Elevated Liver Enzymes along with Comorbidity Is a High Risk Factor for COVID-19 Mortality: A South Indian Study on 1,512 Patients

Narayanasamy Krishnasamy1*, Karthick Rajendran2*, Parimita Barua1, Arunkumar Ramachandran2*, Priyadarshini Panneerselvam2* and Muthukumaran Rajaram2

1Institute of Hepatobiliary Sciences, Madras Medical College and Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India; 2Multidisciplinary Research Unit (MRU), Madras Medical College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

Background and Aims: Liver enzyme abnormalities in coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) are being addressed in the literature. The predictive risk of elevated liver enzymes has not been established for COVID-19 mortality. In this study, we hypothesized that elevated liver enzymes at admission can predict the outcome of COVID-19 disease with other known indicators, such as comorbidities. Methods: This retrospective study included all the consecutive hospitalized patients with confirmed COVID-19 disease from March 4th to May 31st, 2020. The study was conducted in Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. We assessed demography, clinical variables, COVID-19 severity, laboratory parameters, and outcome. Results: We included 1,512 patients, and median age was 47 years (interquartile range: 34–60) with 36.9% being female. Liver enzyme level (aspartate aminotransferase and/or alanine aminotransferase) was elevated in 450/1,512 (29.76%) patients. Comorbidity was present in 713/1,512 (47.16%) patients. Patients with liver enzymes’ elevation and presence of comorbidity were older, more frequently hospitalized in ICU and had more severe symptoms of COVID-19 at the time of admission. Presence of liver enzymes’ elevation with comorbidity was a high risk factor for death (OR: 5.314, 95% CI: 2.278–12.393), as compared to patients with presence of comorbidity (OR: 4.096, 95% CI: 1.833–9.157). Conclusions: Comorbidity combined with liver enzymes’ elevation at presentation independently increased the risk of death in COVID-19 by at least 5-fold.

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Introduction

Coronaviruses (CoVs) are a family of viruses that are known to cause both respiratory and intestinal diseases in various animal species and humans.1 The viruses are known to cause upper respiratory and lower respiratory tract infections, ranging from mild illnesses such as sore throat to severe pneumonia, leading to acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), respiratory failure and death. To date, seven human coronaviruses have been identified, including the three epidemic viruses of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS)-CoV, middle east respiratory syndrome (MERS)-CoV and the newest, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).2 These three epidemic viruses have similar sequence identity, sharing more than 50% of genome sequences.3 In December 2019, there was an outbreak of pneumonia of unknown origin in the Central city of Wuhan, which rapidly spread to other parts of the world, leading to 44,888,869 cases and 1,178,475 deaths globally as of October 30, 2020.4 The World Health Organization labelled COVID-19 as a pandemic by March 2020. While most COVID-19 cases have been identified as mild, more extreme manifestations have led to respiratory failure, septic shock, and/or multiple organ dysfunctions.5 A number of reports have shown that COVID-19 patients have liver enzyme abnormalities.6 Our study aimed to determine the liver enzyme abnormality in patients with COVID-19 at the time of hospital admission and to evaluate the outcome of such patients. To our knowledge, this is the first study that analyzes the association of mortality and patients with liver enzyme elevation and comorbidity in Indian COVID-19 subjects.

Keywords: COVID-19; SARS-CoV-2; Liver enzyme; Comorbidity; Aspartate aminotransferase; Alanine aminotransferase.

Abbreviations: ALP, alkaline phosphatase; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; ARDS, acute respiratory distress syndrome; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; CI, confidence interval; CK, creatine kinase; CK-MB, creatine kinase myocardial band; CoV, coronavirus; COVID-19, coronavirus 2019; CRP, C-reactive protein; CT, computed tomography; ICU, intensive care unit; IQR, interquartile range; LDH, lactate dehydrogenase; MERS, middle east respiratory syndrome; NLR, neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio; OR, odds ratio; PCV, packed cell volume; PR, pulse rate; RBC, red blood cell; RR, respiratory rate; SARS-CoV-2, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2; SpO2, oxygen saturation; TGL-C, triglyceride cholesterol; WBC, white blood cell.

