Impact of wound microbiology on limb preservation in patients with diabetic foot infection

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Keywords
Diabetic foot, Gram-negative bacteria, Lower-extremities amputation

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J Diabetes Investig 2022; 13: 336–343
doi: 10.1111/jdi.13649

ABSTRACT
Aims/Introduction:: To investigate the association between specific bacterial pathogens and treatment outcome in patients with limb-threatening diabetic foot infection (LT-DFI).

Materials and Methods:: Consecutive patients treated for LT-DFI in a major diabetic foot center in Taiwan were analyzed between the years 2014 and 2017. Patients with positive wound culture results at first aid were enrolled. Clinical factors, laboratory data, and wound culture results were compared. Lower-extremity amputations and in-hospital mortality were defined as a poor outcome.

Results:: Among the 558 patients, 272 (48.7%) patients had lower extremity amputation and 22 (3.9%) patients had in-hospital mortality. Gram-negative bacterial (GNB) infection was the independent factor following factors adjustment. When all the 31 microorganisms were analyzed, only \textit{E. coli} (adjusted odds ratio [aOR], 3.01; 95% CI, 1.60–5.65), \textit{Proteus} spp. (aOR, 2.99; 95% CI, 1.69–5.29), and \textit{Pseudomonas aeruginosa} (aOR, 2.00; 95% CI 1.20–3.32) were associated with poor outcome. The analysis of specific GNB species in association with major- or minor- amputation have been reported. No specific pathogen was associated with cause of death in patients with mortality within 30 days. The antimicrobial-resistant strains were not associated with a poor treatment outcome.

Conclusions:: The presence of GNB was associated with limb amputations. This study provides insight into more timely and appropriate management of the diabetic foot infection.

INTRODUCTION
Diabetic foot ulcer (DFU) is a major complication of diabetes and contributes to most causes of non-traumatic lower-extremity amputation (LEA)1–4. Among factors such as perfusion, wound depth and width, infection and neuropathy that might affect wound severity, diabetic foot infection (DFI) is one of the major factors attributed to limb loss while treating DFU5–8.

According to the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) and the International Working Group on Diabetic Foot (IWGDF) guidelines, DFI has been classified into four grades9.

Patients with severe foot infection (grade 4) and those with moderate infection (grade 3) plus relevant morbidities are under limb-threatening DFI (LT-DFI) status and usually need interdisciplinary limb management9,10. In our recent study7, major adverse cardiovascular event (MACE), poor peripheral circulation as well as the grade of DFI were associated with these poor prognoses (LEA and in-hospital mortality).

Previously, gram-positive aerobic bacteria have been reported to be the dominant pathogen in mild to moderate DFI by tissue curettage11. \textit{Staphylococcus aureus} is common in patients with acute DFI, whereas gram-negative bacteria and obligatory anaerobic bacteria are more present in chronic foot infection12.

\textit{Pseudomonas aeruginosa} causes DFI more often in hot and
humid areas. However, to our best knowledge, the impact of microorganisms in patients with LT-DFI has not been well recognized. This study aimed to further analyze the bacteria in patients with LT-DFI (grades 3 and 4) in order to research the association between specific pathogens and treatment outcome.

METHODS
Data source and study population
This study used an anonymous public use data set without identifiable information about individuals in the study. It was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Chang Gung Memorial Hospital (No. NMRPG3K0391), and follows the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) reporting guidelines.

From January 1, 2014 to December 31, 2017, 722 type 2 diabetic patients with LT-DFI (infection grade ≥ 3) were consecutively reviewed and treated in the diabetic foot care unit at Chang Gung Memorial Hospital, an interdisciplinary diabetic foot care center accredited by the International Diabetes Federation West-Pacific Region in Taiwan. Every patient received wound culture on admission. Patients with a negative culture result (n = 164) were excluded, while 558 patients with documented culture results were enrolled in this study.

