Clinical Study

Oncology

Oncology 2014;86:295–302
DOI: 10.1159/000357713

Received: August 9, 2013
Accepted after revision: November 26, 2013
Published online: June 7, 2014

Prevention of Disease Progression with Anti-Inflammatory Therapy in Patients with HCV-Related Cirrhosis: A Markov Model

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Key Words
Hepatitis C · Hepatocellular carcinoma · Interferon · Glycyrrhizin · Carcinogenesis · Markov model · Anti-inflammatory therapy

Abstract
Background: The significance of anti-inflammatory therapy has not been fully evaluated in hepatitis C virus (HCV)-related cirrhosis. ***Patients and Methods:*** We analyzed stepwise progression rates from cirrhosis to hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) and to death using a Markov model in 1,280 patients with HCV-related cirrhosis. During the observation period, 303 patients received interferon and 736 received glycyrrhizin injections as anti-inflammatory therapy. ***Results:*** In the entire group, annual progression rates from cirrhosis to HCC and from cirrhosis to death were 6.8 and 1.9%, and the rate from HCC to death was 19.0%. When sustained virological response (SVR) or biochemical response (BR) was attained with interferon, the annual rate to HCC decreased to 2.6%. On the contrary, the progression rates to HCC and to death in the patients without SVR and BR were 7.2 and 2.0%, respectively ($p < 0.0001$). Continuous interferon administration significantly decreased the carcinogenesis rate to 5.5% ($p = 0.0087$). In the analysis of the remaining patients with high alanine transaminase of 75 IU/l or more but without interferon response or without interferon administration, glycyrrhizin injection significantly decreased annual non-progression probability (no glycyrrhizin 88.0% vs. glycyrrhizin therapy 92.3%, $p = 0.00055$). ***Conclusion:*** Glycyrrhizin injection therapy is useful in the prevention of disease progression in interferon-resistant or intolerant patients with HCV-related cirrhosis.

Introduction

Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is one of the principal etiologies of hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC), with high morbidity and mortality rates in many countries [1–5]. Because interferon has anti-viral, anti-fibrotic and anti-inflammatory properties, it is still a main agent in the treatment of chronic hepatitis C [6, 7]. Many authors have described interferon as capable of preventing hepatocarcinogenesis and prolonging patient survival [8–13]. The radical eradication of HCV by interferon greatly depends on viral load, HCV subtype, certain mutations of the hepatitis virus gene, liver histology, mode of interferon administration and various host factors, including

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the patient's age [10, 13, 14]. When a significant side effect occurs during interferon therapy, cessation or early withdrawal of the therapy often leads to an unsuccessful result. Early withdrawal and treatment failure is usually more common in patients with an advanced stage of liver disease.

Adverse effects of interferon are more commonly found in patients with cirrhosis, and hematological disorders often necessitate cessation of interferon before the therapy is complete. As a result, interferon is considered less effective in the advanced stage of hepatitis. Liver cirrhosis is usually associated with patients aged 55–60 years or older; the adverse effects of interferon-based anti-viral therapy are prevalent in this age group, resulting in low overall compliance for long-term therapy. Because the severity of chronic liver disease is closely associated with the response to interferon therapy [14–16], the sustained response rate is often low in patients with cirrhosis. Furthermore, an older patient with cirrhosis has a very high risk of carcinogenesis and mortality because fibrotic stage is correlated with a patient's age. The role of interferon in suppression of the carcinogenesis rate is therefore likely to be less significant in patients with cirrhosis en masse. There have been several clinical attempts to administer interferon for HCV-related cirrhosis to suppress the hepatocellular carcinogenesis rate [8, 9, 11, 12, 17–19]. However, there have been conflicting reports about the therapeutic value of interferon for this purpose. Some studies have shown a beneficial effect of interferon in reducing carcinogenesis [8, 9, 12, 18], but other reports have not [11, 17, 19].

When interferon fails to eliminate HCV RNA in a patient, long-term administration of interferon often shows anti-carcinogenic action through stabilization of alanine transaminase (ALT) and suppression of the necro-inflammation of hepatocytes [20]. For patients who do not respond to long-term interferon therapy, as shown by persistently high ALT values, glycyrrhizin injection therapy is available in several countries, including some countries in Asia and Europe. A glycyrrhizin-containing product, Stronger Neo-Minophagen C™ (SNMC; Minophagen Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd., Tokyo, Japan), is widely used in Japan for suppression of hepatitis activity and for prevention of disease progression in patients with hepatitis B virus- and HCV-induced chronic hepatitis. Glycyrrhizin has been reported to mitigate hepatic inflammation by suppressing elevated ALT levels and preventing disease progression [21–24]. We previously reported the favorable effects of long-term administration of glycyrrhizin against hepatocellular carcinogenesis in patients with interferon-naïve and interferon-resistant chronic hepatitis C [25, 26].