*Correspondence to: Narayanasamy Krishnasamy, Institute of Hepatobiliary Sciences, Madras Medical College and Rajiv Gandhi Government General Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600003, India. ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3938-3347. Tel: +91-9790797578, Fax: +91-4425305115, E-mail: drkn_1963@yahoo.com; Karthick Rajendran, Multidisciplinary Research Unit, Madras Medical College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu 600003, India. Tel: +91-9841170145, Fax: +91-4425305115, E-mail: rkarthickphd@gmail.com

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Methods

The study was designed as a retrospective analysis of data collected from consecutive patients with COVID-19 admitted to the Rajiv Gandhi Government Hospital, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. The study period was from 4th March to 31st May 2020. Patients with COVID-19 admitted in the hospital were included in the study. Diagnosis of COVID-19 was confirmed by detection of SARS-CoV-2 RNA from nasopharyngeal/throat swabs using real-time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction. The study was approved by the institutional ethics committee of the Madras Medical College, Chennai, India.

Data collection

Demographics, clinical characteristics, laboratory findings, and radiograph findings were collected from the medical records of the Community Medicine Department, Internal Medicine Department, pathology laboratory, biochemical laboratory, and Radiology Department by the Multidisciplinary Research Unit, Madras Medical College. The patient outcomes (discharge or death) were also collected for this analysis. Any uncertain or missing records were clarified and obtained by direct communication with patients and their families.

Clinical severity definitions

The clinical classification of COVID-19 was based on the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Mild type was defined as without evidence of breathlessness or hypoxia (normal saturation). Moderate type was defined as a patient with pneumonia, without signs of severe disease and presence of clinical features of dyspnea and or hypoxia, fever, cough, including peripheral oxygen saturation (SpO₂) <94% (range: 90–94%) on room air, respiratory rate (RR) more or equal to 24 per minute; fast breathing (in breaths/m) < 2 months was ≥60, for 2–11 months was ≥50 and for 1–5 years was ≥40. Severe type was defined as patients with clinical signs of pneumonia plus one of the following: respiratory rate >30 breaths/m, severe respiratory distress, or SpO₂ <90% on room air. We graded severity of pneumonia based on computed tomography (CT) scan imaging of chest as percentage of total lung volume involved, with <25 as Grade 1, 25–50% as Grade 2, 51–75% as Grade 3, and >75% as Grade 4.

Inclusion criteria

All patients with COVID-19 diagnosed with swab test irrespective of age, and gender.

Patients were followed from the time of hospital admission till their death or discharge.

Exclusion criteria

Patients were excluded if they had preexisting liver diseases or liver enzyme abnormalities.

Results

Among 1,512 COVID-19 patients, 450 (29.76%) had elevated liver enzyme and 1,062 (70.24%) had normal range. The clinical characteristics of the patients were grouped based on discharged or death and presented in Table 1. Clinical characteristics and outcomes of COVID-19 stratified by elevated liver enzyme and comorbidity are presented in Table 2. To further understand the pattern of liver enzyme elevation, we classified these biomarkers into three distinct subtypes, such as AST elevation, ALT elevation, and both AST and ALT elevation, which showed a significant difference among survivors and non-survivors (Table 3).

Age group

In the study population, of 1,512 cases, the median age was 47 years (IQR: 34–60 years) and 63.1% cases were male. Compared to survivors, non-survivors were significantly older (44 years [IQR: 33–49] vs. median age 56 years [IQR: 52–73], p <0.001) and were more likely to have underlying comorbid illness with elevated liver enzyme. A majority of non-survivors (66/73) were in the more than 40 years of age group (Table 1). In the study population, patients with age >40 years were more likely to have elevated liver enzyme (127/992), comorbidity (398/992), and elevated liver enzyme with comorbidity (208/992), as compared to the younger age population (<40 years) (p >0.0001), as shown in the Table 2. It was also observed that, AST or ALT elevation was more common in the age group >40 years (p >0.0001), as shown in the Table 3.