Wound recording
Wound classification was recorded as PEDIS describing the perfusion, extent size, depth/tissue loss, infection, and sensation of the wounds. LT-DFI was defined by an infection score greater than 3. Patients with grade 3 infection presented with either erythema >2 cm around the wound or the structures deeper than skin and subcutaneous tissues were involved, but with no systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS). The definition of SIRS was according to matching two or more of the four criteria including abnormal body temperature >38°C or <36°C; tachycardia with pulse >90 beat per minute; abnormal respiratory rate with >20 breaths per minute; and an abnormal leukocyte count >12,000 or <4,000 /cu mm.

The perfusion status was categorized into three grades, with grade 3 perfusion status representing critical limb ischemia as defined by the presence of gangrene or ulcers with an ankle pressure <70 mmHg, or monophasic wave form of distal segment of the posterior tibial artery and dorsalis pedis artery. Adjunct angiography was performed for confirmation.

Wound culture
For clinically infected ulcers, we obtained specimens by cotton swabs (Transystem, COPAN, Italia) for both bacteria and fungus culture after necrotic tissue and surrounding callus debridement at first aid was performed to determine the causative pathogens. Ninety-five percent of specimens in this study were obtained from deep ulcers (penetrating to fascia, muscle, tendon, and/or bone). Culture media included chocolate agar, sheep blood agar, and thioglycolate broth at 37°C. Mycosel agar plates were also obtained and maintained at 25°C to enhance fungal growth. Positive microbial cultures were defined as growth of the same pathogen on two or more culture media with positive fungal culture defined on morphology. Parenteral broad-spectrum antibiotic therapy was initiated empirically for common gram-positive and gram-negative bacteria, and obligatory anaerobic pathogens with antibiotic regimen were adjusted based on the clinical response to empirical therapy and sensitivity results. Cultures were repeated for patients who were not responding to appropriate therapy.

Antibiotics strategy and consensus of managements
Broad-spectrum antibiotics against gram-negative and anaerobic pathogens, including third-generation cephalosporin (43%), extended-spectrum penicillin (31% with aminopenicillins and 5% with ureidopenicillins), fluoroquinolones (6%), carbapenems (5%), and metronidazole (19%) were prescribed promptly for these patients initially. Glycopeptide against methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) was also prescribed in 26% of patients. Empiric antibiotics were subsequently modified according to the results of cultures. Surgical interventions, endovascular treatments, and foot amputations were scheduled in a timely manner after the diabetic foot team reached consensus.

Outcomes definitions
Those patients receiving minor (below the ankle) or major (above the ankle) amputations or expiring during the hospital treatment course were defined as poor outcomes.

Since various causes of death including nosocomial infection of patients with DFU were noted for a longer stay of hospitalization, only those patients who died within 30 days of hospitalization were analyzed to find the association between pathogens and mortality.

Statistical analysis
Clinical demographics, associated comorbidities (such as hypertension, history of MACE, and dialysis), and factors of PEDIS wound-grading were recorded from the patient’s first visit at admission, with laboratory data of routine hematology tests and chemistry profile at enrolment being analyzed. Categorical variables were reported as numbers with percentages, and continuous variables were reported as means and standard deviations. Comparisons between patients with preserved limbs or poor outcome were performed using the Mann–Whitney test for continuous variables and Pearson’s chi-square test for categorical variables. Each factor odds ratio to poor outcome was calculated via an adjusted model of logistic regression, while the same statistical method was used in comparing the two groups with different treatment outcomes. The significant risk factors in the univariate analysis found above were then entered into a multivariate logistic regression model to identify independent risk factors to adverse outcome among these patients. All statistical analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS for Mac, version 26.0, IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) data analysis software.
RESULTS

Baseline characteristics and clinical factors associated with poor outcome

Among the 558 patients with LT-DFI, 272 (48.7%) patients had LEA (217 and 55 patients have minor and major LEA respectively) and 22 (3.9%) patients had in-hospital mortality. The comparison of baseline characteristics, PEDIS classification, laboratory data, and wound culture between the two groups is shown in Table 1. Patients prone to a poor outcome had a higher incidence of MACE (42.2% vs 22.7%, P < 0.001) and end-stage renal disease (ESRD) (28.6% vs 11.0%, P < 0.001). A worse glomerular filtration rate was noted in the poor outcome group (48.5 ± 40.9 vs 58.7 ± 51.0 ml/min/1.73 m², P = 0.002). There were no statistical differences in age, gender, and diabetes duration.

