Occult Hepatitis B Virus Infection: A Hidden Menace?

Recovery from an acute hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection is associated with loss of HBV DNA from serum, hepatitis B e antigen seroconversion, hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) seroconversion, and normalization of serum aminotransferases. These changes generally imply clearance of virus, but clinical observations have shown that reactivation of HBV infection can occur either spontaneously or after immunosuppression. Recent studies showed that immune response to HBV remains vigorous long after an acute infection. In addition, HBV DNA can be detected by polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assays in serum, liver, and peripheral blood mononuclear cells more than a decade after an apparent recovery from HBV infection. These findings suggest that recovery from acute hepatitis B may not result in complete virus elimination, but rather the immune system keeps the virus at very low levels. There is, however, no clear evidence that patients who have persistently low levels of HBV after recovery from acute hepatitis B develop progressive liver disease.

The availability of PCR assays for HBV DNA allows the detection of 10^3 copies/mL compared with 10^9 copies/mL using hybridization assays. Using PCR assays, HBV DNA has been detected in some subjects who are HBsAg negative including those with no serologic markers of HBV infection. In this issue of the HEPATOLOGY, Bréchot et al. review the prevalence, virologic basis, and clinical significance of occult HBV infection. For the clinician, several issues regarding occult HBV infection are pertinent: Does it exist? How common is it? What is the risk of transmission? What is the risk of progressive liver disease? How can it be diagnosed? Is antiviral therapy indicated? Before these issues can be addressed, it must be recognized that there is currently no standardized definition or diagnostic criteria of occult HBV infection. A simple definition would be the detection of HBV DNA in HBsAg-negative subjects. However, more specific information must be provided, as occult HBV infection is a heterogeneous clinical entity.

Bréchot et al. provide very strong evidence that occult HBV infection exists and that most cases are related to very low levels of HBV rather than to HBV mutants that do not express or produce aberrant surface proteins and therefore are undetected by standard testing. Because HBV-DNA detection is the key to diagnosis of occult HBV infection, the type of assay used and its sensitivity must be specified. The sensitivity of PCR assays for HBV DNA in studies on occult HBV infection varies from 10^1 to 10^3 copies/mL. However, most PCR assays including commercially available assays are not standardized. Other factors that may affect the detection rates of HBV DNA include the volume of sample used and the material tested. Thus, the limit of detection can be increased by using a larger volume of serum as in the case of the hybrid capture assay. Most studies on occult HBV infection have reported higher rates of HBV-DNA detection in liver or peripheral blood mononuclear cells compared with serum or plasma. In addition, snap-frozen liver tissue has a higher rate of HBV-DNA detection than paraffin-embedded liver tissue. More importantly, specificity and reproducibility of assay results must be ensured. This requires meticulous steps to prevent contamination of samples, inclusion of negative controls, and performance of assays in duplicate using two independent sets of HBV primers.

Occult HBV infection should also be reported in the context of other HBV serology markers. Broadly, individuals should be classified as being seropositive or seronegative. “Seropositive” subjects are positive for antibodies to hepatitis B core antigen (anti-HBc) and can be further divided into 2 subgroups: with and without anti-HBs. “Seronegative” subjects are negative for both anti-HBc and anti-HBs. As indicated in the review by Bréchot et al., the HBV-DNA detection rate is highest in subjects who are anti-HBc positive/anti-HBs negative; some of these individuals probably have low-level HBV infection with subdetectable HBsAg. The HBV-DNA detection rate is intermediate in subjects who are positive for both anti-HBc and anti-HBs. These individuals may have recovered from previous infection but may have persistent low levels of HBV. The HBV-DNA detection rate is lowest in seronegative subjects. These individuals have recovered from previous infection but lost all serologic markers of HBV infection. Rarely, they may be infected with HBV mutants that do not express HBV serologic markers.

Geographic differences in the prevalence of occult HBV infection are most likely related to the endemicity of HBV infection. Thus, occult HBV infection is most commonly reported in high endemic areas where 70% to 90% of the population have been exposed to HBV and infrequently reported in low endemic areas where 5% to 20% of the population had prior infection with HBV. The prevalence of occult HBV infection also depends on the population studied, being more common in patients with chronic liver disease and less common among healthy blood or organ donors. Patients with fulminant hepatitis B may be misdiagnosed as occult HBV infection because of rapid virus clearance with undetectable HBsAg at the time of presentation.