Gender distribution

More than half of non-survivors were male (64.4%). However, mortality was not significantly different between genders (p >0.815). Males with elevated liver enzyme num-

Definitions

Abnormal/elevated aspartate aminotransferase (AST) or alanine aminotransferase (ALT) was defined by taking the reference upper limit of normal as defined in male (ALT: 37 IU/L, AST: 41 IU/L) and in female (ALT: 37 IU/L, AST: 35 IU/L). Other test abnormalities were defined as the following reference: WBCs <3,800 or >11,000 cells/mm³; RBCs in male <4.2 or >5.6 (×10⁹/µL) and in female <3.8 or >5.1 (×10⁹/µL); hemoglobin in male <14 or >18 g/dL and in female <11 or >16 g/dL; packed cell volume (PCV) in male <40 or >52% and in female <35 or >47%; platelets <1.40 or <4.5 (×10⁹/µL); neutrophils <50 or >81%; lymphocytes <14 or >44%; NLR <1 or >3; glucose (Random Blood Sugar) >140 mg/dL; urea <15 or >40 mg/dL; creatinine <0.5 or >1.3 mg/dL; sodium <136 or >146 m.eq/L; potassium <3.5 or >5.0 m.eq/L; triglyceride cholesterol (TGL-C) <40 or >170 mg/dL; CK <20 or >200 IU/L; CK MB <5 or >25 IU/L; LDH <125 or >220 IU/L; ferritin >400 ng/mL; CRP >10 mg/L; total bilirubin <0.3 or >1.3 mg/dL; direct bilirubin <0.0 or >0.4 mg/dL; total protein <6.5 or >8 g/dL; albumin <3.5 or >5.0 g/dL; alkaline phosphatase <32 or >110 U/L; pulse rate (PR) <60 or >100 beats/min; respiratory rate (RR) <14 or >24 breaths per minute; saturation (SpO₂) <94%. We graded severity of pneumonia based on computed tomography (CT) scan imaging of chest as percentage of total lung volume involved <25 as Grade 1, 25–50% as Grade 2, 51–75% as Grade 3, and >75% as Grade 4.
Table 1. Characteristics of 1,512 patients with COVID-19 at admission grouped by survival

| Characteristics       | Total, n (%) | Discharged, n (%) | Death, n (%) | p valuea |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|----------|
| Age in years          |              |                   |              |          |
| <18                   | 47 (3.1)     | 47 (3.3)          | 0 (0)        | 0.0001   |
| 18–29                 | 229 (15.1)   | 227 (15.8)        | 2 (2.7)      |          |
| 30–39                 | 244 (16.1)   | 239 (16.6)        | 5 (6.8)      |          |
| 40–49                 | 298 (19.7)   | 288 (20)          | 10 (13.7)    |          |
| 50–59                 | 300 (19.8)   | 284 (19.7)        | 16 (21.9)    |          |
| >60                   | 394 (26.1)   | 354 (24.6)        | 40 (54.8)    |          |
| Gender                |              |                   |              |          |
| Male                  | 954 (63.1)   | 907 (63)          | 47 (64.4)    | 0.815    |
| Female                | 558 (36.9)   | 532 (37)          | 26 (35.6)    |          |
| Chest CT              |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 664 (43.9)   | 647 (45)          | 17 (23.3)    | 0.0001   |
| Abnormal              | 848 (56.1)   | 792 (55)          | 56 (76.7)    |          |
| Chest CT grade        |              |                   |              |          |
| Grade 1               | 465 (30.8)   | 450 (31.3)        | 15 (20.5)    | 0.0001   |
| Grade 2               | 248 (16.4)   | 234 (16.3)        | 14 (19.2)    |          |
| Grade 3               | 105 (6.9)    | 89 (6.2)          | 16 (21.9)    |          |