Compared with patients with preserved limbs, those with poor outcomes had worse perfusion (63.9% vs 22.0% of grade 3 perfusion, P < 0.001), larger wound size (40.3 cm² vs 33.4 cm², P < 0.001), deeper wound (95.2% vs 54.5% of grade 3 depth, P < 0.001), more severe infection (40.1% vs 27.7% of grade 4 infection, P = 0.001), and worse sensation (62.2% vs 22.7% of grade 2 sensation, P < 0.001). The incidence of osteomyelitis was higher in patients with poor outcome (51.4% vs 40.0%, P = 0.017).

A higher leukocyte count (15.2 vs 12.3 10³/mL, P < 0.001) and c-reactive protein level (131.3 ± 99.9 vs 90.3 ± 89.3 mg/dL, P < 0.001) were both found in the poor outcome group, indicating the severity of infection status, while lower hemoglobin, serum albumin, and high-density lipoprotein were also revealed. There were no statistical differences in HbA1c. Of note, higher incidences of gram-negative and obligatory anaerobic bacteria were documented in the poor outcome group.

Microorganisms associated with poor outcome

The most common pathogens in gram-positive strains are Streptococcus spp. (25.8%), methicillin-sensitive Staphylococcus aureus (21.7%), and methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (12.5%). The most common gram-negative pathogens are Proteus spp. (16.3%), E. coli (11.1%), and Pseudomonas spp. (8.8%). The most common anaerobic pathogens are Peptostreptococcus spp. (22.8%) and Bacteroides spp. (21.1%). When putting baseline characteristics with statistical significance into the multivariate logistic regression model, gram-negative aerobic bacteria (odds ratio 2.59, 95% confidence interval 1.77–3.79) and obligatory anaerobic bacteria (OR 2.28, 95% CI 1.58–3.29) infection could predict poor outcome. We further adjusted wound assessment, laboratory data with statistical significance, and the incidence of osteomyelitis, but gram-negative bacteria remained the independent factor for poor outcome in these groups (Table 2).

Forest plot analysis and unadjusted odds ratio of specific pathogens revealed poor outcome in patients with LT-DFI as demonstrated in Figure 1. E. coli (OR: 3.01, 95% CI 1.60–5.65), Proteus spp. (OR: 2.99, 95% CI 1.69–5.29), and Pseudomonas aeruginosa (OR: 2.00, 95% CI 1.20–3.32) had a more predictive value of poor outcome among all bacteria.

Table 1: Demographics, wound grading and associated bacteria in patients with limb-threatening diabetic foot infection