In order to elucidate whether long-term glycyrrhizin injection therapy suppresses hepatocarcinogenesis and mortality rates in patients with interferon-resistant cirrhosis, we retrospectively analyzed a large cohort of patients with HCV-related cirrhosis in a single institution. The principal aims of our study were to show the clinical role of glycyrrhizin in advanced liver disease, and to determine whether glycyrrhizin can be used as an anti-inflammatory therapy.

Patients and Methods

Study Population and Analyzed Cohorts

A total of 1,358 consecutive patients with hepatitis C were diagnosed as having liver cirrhosis at the Department of Hepatology, Toranomon Hospital, Tokyo, Japan, from 1974 to 2007. They had positive anti-HCV antibody, detectable HCV RNA (nested PCR), and negative hepatitis B surface antigen. Anti-HCV and HCV RNA were assayed using stored frozen sera. Among the 1,358 consecutive patients with hepatitis C, 78 patients were excluded from the study based on meeting one or more of the following exclusion criteria: (1) possible association with HCC; (2) association with hemochromatosis, autoimmune liver disease, primary biliary cirrhosis, α1-antitrypsin deficiency or Wilson disease; (3) daily alcohol ingestion of 75 g or more; (4) α-fetoprotein of 400 ng/ml or higher; (5) a short follow-up period of 6 months or less, or (6) Child-Pugh stage C liver disease because of the substantial difference in carcinogenesis in these patients [27–29].

The remaining 1,280 patients with HCV-positive liver cirrhosis were retrospectively analyzed for hepatocellular carcinogenesis and mortality. Among them, 754 patients (59.4%) were diagnosed as having cirrhosis by histopathological findings with peritoneoscopy and biopsy, and the remaining 526 (40.6%) were diagnosed with clinical findings: rough-surfaced liver on imaging (ultrasonography or computerized tomography, CT), plus endoscopic finding of esophageal varices, overt ascites or indocyanine green retention rate at 15 min of 30% or more. There were 744 men and 536 women, with a median age of 59 years (range 22–86). They were observed for a median of 8.1 years (table 1). A total of 231 patients (18.0%) were lost to follow-up during the observation period.

Interferon Treatment and Evaluation of Effects

Among the 1,280 patients with cirrhosis, 303 patients (23.7%) received interferon therapy with or without ribavirin. Among the 303 patients receiving interferon therapy, 252 received interferon-α and 51 received interferon-β therapy. For dosages, 258 patients received at least 6 million IU/day, and the other 45 patients received no more than 3 million IU/day as their initial anti-viral therapy. Of 303 patients receiving interferon, 52 patients received interferon daily for the first 2–8 weeks and then 2–3 times per week for the following 24–72 weeks. The other 251 patients received interferon 3 times per week for 24–72 weeks. The median administration period was 26.0 weeks (range 4–548).

Table 1. Clinical features of the study group: 1,280 patients with liver cirrhosis caused by hepatitis C

Demography	
Male	744 (58.1)
Female	536 (41.9)
Age, years	59 (22–86)
Decompensated cirrhosis	134 (10.5)
History of blood transfusion	549 (42.9)
Total alcohol intake >500 kg	200 (15.6)
Presence of diabetes mellitus	249 (19.5)
Observation period, years	8.1 (0.5–30.6)
Laboratory data	
ICG R15, %	27 (2–96)
Bilirubin, mg/dl	1.0 (0.2–7.7)
Albumin, g/dl	3.7 (1.6–5.1)
Aspartate transaminase, IU/l	66 (14–1313)
ALT, IU/l	62 (4–570)
Platelet count, $\times 10^3/mm^3$	104 (20–398)
Prothrombin time, %	82 (11–117)
Hepatitis C subtype	
1	821 (75.7)
2	254 (23.4)
Other	9 (0.8)
Treatment after diagnosis of cirrhosis	
Interferon with/without ribavirin	303
Glycyrrhizin injection	736
Ursodeoxycholic acid	615

Data are presented as the median value with range in parentheses, or n with percentages in parentheses. ICG R15 = Indocyanine green retention rate at 15 min.