| Grade 4               | 30 (2)       | 19 (1.3)          | 11 (15.1)    |          |
| Normal                | 664 (43.9)   | 647 (45)          | 17 (23.3)    |          |
| Symptoms              |              |                   |              |          |
| Absent                | 681 (45)     | 668 (46.4)        | 13 (17.8)    | 0.0001   |
| Present               | 831 (55)     | 771 (53.6)        | 60 (82.2)    |          |
| Disease severity      |              |                   |              |          |
| Asymptomatic/Mild     | 729 (48.2)   | 723 (50.2)        | 6 (8.2)      | 0.0001   |
| Moderate              | 373 (24.7)   | 358 (24.7)        | 15 (20.5)    |          |
| Severe                | 410 (27.1)   | 358 (27.1)        | 52 (71.2)    |          |
| ICU                   |              |                   |              |          |
| Not admitted          | 1,029 (68.1) | 1,015 (70.5)      | 14 (19.2)    | 0.0001   |
| Admitted              | 483 (31.9)   | 424 (29.5)        | 59 (80.8)    |          |
| WBCs                  |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 1,186 (78.4) | 1,154 (80.2)      | 48 (65.8)    | 0.029    |
| Abnormal              | 326 (21.6)   | 285 (19.8)        | 41 (56.2)    |          |
| RBCs                  |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 1,154 (76.3) | 1,106 (76.9)      | 48 (65.8)    | 0.029    |
| Abnormal              | 358 (23.7)   | 333 (23.1)        | 25 (34.2)    |          |
| Hemoglobin            |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 887 (58.7)   | 853 (59.3)        | 34 (46.6)    | 0.032    |
| Abnormal              | 625 (41.3)   | 586 (40.7)        | 39 (53.4)    |          |
| PCV                   |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 929 (61.4)   | 894 (62.1)        | 35 (47.9)    | 0.015    |
| Abnormal              | 583 (38.6)   | 545 (37.9)        | 38 (52.1)    |          |
| Platelets             |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 1,303 (86.2) | 1,242 (86.3)      | 61 (83.6)    | 0.507    |
| Abnormal              | 209 (13.8)   | 197 (13.7)        | 12 (16.4)    |          |
| Neutrophils           |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 1,072 (70.9) | 1,026 (71.3)      | 46 (63)      | 0.128    |
| Abnormal              | 440 (29.1)   | 413 (28.7)        | 27 (37)      |          |
| Lymphocytes           |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 1,133 (74.9) | 1,094 (76)        | 39 (53.4)    | 0.0001   |
| Abnormal              | 379 (25.1)   | 345 (24)          | 34 (46.6)    |          |
| NLR                   |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 907 (60)     | 879 (61.1)        | 28 (38.4)    | 0.0001   |
| Abnormal              | 605 (40)     | 560 (38.9)        | 45 (61.6)    |          |
| Glucose               |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 567 (37.5)   | 545 (37.9)        | 22 (30.1)    | 0.183    |
| Abnormal              | 945 (62.5)   | 894 (62.1)        | 51 (69.9)    |          |
| Urea                  |              |                   |              |          |
| Normal                | 971 (64.2)   | 937 (65.1)        | 34 (46.6)    | 0.001    |
| Abnormal              | 541 (35.8)   | 502 (34.9)        | 39 (53.4)    |          |