| Limb preserved | Poor outcome | P value |
|----------------|--------------|---------|
| (n = 264)      | (n = 294)    |         |
| **Baseline characteristics**                           |         |         |
| Age (years)    | 62.9 ± 140   | 63.5 ± 12.1 | 0.540 |
| Male (%)       | 60.2         | 65.0       | 0.143 |
| Diabetes duration (years)                             | 137.7 ± 9.2 | 146.6 ± 10.0 | 0.400 |
| Hypertension (%) | 68.9         | 69.7       | 0.456 |
| Major adverse cardiovascular disease (%)              | 22.7       | 42.2       | <0.001 |
| Coronal artery disease (%)                            | 15.5       | 31.0       | <0.001 |
| Stroke (%)                                            | 9.5        | 16.0       | 0.015 |
| ESRD (%)                                               | 11.0       | 28.6       | <0.001 |
| eGFR (ml/min/1.73 m²)                                 | 58.7 ± 51.0 | 48.5 ± 40.9 | 0.002 |
| **Wound assessment**                                   |         |         |
| Wound duration (days)                                  | 37.2 ± 47.5 | 44.2 ± 55.0 | 0.106 |
| Perfusion, Grade 3 (%)                                 | 22.0       | 63.9       | <0.001 |
| Toe involvement (%)                                    | 82.4       | 91.8       | 0.545 |
| Extension (cm²)                                        | 334.3 ± 1099 | 403.4 ± 75.4 | <0.001 |
| Depth, Grade 3 (%)                                     | 545.2      | 95.2       | <0.001 |
| Infection, Grade 4 (%)                                 | 27.7       | 40.1       | 0.001 |
| Sensation, Grade 2 (%)                                 | 22.7       | 62.2       | <0.001 |
| **Laboratory data**                                    |         |         |
| WBC (10³/mL)                                           | 12.3 ± 6.0 | 15.2 ± 7.0 | <0.001 |
| CRP (mg/dL)                                            | 90.3 ± 89.3 | 131.3 ± 99.9 | <0.001 |
| Hemoglobin (mg/dL)                                     | 11.2 ± 2.2 | 10.7 ± 4.3 | <0.001 |
| HbA1c (%)                                              | 91.1 ± 2.7 | 91.2 ± 2.5 | 0.482 |
| Serum albumin (mg/dL)                                  | 32.6 ± 0.6 | 3.0 ± 0.5 | 0.002 |
| LDL (mmol/L)                                           | 847.3 ± 34.4 | 834.3 ± 33.5 | 0.699 |
| HDL (mmol/L)                                           | 312.9 ± 9.5 | 295.3 ± 12.3 | 0.033 |
| Osteoemyelitis (%)                                     | 42.0       | 51.4       | 0.017 |
| **Wound culture**                                      |         |         |
| Gram-positive bacteria (%)                             | 84.5       | 78.9       | 0.057 |
| Gram-negative bacteria (%)                             | 52.3       | 73.8       | <0.001 |
| Anaerobic bacteria (%)                                 | 40.2       | 57.8       | <0.001 |
| **Wound Management**                                   |         |         |
| Endovascular therapy (%)                               | 48.3       | 44.7       | 0.370 |
| NPWT (%)                                               | 2.0        | 4.1        | 0.485 |
| HBO (%)                                                | 5.9        | 6.1        | 0.642 |

ESRD, end stage renal disease; eGFR, estimated glomerular filtration rate; WBC, leukocyte count; CRP, C-reactive protein; HbA1c, glycated hemoglobin; LDL, low-density lipoprotein; HDL, high-density lipoprotein; NPWT, negative pressure wound therapy; HBO, hyperbaric oxygen therapy. aIncluding minor amputation, major amputation, and mortality. bBacterial infection was defined as the isolation of one or more than one type of bacteria from a wound culture.
**Gram-negative bacteria** as an independent factor for poor outcomes following various multivariate multinomial logistic regression analyses

| Variables                | Odds Ratio (95% CI) |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Gram-positive bacteria   | 0.83 (0.52–1.33)   |
| Gram-negative bacteria   | 2.29 (1.58–3.29)*  |
| Anaerobic bacteria       | 1.73 (0.94–3.19)   |

a: Adjusted for MACE, ESRD, and eGFR. b: Adjusted for MACE, ESRD, eGFR, and PEDIS classification. c: Adjusted for MACE, ESRD, eGFR, PEDIS classification, WBC, C-reactive protein, hemoglobin, and HDL. d: Adjusted for MACE, ESRD, eGFR, PEDIS classification, WBC, C-reactive protein, hemoglobin, HDL, and osteomyelitis. *Significance: P value < 0.05.

**Prevalence of antimicrobial resistance strains**

In order to investigate the role of antimicrobial-resistant strains, the cultured results of the causative pathogens in poor treatment outcome were further analyzed (Table 3). Ceftriaxone- or ceftazidime-resistant strains accounted for 2.7% (1/36) in *Klebsiella* spp., while low percentages of carbapenem-resistant strains (5.6% and 1.6% in *Klebsiella* spp. and *E. coli*, respectively) were found.

