data on disease status (e.g. cirrhosis), HBsAg levels, a known risk factor for HDV viremia [42] or risk factors for HDV infection (e.g. birth place, use of injection drugs) for the 586 seropositive HDV individuals was lacking. Although most HDV sequences in this study derived from patients born in Eastern European countries and a few in Ethiopia, countries with a high prevalence of HBV infection [43], this information was not available for all HDV seropositive individuals. The ethnic group of the HBV/HDV coinfected individuals, which may also be a risk factor for HBV positivity [42, 44] was also unknown.

Conclusions

This study identified a 6.5% rate of HDV seroprevalence in HBsAg positive patients. This high rate suggests that screening for HDV in HBV positive patients in Israel is mandatory and should be continued. Furthermore, the presence of HDV-RNA should be assessed in all HDV IgG positive cases. In HDV-RNA positive cases, HDV viral load measurements could be beneficial. Patients with high HDV viral load and higher degree of viral diversity should be more closely monitored. Whenever possible, analysis of HBV/HDV genotypes will also be beneficial especially as the most common HDV genotype observed in this study, HDV-1, is considered to worsen the liver disease more than other HDV genotypes. Moreover, as the clinical efficacy of future anti-HDV therapy may also be influenced by HBV/HDV genotypes and subtypes, deciphering the local HBV/HDV status will be advantageous.

Abbreviations

HBV: Hepatitis B; HDV: Hepatitis delta; HDAg: Hepatitis delta antigen; IgG: Immunoglobulin G; HIV: Human immunodeficiency virus; ml: Microliters; PCR: Polymerase chain reaction; RT-PCR: reverse transcription PCR; qRT-PCR: Quantitative real-time PCR

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Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Authors’ contributions

RS, DR, AR, EB and YG preformed all the experiments. YL, YS, EHS, EM and ZBA were major contributors in writing the manuscript. PSM, OP, HBZ, OH, and YS analyzed and interpreted the patient serological data. YL, EV, MB, MC, MCN, AS, RS, ZBA saw the patients and provided clinical information. OM was in charge of the whole project and wrote the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.
Ethics approval and consent to participate
The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Sheba Medical Center (approval number SMC 2890-15). The need for informed consent was deemed unnecessary by the committee according to national regulations.

Consent for publication
Not applicable.

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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