(continued)
Gender-wise distribution of AST/ALT elevation also had not significantly differed ($p > 0.725$). The analysis of gender-wise distribution of liver enzyme elevation and comorbidity was statistically significant. It was observed that males had high liver enzyme elevation (63.8%) and co-morbidity (56.5%), and males also had both elevated liver enzyme and comorbidity (65.4%).

| Characteristics | Total, n (%) | Discharged, n (%) | Death, n (%) | $p$ value\(^a\) |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-----------------|
| **Creatinine**  |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 1,348 (89.2) | 1,286 (89.4)      | 62 (84.9)    | 0.234           |
| Abnormal        | 164 (10.8)   | 153 (10.6)        | 11 (15.1)    |                 |
| **Sodium**      |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 911 (70.5)   | 872 (70.7)        | 39 (66.1)    | 0.453           |
| Abnormal        | 382 (29.5)   | 362 (29.3)        | 20 (33.9)    |                 |
| **Potassium**   |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 838 (65.3)   | 802 (65.4)        | 36 (62.1)    | 0.601           |
| Abnormal        | 446 (34.7)   | 424 (34.6)        | 22 (37.9)    |                 |
| **TGL-C**       |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 1,156 (76.5) | 1,093 (76)        | 63 (86.3)    | 0.042           |
| Abnormal        | 356 (23.5)   | 346 (24)          | 10 (13.7)    |                 |
| **CK**          |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 663 (67.4)   | 640 (68)          | 23 (53.5)    | 0.047           |
| Abnormal        | 321 (32.6)   | 301 (32)          | 20 (46.5)    |                 |
| **CK-MB**       |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 1,145 (75.7) | 1,097 (76.2)      | 48 (65.8)    | 0.042           |
| Abnormal        | 367 (24.3)   | 342 (23.8)        | 25 (34.2)    |                 |
| **LDH**         |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 390 (33.2)   | 386 (34.5)        | 4 (7.3)      | 0.0001          |
| Abnormal        | 783 (66.8)   | 732 (65.5)        | 51 (92.7)    |                 |
| **Ferritin**    |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 774 (65)     | 749 (66)          | 25 (45.5)    | 0.002           |
| Abnormal        | 416 (35)     | 386 (34)          | 30 (54.5)    |                 |
| **CRP**         |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 558 (46.7)   | 550 (48.3)        | 8 (14.3)     | 0.0001          |
| Abnormal        | 637 (53.3)   | 589 (51.7)        | 48 (85.7)    |                 |
| **Total bilirubin** |        |                   |              | 0.834           |
| Normal          | 1,437 (95)   | 1,368 (95.1)      | 69 (94.5)    |                 |
| Abnormal        | 75 (5)       | 71 (4.9)          | 4 (5.5)      |                 |
| **Direct bilirubin** |      |                   |              | 0.196           |
| Normal          | 1,370 (90.6) | 1,307 (90.8)      | 63 (86.3)    |                 |
| Abnormal        | 142 (9.4)    | 132 (9.2)         | 10 (13.7)    |                 |
| **Total protein** |            |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 1,037 (97.6) | 993 (97.6)        | 44 (97.8)    | 0.952           |
| Abnormal        | 25 (2.4)     | 24 (2.4)          | 1 (2.2)      |                 |
| **Albumin**     |              |                   |              | 0.006           |
| Normal          | 1,223 (80.9) | 1,173 (81.5)      | 50 (68.5)    |                 |
| Abnormal        | 289 (19.1)   | 266 (18.5)        | 23 (31.5)    |                 |
| **AST**         |              |                   |              |                 |
| Normal          | 1,198 (79.2) | 1,153 (80.1)      | 45 (61.6)    | 0.0001          |
| Abnormal        | 314 (20.8)   | 286 (19.9)        | 28 (38.4)    |                 |
| **ALT**         |              |                   |              | 0.512           |
| Normal          | 1,166 (77.1) | 1,112 (77.3)      | 54 (74)      |                 |
| Abnormal        | 346 (22.9)   | 327 (22.7)        | 19 (26)      |                 |
| **ALP**         |              |                   |              | 0.012           |
| Normal          | 763 (80.9)   | 736 (81.6)        | 27 (65.9)    |                 |
| Abnormal        | 180 (19.1)   | 166 (18.4)        | 14 (34.1)    |                 |
| **PR**          |              |                   |              | 0.0001          |
| Normal          | 1,385 (91.6) | 1,331 (92.5)      | 54 (74)      |                 |
| Abnormal        | 127 (8.4)    | 108 (7.5)         | 19 (26)      |                 |
| **RR**          |              |                   |              | 0.0001          |
| Normal          | 972 (64.3)   | 940 (65.3)        | 32 (43.8)    |                 |
| Abnormal        | 540 (35.7)   | 499 (34.7)        | 41 (56.2)    |                 |
| **SpO₂**        |              |                   |              | 0.0001          |
| Normal          | 1,389 (91.9)| 1,348 (93.7)      | 41 (56.2)    |                 |
| Abnormal        | 123 (8.1)    | 91 (6.3)          | 32 (43.8)    |                 |

\(^a\)Chi square test.
The occurrence of comorbidities was: cardiovascular diseases including hypertension (180/713, 25.2%); diabetes (171/713, 24%); diabetes with hypertension (133/713, 18.7%); chronic kidney diseases (80/713, 11.2%); cancer (44/713, 6.2%); respiratory disease (34/713, 4.8%); and others (71/713, 10%). In the study population, mortality of patients with pre-existing comorbid illness with elevated liver enzyme was high at 23/73 (9.7%) when compared to patients with comorbidity alone (7.4%), patients with liver enzyme elevation alone (3.3%) or patients without liver enzyme elevation and comorbidity (1.4%). Patients with comorbidity and liver enzyme elevation were more likely to have been admitted to the ICU (p=0.0001).