Transmission of HBV infection has been documented from HBsAg-negative, anti-HBc-positive blood and organ donors. The risk is variable (0.4%-90%) and is highest when donors...
from anti-HBc–positive donors are transplanted to seronegative recipients. The possibility of HBV transmission from HBsAg-negative donors raises several questions: Should blood/organ donors be screened for anti-HBc? Should blood/organisms from HBsAg-negative, anti-HBc–positive donors be used? Would PCR testing for HBV DNA differentiate infectious from noninfectious donors? In the United States, blood and organ donors are routinely screened for anti-HBc. In general, blood and organs from HBsAg-negative, anti-HBc–positive donors are not used. The shortage of donor organs has led to a widespread practice of transplanting organs from anti-HBc–positive donors to HBsAg-positive recipients. The transplantation of such organs (especially livers) to HBsAg-negative recipients has been reported to result in de novo HBV infection.14,17 Additional testing for HBV DNA by PCR in the setting of solid organ transplantation is logistically difficult and several studies found that PCR testing of donor blood is not sensitive enough to identify donors who are infectious.17,18 Thus, use of organs from anti-HBc–positive donors in HBsAg-negative recipients in the United States should be restricted to dire emergencies only. However, anti-HBc screening and exclusion of anti-HBc–positive donors is impractical in countries where HBV infection is prevalent and greater than 20% of the population are anti-HBc positive. Whether anti-HBc screening and direction of organs from anti-HBc–positive donors to seropositive recipients should be implemented deserves careful study. The risk of transmission of HBV infection from seronegative individuals has not been well studied. Although there have been case reports of such transmission, the overall risk is likely to be negligible and does not warrant routine screening of seronegative blood/organ donors for HBV DNA.

Occult HBV infection is usually associated with very low levels of HBV DNA. A key question is whether the presence of small amounts of HBV will lead to progressive liver disease. Available data suggest that the likelihood is extremely low although definitive data are lacking. Among patients with persistent low levels of HBV DNA after apparent recovery from acute hepatitis B, there is no evidence that they have increased risks of cirrhosis or hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC). Cirrhosis and HCC have been reported in patients with seropositive occult HBV infection, but it is not clear if the cirrhosis or HCC is a result of persistent low levels of HBV or other causes of liver disease. In patients with other etiologies of chronic liver disease such as alcoholism and hepatitis C virus infection, HBV may be a bystander or a cofactor in the pathogenesis of liver disease. Other patients may have chronic HBV infection for decades leading to liver damage but HBsAg is no longer detectable when cirrhosis or HCC is diagnosed.19–21 The role of occult HBV infection in the etiology of liver disease in seronegative individuals is less clear. Data are scanty and based on case reports or case series. Thorough evaluation for other causes of liver disease and duplicate testing for HBV DNA under stringent conditions must be performed. At the recent National Institutes of Health Conference on Hepatitis B, an arbitrary HBV DNA level of 10^3 copies/mL was chosen as a diagnostic criterion for chronic hepatitis B and an indication for antiviral therapy.22 However, more studies using standardized assays are needed to determine if a threshold HBV-DNA level exists for pathogenicity of liver disease and to define this level.

When should occult HBV infection be considered? In patients with cryptogenic acute or chronic liver disease, it is not unreasonable to test for HBV DNA particularly in anti-HBc–positive individuals but routine testing of seronegative individuals is not necessary. HBV-DNA testing is also not recommended in HBsAg-negative patients with other identifiable etiologies of liver disease. An exception may be in patients who are hepatitis C antibody positive but hepatitis C virus RNA negative on repeat testing. HBV-DNA testing should be performed on anti-HBc–positive donors regardless of amino-transferase levels if their blood or organs may be used. However, the logistics of obtaining reliable results in a timely manner are difficult and a negative test result has a very low accuracy in predicting infectivity. Thus, blood or organs from anti-HBc–positive donors should in general be used in HBsAg-positive or seropositive recipients only. Based on the limited data available, universal screening for HBV DNA among seronegative donors is not warranted.

There are no data on the use of antiviral treatment in patients with occult HBV infection. Intuitively, the benefit is anticipated to be low as the vast majority of patients with occult HBV infection have very low levels (~10^3 copies/mL) of HBV DNA, which may not be sufficient to cause progressive liver disease. However, the threshold level of HBV DNA that causes liver disease has not been defined and may be different in different clinical situations. Thus, patients with active liver disease and no other identified etiology should have HBV DNA levels monitored. Antiviral treatment may be considered in the context of clinical trials in patients with HBV DNA levels that are persistently or intermittently above 10^3 copies/mL.

In summary, we agree with Bréchot et al. that occult HBV infection exists and, in most instances, is associated with very low levels of HBV rather than HBV mutants. We propose that occult HBV infection be defined as the detection of HBV DNA by PCR or other amplification assays in HBsAg-negative individuals. The prevalence of occult HBV infection is unclear but appears to be more common in endemic areas and among seropositive individuals (anti-HBc positive with or without anti-HBs). There is, as yet, no proof that occult HBV infection exists in individuals with anti-HBs only. Standardized definition and diagnostic criteria of occult HBV infection are needed for future research to determine the prevalence and clinical significance of occult HBV infection and the role of antiviral therapy. Reports of occult HBV infection should specify the type and sensitivity of HBV-DNA assay, the material used for detection of HBV DNA, the HBV serology profile, and the presence or absence of liver disease as determined biochemically and/or histologically.

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