Almost all patients who received interferon therapy showed varying degrees of influenza-like symptoms, leukocytopenia and thrombocytopenia. Eight patients discontinued interferon therapy because of significant adverse reactions: depression in 2 patients, severe cytopenias in 2, marked anorexia in 1, malaise in 2 and retinopathy in 1 patient. No patients developed decompensated liver disease with ascites, encephalopathy, jaundice or variceal bleeding.

The effects of interferon therapy were classified according to the elimination of HCV RNA and the levels of ALT for 6 months after the end of the treatment. Sustained virological response (SVR) was defined as persistent disappearance of HCV RNA after therapy. Biochemical response (BR) was defined as normal ALT values without elimination of HCV RNA for at least 6 months after therapy. No response (NR) was defined as persistently abnormal or only transient normalization of ALT for a period of less than 6 months. Because 73 patients (24.1%) were still undergoing their course of interferon therapy, the evaluation was conducted in 230 (75.9%) of the 303 patients.

Glycyrrhizin Injection (SNMC) Therapy

Glycyrrhizin therapy was performed using intravenous injections of SNMC™ (Minophagen Pharmaceutical Co. Ltd.). The preparation contains 0.2% (40 mg) glycyrrhizinic acid as the main active constituent, 2% (400 mg) glycine and 0.1% (20 mg) L-cysteine in a 20-ml ampule.

Of 376 chronic hepatitis patients with interferon resistance or who did not receive interferon injection therapy, 264 patients underwent glycyrrhizin injection therapy and the remaining 112 patients did not receive therapy until the end of observation. The purpose of glycyrrhizin injection therapy was to suppress elevated ALT levels and to prevent disease progression in all the patients. In patients for whom the treatment was regarded as effective with respect to ALT levels, the treatment was usually continued for as long a period as possible. As a result, a daily dose of 100 ml of SNMC was administered three times a week for a median period of 4.9 years (range 0.1–24.1) in the glycyrrhizin-treated group.

Certain patients with a high ALT value did not receive glycyrrhizin injection for a variety of reasons. These included the refusal of intravenous treatment, a difficulty in frequently visiting the clinic for the injection, inappropriate superficial veins for repeated injection, negativism towards the handling of intravenous therapy by the doctors in charge, and so on. Those patients who did not receive glycyrrhizin injection therapy in spite of a high ALT often received pills of ursodeoxycholic acid as an anti-inflammatory therapy.

Follow-Up of Patients and Diagnosis of HCC

Follow-up of the patients was made on a monthly to tri-monthly basis after the initial visit. Imaging diagnosis was made one or more times per year with ultrasonography, CT or magnetic resonance imaging. HCC was diagnosed by its typical hypervascular characteristics on CT, magnetic resonance imaging or angiography. When combined use of imaging modes could not demonstrate a typical image of HCC, a fine-needle biopsy was obtained for microscopic examination. The imaging diagnosis was similarly performed among those patients with interferon therapy, glycyrrhizin therapy and without therapy.

Statistical Analysis and Markov Model

Standard statistical measures and procedures were used. The χ^2 test, Fisher exact test and Mann-Whitney U test were used to analyze the differences in demography and laboratory findings. Progression and survival rates were analyzed using the Kaplan-Meier technique [30] with the log-rank test. A Markov model [31] was used to analyze the transition rates from liver cirrhosis to appearance of HCC, and to death. A homogenous Markov chain consisted of three states (fig. 1). These were liver cirrhosis, appearance of HCC and death as an absorbing state from where no transitions to the other states occurred. The model was based on the following principles: (1) the three states are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive; (2) the Markov assumption is that the current state has no memories of prior states; (3) the time intervals are uniform, and (4) the transition probabilities are constant and time independent. The first and second items here define a Markov chain, whereas the third and fourth items characterize a homogenous Markov chain [32]. Patient data were regarded as censored at the time of the last date of observation, in the evaluation of survival analysis and Markov analysis.

A p value <0.05 in the two-tailed test was considered significant. Data analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 18 [33]. The Human Ethics Review Committee of Toranomon Hospital approved the study protocol.