Table 3. Elevated liver enzyme and its association with characteristics of patients with COVID-19

| Characteristics | COVID-19 patients with elevated liver enzyme | Total n=450 | p valuea |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------|-------------|----------|
|                 | AST (n=103, 22.9%) | ALT (n=135, 30.0%) | AST and ALT (n=212, 47.1%) | n=450 |
| Age in years    | <40 21 (20.4%) | 53 (39.3%) | 41 (19.3%) | 115 (25.6%) | 0.0001 |
|                 | >40 82 (79.6%) | 82 (60.7%) | 171 (80.7%) | 335 (74.4%) |
| Gender          | Male 65 (63.1%) | 91 (67.4%) | 135 (63.7%) | 291 (64.7%) | 0.725 |
|                 | Female 38 (36.9%) | 44 (32.6%) | 77 (36.3%) | 159 (35.3%) |
| Chest CT        | Normal 29 (28.2%) | 64 (47.4%) | 58 (27.4%) | 151 (33.6%) | 0.0001 |
|                 | Abnormal 74 (71.8%) | 71 (52.6%) | 154 (72.6%) | 299 (66.4%) |
| Symptoms        | Absent 37 (35.9%) | 58 (43) | 76 (35.8) | 171 (38) | 0.365 |
|                 | Present 66 (64.1) | 77 (57) | 136 (64.2) | 279 (62) |
| Disease severity| Asymptomatic/Mild 35 (34.0%) | 67 (49.6%) | 73 (34.4%) | 175 (38.9%) | 0.030 |
|                 | Moderate 28 (27.2%) | 34 (25.2%) | 58 (27.4%) | 120 (26.7%) |
|                 | Severe 40 (38.8%) | 34 (25.2%) | 81 (38.2%) | 155 (34.4%) |
| ICU             | Not admitted 53 (51.5%) | 97 (71.9%) | 97 (45.8%) | 247 (54.9%) | 0.0001 |
|                 | Admitted 50 (48.5%) | 38 (28.1%) | 115 (54.2%) | 203 (45.1%) |
| Outcome         | Death 11 (10.7%) | 2 (1.5%) | 17 (8%) | 30 (6.7%) | 0.001 |
|                 | Discharged 92 (89.3%) | 133 (98.5%) | 195 (92%) | 420 (93.3%) |

aChi-square test.
elevation had higher mortality than patients without.

**Symptoms**

Non-survivors were more likely to have symptoms than survivors (p<0.0001). Among symptomatic patients, the most common symptom is respiratory distress (33.6%), followed by fever with cough (9.6%), fever (6.9%), cough (4.7%), and other symptoms (2.7%). Symptomatic patients were more likely to have comorbidity with elevated liver enzyme (66.2%), with comorbid illness (63.4%), and with elevated liver enzyme (51.6%), as compared to patients without liver enzyme elevation or comorbidity (44.7%) (p<0.0001). Subgroup analysis of liver enzyme elevation did not find any statistically significant difference between the three groups.

**Laboratory and clinical parameters**

Various laboratory parameters and clinical parameters were assessed to study the association with outcome (discharge/death). Non-survivors had significantly higher median levels of AST (42.5 [31.25–70.25]) and ALT (32.9 [27.75–48.25]) than AST (26 [19–40]) and ALT (21 [14–34]) of survivors. The laboratory parameters such as WBC and RBC counts, hemoglobin, TGL-C, NLR, blood urea, CK-myoglobin fraction, ferritin, LDH, CRP and ALP were elevated in the poorer outcome group. Patients with lower serum albumin and lymphocyte count also had higher mortality. As shown in the Table 1, abnormal clinical parameters such as pulse rate (<60 or >100 beats/m), respiratory rate (<14 or >24 breaths per m) and low saturation (<94%) at the time of admission correlated with mortality.

**Chest CT**

On admission, lung involvement was more common in non-survivors than survivors (76.7% vs. 55%, p=0.001) (Table 1). The total severity CT grade was significantly higher in the non-survivor group than the survivor group (p<0.0001). By further characterizing the patients based on severity of lung involvement in non-survivors, Grade 1 was in 1573 (20.5%), Grade 2 in 1473 (19.2%), Grade 3 in 1673 (21.9%) and Grade 4 in 1173 (15.1%), suggesting severe lung involvement was common among non-survivors. A high frequency of patients [166/237 (70%)] had both elevated liver enzyme and comorbidity with abnormal chest CT than did patients with comorbidity 325/476 (68.3%) or liver enzyme elevation 133/213 (62.4%). Patients with abnormal chest CT had both AST and ALT elevated [154/212 (72.6%)] or AST elevated [74/103 (71.8%)] numbered more than patients with ALT elevated [71/135 (52.76%)].