**DISCUSSION**

In addition to the well-known factors of poor outcome (e.g., MACE, ESRD, PAD, large wound size, deep wound, impaired sensation, severe infection, and the presence of osteomyelitis), our results demonstrated the association between gram-negative bacteria and poor in-hospital treatment outcome. After multivariate multinomial logistic regression analyses of these clinical factors with statistical significance, gram-negative bacteria remained an independent factor for poor outcome in our referral center. Among these, *Proteus* spp. and *Klebsiella* spp. could predict minor and major amputations, respectively, even with low percentages of antimicrobial resistance strain.

DFI is a heterogenous group of infection in a diverse patient population, with the causative pathogens of DFI varying by geographic, demographic, and clinical situations. Gram-positive bacteria, especially *S. aureus*, are reported to be the predominant and virulent pathogens in mild or moderate DFI; however, the incidence of gram-negative bacteria infection has become more common in warmer climates and chronic wounds. Compared with gram-positive infection, gram-negative bacteria induce a greater magnitude of inflammatory response, leading to LEA and high in-hospital mortality. In the diabetic foot, gram-negative bacterial infection has been reported to induce ischemic tissue necrosis and thereby progressive infection and poor outcome. Thus, infections with gram-negative bacteria might generally require more frequent surgical debridement, endovascular therapy, and longer hospitalization than those with gram-positive bacteria.

The predominance of the *Enterobacteriaceae* family (*E. coli*, *Klebsiella* spp., *Morganella morganii*, and *Proteus* spp.) has recently been reported as the largest group of aerobic gram-negative bacteria in DFI. Extraintestinal pathogenic *E. coli* is well-known for its virulence potential to invade host tissue and to be transmitted via the bloodstream. *Klebsiella* spp. can cause severe infection with a high mortality rate, is a common pathogen of pyogenic liver abscess, and potentially fatal necrotizing fasciitis in Taiwan. *Proteus* spp. exhibits a characteristic swimming activity, which enables colonization, tissue invasion, and biofilm formation in chronic wounds, and is one of the most common pathogens of osteomyelitis, and diabetic patients with osteomyelitis are prone to limb loss if this is accompanied by exposed bone, the presence of ischemia, and necrotizing soft tissue infection. Major LEA is indicated in these patients when accompanied by severe sepsis, extensive tissue loss, and poor-healing wound(s). This study demonstrates the importance of specific pathogens in the *Enterobacteriaceae* family and their role in amputations and in-hospital mortality.

In the past few years, antibiotic-resistant pathogens, particularly MRSA and extended-spectrum β-lactamase (ESBL) or carbapenemase-producing gram-negative bacteria have become a major problem in treating DFI. DFIcaused by MRSA have been thought to have worse outcomes; however, a recent review
found that they did not differ from those of other pathogens\textsuperscript{36}. Similarly, Henig et al. reported that there was no association between MRSA and poor outcome, but there was a trend toward a significantly higher likelihood of having recurrent DFI within 1 year\textsuperscript{37}. In our study, ceftriaxone- or ceftazidime-resistant strains were low in *Klebsiella spp.* and *E. coli*, indicating that a poor outcome was not associated with antibiotic-resistant strains.

The main limitation of this study is its retrospective nature. In addition, wound culture samples in patients with LT-DFI were obtained by swab, the most common real-world practice. Previous broad-spectrum antibiotic treatment before patient referral might influence the culture result on admission. Although new advances obtained from DNA- and RNA-based techniques for bacterial identification could improve therapeutic approaches\textsuperscript{27}, gram-negative bacteria (especially *Enterobacteriaceae* group) have

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1** | The odds ratios of poor outcome in individual microorganisms.
still shown their importance by different culturing methodology and identification technique. A larger sample investigation is needed to clarify the microbiological impact.

**CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrated that the presence of gram-negative bacteria ought to raise awareness in clinicians treating patients with LT-DFI. Further evaluation of these specific species might provide further insight for the management of DFI.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None

**FUNDING SOURCES**

The study was supported by project grant from the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan (MOST 109-2314-B-182A-128).

**DISCLOSURE**

The author declares no conflict of interest.
Approval of the research protocol: N/A.
Informed Consent: N/A.
Approval date of Registry and the Registration No. of the study/trial: N/A.
Animal Studies: N/A.

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