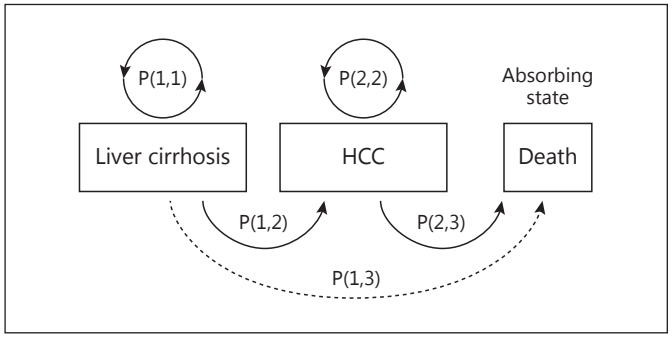

Fig. 1. Markov state transition diagram of liver cirrhosis. Three states were defined: liver cirrhosis without development of HCC, liver cirrhosis-associated HCC, and death. Of these, death was the absorbing state from which no transitions to the other states occurred. The transition in one cycle (1 year) is shown. Arrows connecting two different states indicate observed transitions. The figure represents a probability diagram of the entire study group. All patients were initially at the stage of liver cirrhosis, but transitions to HCC stages gradually increased with time.

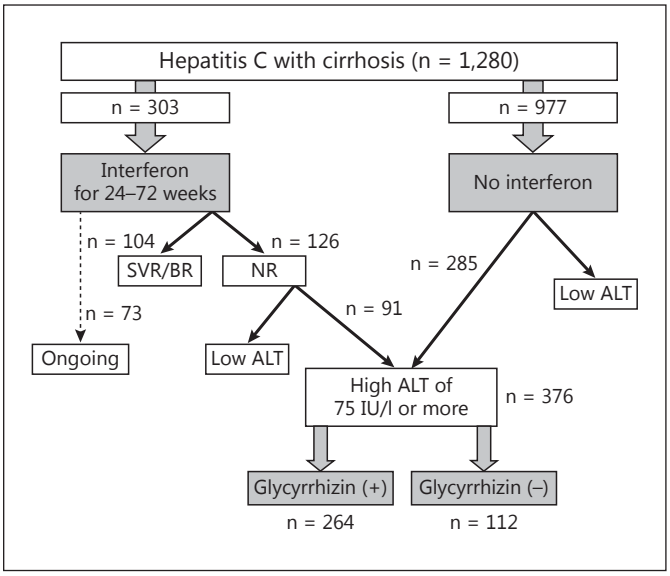

Fig. 2. Clinical courses of patients with cirrhosis. Among 303 patients who received interferon therapy, there were 104 patients who had SVR or BR, and 126 patients who had NR. The remaining 73 patients continued to receive long-term interferon therapy. Among 376 patients with a high ALT value of 75 IU/l or more, with or without a history of interferon therapy, 264 patients underwent glycyrrhizin injection therapy and 112 did not receive glycyrrhizin.

Results

Effects of Interferon and Anti-Inflammatory Treatment

Among the 303 patients who underwent interferon therapy with or without ribavirin, 79 patients (26.1%) showed HCV RNA clearance (SVR effect), and 25 patients (8.3%) showed a BR with normal ALT values for 6 months or longer. One hundred and twenty-six patients (41.6%) showed NR after cessation of interferon. The remaining 73 patients (24.1%) continued intermittent interferon administration for 1 year or longer.

Among the 977 patients who did not receive interferon therapy, plus the 126 patients who received interferon with NR, a high ALT value of 75 IU/l or more was found in 376. Of these patients, 264 (70.2%) underwent long-term glycyrrhizin injection therapy and the other 112 (29.8%) did not receive glycyrrhizin (fig. 2).

Crude Hepatocellular Carcinogenesis and Survival Rates in the Entire Study Group

Cumulative hepatocellular carcinogenesis rates were calculated in all 1,280 study patients with HCV-related cirrhosis. The carcinogenesis rates were 16.4, 29.2, 37.3, 51.6, 65.0 and 69.5% at the end of the third, fifth, seventh, tenth, fifteenth and twentieth years, respectively (fig. 3a). The cumulative survival rates were 93.0, 86.3, 77.1, 61.9, 39.3 and 25.4% at the same time points (fig. 3b).