**Disease severity**

Symptomatic patients with severe illness at the time of hospital admission had higher mortality (p<0.0001). A higher percentage of severe-symptom patients [103 (43.5%)] had elevated liver enzyme and presence of comorbidity than patients with comorbidity alone [181 (38%)] or liver enzyme elevation alone [52 (24.4%)]. Among patients with mild disease, 34% had elevated AST, 49.6% had elevated ALT, and 34.4% had both enzymes elevated. Among patients with moderate disease, 27.2% had elevated AST, 25.2% had elevated ALT, and 27.4% had both enzymes elevated. Whereas, among patients with severe disease, 38.8% had elevated AST, 25.2% had elevated ALT, and 38.2% had both enzymes elevated. Patients with severe disease had higher prevalence of both AST and ALT elevated or AST alone elevated than did those with ALT alone elevated (p<0.030).

**Intensive care unit (ICU) admission**

Most non-survivors were admitted to the ICU (80.8%). Patients with liver enzyme elevation and comorbidity were more frequently admitted to ICU (52.7%), while 47.3% of patients were managed in wards without ICU admission (54.9%). On further analysis, among patients who required ICU admission, 54.2% had both AST/ALT elevated and 48.5% had ALT elevated.

**Clinical outcome**

AST/ALT subgroups showed a statistically significant difference between the groups for mortality. Patients with AST elevation [11/30 (10.7%)] or both AST and ALT [17/30 (8%)] elevation had higher mortality than those with only ALT elevation [2/30 (1.5%)]. Multiple logistic regression was assessed for poorer outcome (death). Compared with COVID-19 patients with presence of comorbidity (OR: 4.096; 95% CI: 1.833–9.157), patients with liver enzyme elevations and presence of comorbidity had higher observed death risk (OR: 5.314; 95% CI: 2.278–12.393) (Table 4).

**Discussion**

In this study, clinical and laboratory parameters of 1,512 patients with COVID-19 were analyzed. We found that over 95% of the COVID-19 patients in the study population survived. Non-survivors with confirmed COVID-19 were older than 40 years of age and more likely to have elevated liver enzyme with comorbidity, compared to liver enzyme elevation or comorbidity alone. Consistent with findings reported by other authors, increased age was associated with mortality.\(^9\) It is postulated that the SARS-CoV-2 takes advantage of the natural decline in immunity in individuals with increasing age to cause severe and fatal infection. However, our study showed that age >40 years is associated with increased risk (p<0.0001). This warrants aggressive protective strategies for all persons >40 years of age to limit exposure, as active infection in such patients carries a very

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**Table 4. Multivariate analysis of elevated liver enzyme and comorbidity with COVID-19 mortality (age, gender adjusted)**

| Characteristics | OR  | 95% CI for EXP(B) | p value |
|-----------------|-----|-------------------|---------|
| Normal level of liver enzyme and absence of comorbidity |     |                    |         |
| Liver enzyme elevated | 2.125 | 0.756 | 5.974 | 0.153 |
| Presence of comorbidity | 4.096 | 1.833 | 9.157 | 0.001 |
| Liver enzyme elevated with presence of comorbidity | 5.314 | 2.278 | 12.393 | 0.0001 |

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poor prognosis, at least for now, until a safe vaccine is developed and fully available. In this study, more than 67% (484/713) of patients had diabetes and cardiovascular diseases as a common underlying comorbid illness. Meanwhile, a greater number of non-survivors had higher WBC count, neutrophils, NLR, and lower lymphocyte and platelet levels. This is consistent with previous findings that indicated severe patients with COVID-19 display higher neutrophil count and NLR, and lower lymphocyte count during the period of diseases.10–12 Elevated ALP is rare and has less commonly been observed among the COVID-19 liver injury patients.13 However, interestingly, our analysis found elevated ALP levels to be associated with mortality. The elevated clinical parameters such as PR, RR and decreased saturation at the time of admission were significantly associated with increased mortality. In this study, we observed that severely ill patients were more likely to die compared with the non-severe patients and that more than 71% (52/73) non-survivors were severely ill at the time of admission.

Liver enzyme abnormality is common in patients with COVID-19 at the time of hospital admission. We found that 450/1,512 (29.76%) had elevated liver enzyme. Our study showed that both AST and ALT represented the most frequently elevated pattern [212 (47.1%) of 450 patients], followed by ALT alone [135 (30%) of 450 patients] and AST alone [103 (22.9%) of 450 patients]. AST and ALT (both together) were elevated in 212/1,512 (14%) of patients at the time of hospital admission, as compared to the findings of many studies in which AST was found to be more frequently elevated than ALT.14–16 Additionally, symptomatic patients were more likely to have elevated liver enzyme (62%) at the time of hospital admission. The most common symptoms were respiratory distress, followed by cough and fever. In the present study, patients with lung involvement were more likely to have elevated liver enzyme at the time of presentation (66.4%, 299/450). Information regarding potential risks of severe conditions in COVID-19 associated with each type of liver enzyme elevation were calculated. Elevation of AST alone or ALT and AST (both together) was much more common in patients with severe disease than in patients with mild or moderate infection (p<0.030).

Previous studies by Zhang et al.17 and Huang et al.18 also showed that liver enzyme abnormality was more common in patients with severe disease. A recently published meta-analysis reported pooled risk of AST elevation (OR: 3.4, 95% CI: 2.3–5.1) and risk of ALT elevation (OR: 2.8, 95% CI: 1.8–4.3) of severe COVID-19 patients.19 The findings reported were explained by the fact that, apart from direct effects of SARS-CoV2 on liver, liver itself may also be involved in the development of Systemic Inflammatory Response Syndrome (SIRS) due to COVID-19. Further analysis showed that higher percentage of patients with AST and ALT (both together) elevated (115/212, 54.2%) needed ICU admission, suggesting that these enzyme elevation correlates with need for ICU admission, which may be revealed that hepatic dysfunction, being significantly higher in critically ill patients and associated with a poor outcome. Another study yielded similar results, showing elevated AST in 8/13 (62%) of patients in the ICU compared to 7/28 (25%) in the non-ICU setting.18 Patients with both AST and ALT elevation had a relatively higher death rate (17/30, 56.7%) and patients with AST elevated had the second-highest death rate (11/30, 36.7%), which was similar to the findings of a systematic review and meta-analysis study that found the presence of elevated liver enzyme also had statistical correlation with worse outcome (death).20

Most of the COVID-19 management protocols follow that patients with comorbidities should be closely monitored.12 However, specific recommendations for patients with elevated liver enzyme are sparse. The risk of comorbidities with elevated liver enzyme in COVID-19 patients had not been considered in most of the previous studies. In this large-sample sized study, patients were categorized into four groups (patients with normal liver enzymes, liver enzyme elevation, comorbidity and liver enzyme elevation with comorbidity) and the mortality rates were 1.36%, 3.28%, 7.35%, and 9.7%, respectively. Multivariate logistic regression with propensity analysis of our study showed that liver enzyme elevation and comorbidity had the highest risk for death (OR: 5.314, 95% CI: 2.278–12.393) as compared to comorbidity alone (OR: 4.096, 95% CI: 1.833–9.157). In general, patients with liver enzyme elevated with comorbidity deteriorated more rapidly than those without liver damage and comorbidity, in which utility of liver enzyme elevation among the comorbid patients at the onset of the COVID-19 will be beneficial for stratification for aggressive early management of the disease. However, the mechanisms for increased risk for specified patients in COVID-19 should be thoroughly studied or explained in future.

Conclusions

From the present data analysis, we first conclude that comorbid illness with elevated liver enzyme at the early stage, associates with disease severity and worse clinical features. Second, we found that patients of age more than 40 years are at increased risk for severe disease, ICU admission, and mortality. Finally, logistic regression analysis suggested that elevated liver enzyme and presence of comorbidity could impart a 5-fold increase in risk for fatal outcomes of COVID-19.

Limitations

There were certain limitations in our study. First, serial liver enzyme levels during the course of hospitalization were not analyzed; as a result of which, a probability of drug-induced liver injury could not be ruled out with certainty. However, our major objective was to study patients with liver enzyme elevation at the time of hospital admission and its association with outcome. Second, patients were not followed prospectively with respect to their biochemical abnormality during their course of hospital admission; it is difficult to ascertain whether subsequent liver injury (due to sepsis, drug-induced liver injury, COVID-19 per se) affected the disease outcome and future studies should be undertaken to address this problem. Since, Covid-19 is a relatively new disease and we have limited knowledge, the full disease spectrum of the virus may unfold in the future.

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interests related to this publication.
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