Probabilities for Transition among the Three Disease States according to the Results of Interferon and Anti-Inflammatory Treatment

In the matrix of the entire study group, 6.8% (562/8,273) of the patients with liver cirrhosis progressed to HCC annually, and 1.9% (157/8,273) died. The remaining 91.3% (7,554/8,273) of the patients remained in the stage of liver cirrhosis after 1 year. Similarly, 19.0% (423/2,228) of the patients in the stage of HCC died, and 81.0% (1,805/2,228) of the patients remained in the stage of HCC annually (table 2).

The results are shown in table 3 as a matrix of transition probabilities for three subsets composed of treatments (SVR or BR, NR or no interferon, and continual interferon) stratified by three states (cirrhosis, HCC, and death). The probabilities for transition from liver cirrhosis to HCC and from liver cirrhosis to death were significantly lower in patients who achieved SVR or BR [2.6% (20/778) and 0.6% (5/778)] than in patients with NR or no interferon therapy [7.2% (542/7,494) and 2.0% (151/7,494); $\chi^2 = 32.4$, $p < 0.0001$]. The probabilities for transition from liver cirrhosis to HCC and from liver cirrhosis to death were significantly lower in patients who

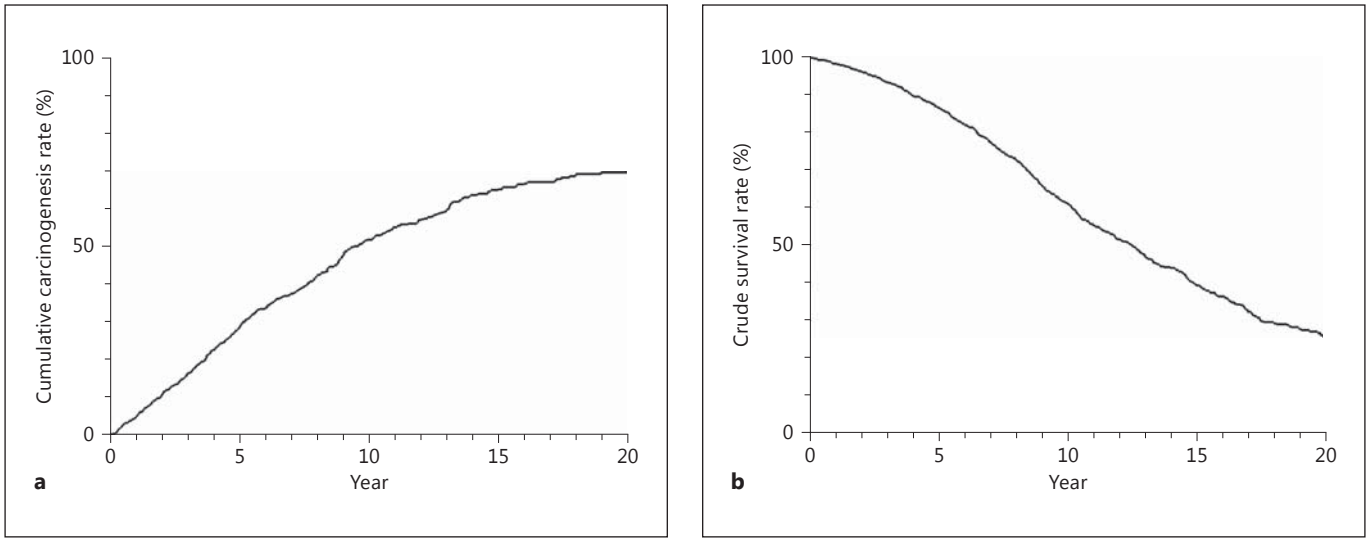

Fig. 3. HCV-positive chronic hepatitis patients with cirrhosis were retrospectively analyzed for hepatocellular carcinogenesis and mortality. **a** Cumulative hepatocellular carcinogenesis rate in the entire group of patients with cirrhosis. **b** Crude survival rate in the entire group of patients with cirrhosis.

Table 2. One-year state-transition probability matrix of the entire study group (n = 10,501 person years)

	Cirrhosis	HCC	Death
Liver cirrhosis (n = 8,273)	7,554 (91.3)	562 (6.8)	157 (1.9)
HCC (n = 2,228)		1,805 (81.0)	423 (19.0)

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

received continuous interferon therapy [5.5% (39/714) and 0.7% (5/714)] than in patients with NR or no interferon therapy [7.2% (542/7,494) and 2.0% (151/7,494); $\chi^2 = 7.59$, $p = 0.0059$].

Probabilities for Transition among the Remaining Patients with High ALT

Among 376 patients without SVR/BR effect and continuous interferon injection and with a high ALT value of 75 IU/l or more, 264 patients (70.2%) received glycyrrhizin injection as anti-inflammatory therapy. Among 692 patients without SVR/BR effect and continuous interferon injection and with relatively low ALT of less than 75 IU/l, glycyrrhizin injection was performed only in 253 patients (36.6%).

We evaluated the transition probabilities among the three states in the remaining patients with high ALT levels of 75 IU/l or more. In the matrix of patients without glycyrrhizin injection therapy, the transition probability from liver cirrhosis to HCC was 6.8% (85/1,245), and the probability of transitioning from cirrhosis to death was 2.0% (25/1,245). In the patients who received glycyrrhizin injection therapy, the transition probability from liver cirrhosis to HCC was 5.9% (45/764), and the probability of transitioning from cirrhosis to death was 0.8% (6/764). Glycyrrhizin injection therapy slightly improved the transition probability both from liver cirrhosis to HCC and from liver cirrhosis to death, but statistical significance was not observed ($\chi^2 = 5.5$, $p = 0.06$; table 4).

Disease Control Rates (Annual Non-Progression Probability) of Anti-Viral and Anti-Inflammatory Treatment

The disease control rates depended on the probabilities for transition between progression and non-progression of disease at a specific time interval, which was set at 1 year. The yearly transition probabilities were calculated based on the data of 10,501 person years of the 1,280 study patients with HCV-positive liver cirrhosis.

The disease control rate of the patients with SVR or BR (874/910, 96.0%) was significantly higher than that of the

Table 3. One-year state-transition probability matrices according to initial treatment

	Cirrhosis	HCC	Death
Patients with SVR or BR (n = 910 person years)			
Liver cirrhosis (n = 778)	753 (96.8)	20 (2.6)	5 (0.6)
HCC (n = 132)		121 (91.7)	11 (8.3)
Patients with no response or no interferon therapy (n = 9,590 person years)			
Liver cirrhosis (n = 7,494)	6,801 (90.8)	542 (7.2)	151 (2.0)
HCC (n = 2,096)		1,684 (80.3)	412 (19.7)
Patients with continuous interferon therapy (n = 856 person years)			
Liver cirrhosis (n = 714)	670 (93.8)	39 (5.5)	5 (0.7)
HCC (n = 142)		132 (93.0)	10 (7.0)

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Table 4. One-year state-transition probability matrices according to glycyrrhizin injection therapy for patients with high ALT values

	Cirrhosis	HCC	Death
Patients without glycyrrhizin therapy (n = 1,637 person years)			
Liver cirrhosis (n = 1,245)	1,135 (91.2)	85 (6.8)	25 (2.0)
HCC (n = 392)		305 (77.8)	87 (22.2)
Patients with glycyrrhizin therapy (n = 913 person years)			
Liver cirrhosis (n = 764)	713 (93.3)	45 (5.9)	6 (0.8)
HCC (n = 149)		130 (87.2)	19 (12.8)

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

Table 5. One-year non-progression probability matrix of anti-viral and anti-inflammatory treatment

	Non-progression	Progression
Entire study group (n = 10,501)	9,359 (89.1)	1,142 (10.9)
Patients with SVR or BR (n = 910)	874 (96.0)	36 (4.0)
Patients with NR or no interferon therapy (n = 9,590)	8,485 (88.5)	1,105 (11.5)
Patients without glycyrrhizin therapy (n = 1,637)	1,440 (88.0)	197 (12.0)
Patients with glycyrrhizin therapy (n = 913)	843 (92.3)	70 (7.7)

Figures in parentheses are percentages.

patients with NR or the patients without interferon therapy (8485/9590, 88.5%; $\chi^2 = 49.1$, $p < 0.0001$).

We also evaluated disease control rates according to glycyrrhizin injection therapy in the subgroups of patients who either failed or did not receive interferon therapy with a high ALT of 75 IU/l or more. Anti-inflammation therapy with glycyrrhizin injections significantly increased the disease control rates, as shown by the rate of 92.3% (843/913) in the patients who received glycyrrhizin injection therapy versus 88.0% (1,440/1,637) in the patients without glycyrrhizin therapy ($\chi^2 = 11.9$, $p < 0.0001$; table 5).

Discussion

Based on our epidemiological data obtained from long-term observations of patients with chronic hepatitis [34] and patients with cirrhosis [35], we found that the life expectancy of patients with HCV-related liver cirrhosis heavily depends on the development of HCC. The probability of patients with HCV-related liver cirrhosis eventually developing HCC is staggeringly high at 75% [35]. In the present study, interferon administration significantly decreased the probability for transition from liver cirrhosis to HCC in the patients who achieved SVR or BR. However, there were some background varieties between the patients with SVR or BR and NR or no interferon therapy with respect to stage of fibrosis, sex, platelet count and age, which can affect the carcinogenesis rate.

From the standpoint of anti-inflammatory effects and cancer prevention [8–10, 13, 14, 19], interferon is effective in patients with chronic liver disease caused by HCV. Although the carcinogenesis rate is noticeably reduced when the ALT level becomes normal with or without HCV RNA eradication [10, 13, 14] after therapy, ALT levels become normal after interferon therapy in approximately half of the patients with a high viral load and group 1 HCV subtype. Furthermore, the anti-carcinogenic capacity of interferon has been demonstrated not only in patients with persistent ALT normalization, but also in patients with transient normalization of ALT for at least 6 or 12 months [20].

Many authors have already described that the activity of interferon in suppressing the development of HCC in patients with HCV RNA clearance (SVR) is similar to that in patients with ALT normalization in the absence of elimination of HCV RNA (BR) [13, 36–38]. Based on these compelling lines of evidence, the anti-carcinogenic activity of interferon is ascribed to the suppression of in-

flammatory and regenerative processes in hepatocytes. Moreno and Muriel [39] reported that interferon reverses liver fibrosis and, therefore, control of the necro-inflammatory process can suppress the growth of HCC.

An SVR improves clinical symptoms in decompensated cirrhosis [40], but interferon often induces severe complications, even in young patients with decompensated cirrhosis [41]. A patient with compensated cirrhosis can be a candidate for interferon therapy if careful, close hematologic monitoring is performed.

Because patients with liver cirrhosis generally experience some difficulties with interferon treatment, our present study demonstrated practical information about carcinogenesis and the life expectancy of patients with HCV-related liver cirrhosis and the order of priority in the management of interferon for these patients. Interferon administration is considered and initiated in patients with HCV-related liver cirrhosis preferably to reduce the probability for the transition from liver cirrhosis to HCC.

Because carcinogenesis is not a single-step event, but rather a complex, multi-step process, the exact mechanism of the role of glycyrrhizin in suppressing liver carcinogenesis remains unknown. One of the principal functions of long-term administration of glycyrrhizin in decreasing the carcinogenesis rate is considered to be anti-inflammation, which blocks the active carcinogenic process of continuous hepatic necro-inflammation and cell damage. In the treated group of the present study, the median ALT values markedly decreased after initiation of the glycyrrhizin injections, suggesting that the pathological process of hepatocyte necrosis or apoptosis was significantly suppressed by glycyrrhizinic acid. The actions of the amino acids, glycine and cysteine contained in SNMC have not been completely explained, but these substances have been demonstrated to suppress increased aldosterone levels that are induced by glycyrrhizinic acid. Tarao et al. [42] reported that a high ALT level resulted in an increased HCC recurrence rate in patients with HCC. From the standpoint of these anti-inflammatory activities, SNMC may be considered to only postpone the time of HCC appearance in the clinical course of cirrhosis. Since the entire process of hepatocellular carcinogenesis from the initial transformation of a hepatocyte to a detectable growth of cancer is considered to take at least several years, the influence of glycyrrhizin on the carcinogenesis rate cannot be evaluated over a short period.

Because the data in the present study were obtained from a retrospective cohort analysis, glycyrrhizin doses, times of injection per week and duration of therapy varied in each patient in the treated group. In order to elucidate the cancer preventive effect of glycyrrhizin therapy in active HCV-related liver disease, we should further stratify the treated patients or perform much more detailed statistical procedures. Future studies should aim at defining the basic oncogenic mechanisms and roles of long-term administration of glycyrrhizin in carcinogenesis in chronic hepatitis patients with cirrhosis caused by HCV.

In conclusion, the results of the present study demonstrated that long-term intermittent glycyrrhizin (SNMC) therapy for a few years or more successfully reduced disease progression probability (progression to carcinogenesis plus progression to death) in patients with HCV-related cirrhosis. A randomized controlled trial with a larger number of cases, with or without glycyrrhizin therapy, is expected to confirm the effectiveness of this therapy.

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