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**Chronic hepatitis B and metabolic risk factors: A call for rigorous longitudinal studies**

Seto WK. Chronic HBV and metabolic risk factors

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**Abstract**

Long-term nucleos(t)ide analogue therapy in chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection is effective in suppressing viral replication and reducing liver-related complications. However, HBV-related liver events can still occur in different patient sub-groups. There is emerging evidence that, similar to chronic hepatitis C virus infection, metabolic risk factors may play a role in the disease process of chronic HBV. While the mechanistic nature of metabolic-HBV interaction remains uncertain, studies in different HBV-infected populations have demonstrated hepatic steatosis, increased body-mass index, diabetes, or a combination of different metabolic risk factors are associated with an increased risk of hepatocellular carcinoma and cirrhosis. The impact of metabolic risk factors is especially prominent in patients with quiscent virological activity, including on-treated patients with effective viral suppression. As the proportion of on-treated chronic HBV patients increases worldwide, longitudinal studies determining the relative risks of different metabolic parameters with respect to clinical outcomes are needed. Future studies should also determine if metabolic-directed interventions can improve disease outcomes in chronic HBV.

**Key words:** Hepatitis B virus; Diabetes; Obesity; Steatosis; Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease; Body-mass index

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**Core tip:** Metabolic risk factors, including hepatic steatosis, increased body-mass index and diabetes, may be associated with worsened disease outcomes and reduced treatment response in chronic hepatitis B. Their effect may be most pronounced in patients with quiscent viral activity, including patients on long-term nucleos(t)ide analogue therapy.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Affecting 248 million individuals worldwide, chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) infection is a leading cause of liver-related morbidity and mortality[[1](#_ENREF_1)]. Current nucleos(t)ide analogues, when taken long-term, can effectively suppress viral replication, improve liver histology, and reduce liver-related complications[[2](#_ENREF_2)]. Yet nucleos(t)ide analogue therapy is never a “magic bullet” that can eliminate and prevent all HBV-related complications, with the benefit of therapy mitigated in certain patient sub-groups. For example, in an Asian population-based study, nucleoside analogue failed to significantly reduce liver cancer incidence in elderly chronic HBV patients[[3](#_ENREF_3)].

Metabolic parameters have been demonstrated to play a prominent role in the disease course of chronic hepatitis C virus infection[[4](#_ENREF_4)]. The interaction of metabolic factors with chronic HBV has been less extensively studied. Now, there is emerging evidence on how metabolic risk factors may influence the natural history and treatment response of chronic HBV (Figure 1), and these will be described in detail in this editorial.

**HEPATIC STEATOSIS**

The impact of liver fat on the disease course of HBV is controversial. There are studies indicating steatosis may actually be protective. A cohort study from Taiwan involving 83339 participants showed hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg)-positive patients, when compared to HBsAg-negative individuals, to have a lower risk of non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) development[[5](#_ENREF_5)]. Another study demonstrated treatment-naïve chronic HBV patient with co-existing NAFLD, after adjusting for potential confounders, had significantly lower serum HBV DNA levels when compared to chronic HBV without steatosis[[6](#_ENREF_6)].

Paradoxically, there is evidence showing co-existing hepatic steatosis may contribute to the disease process of chronic HBV. A study employed the noninvasive quantification of steatosis using controlled attenuation parameter (CAP) measurements, with standardized cut-off values used to categorize steatosis severity[[7](#_ENREF_7)]. Severe steatosis (CAP ≥ 280 dB/m) was found to be independently associated with increased liver fibrosis in both treatment-naïve patients and on-treatment patients achieving long-term virological suppression. The results suggest that even during quiescent viral activity, fibrogenesis can still develop in the presence of hepatic steatosis[[8](#_ENREF_8)].

The above findings will require longitudinal validation in the clinical setting, as well as mechanistic studies to determine for any HBV-steatosis interaction. Nonetheless, the management implications can be potentially huge since both chronic HBV and NAFLD are common diseases. In Asia, the prevalence of NAFLD is greater than 30%[[9](#_ENREF_9)], while more than a quarter of chronic HBV patients have concomitant NAFLD[[10](#_ENREF_10)].

**OBESITY**

An increased body-mass index (BMI) has been demonstrated to worsen the disease outcome of chronic HBV. In a population-based study involving 2903 HBsAg-positive men, after a mean follow-up of 14.7 years, obesity (BMI ≥ 30 kg/m2) was associated with increased risk of both hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) and liver-related mortality[[11](#_ENREF_11)]. Obesity also diminishes treatment response by lessening fibrosis regression during long-term nucleos(t)ide analogue therapy. In a study with paired liver biopsies over a course of 5 years, increased BMI (≥ 25 kg/m2) in HBV-infected patients of majority European descent, when compared to patients with normal BMI, was associated with persistent severe fibrosis or cirrhosis during treatment[[2](#_ENREF_2)]. Results were also similar in another study involving Asian on-treatment patients with paired transient elastography over a median duration of 87.5 mo[[12](#_ENREF_12)].

Obesity is associated with adipokine dysregulation, including a reduced adiponectin and increased leptin production, which leads to enhanced liver fibrogenesis[[13](#_ENREF_13)]. However, it remains uncertain if this adipokine dysfunction has any mechanistic interaction with HBV. With the prevalence of obesity in HBV-endemic regions increasing[[14](#_ENREF_14)], studies specifically concentrating on the obese HBV population will be needed.

**DIABETES MELLITUS**

Diabetes has a synergistic impact on the disease course of chronic HBV. While the exact mechanism remains unclear, hyperglycemia activates oxidative stress[[15](#_ENREF_15)], which can be linked with the severity of liver disease in chronic HBV infection[[16](#_ENREF_16)]. Diabetic chronic HBV patients, when compared to non-diabetic patients, have an increased chance of alanine aminotransferase (ALT) elevation and liver damage[[17](#_ENREF_17)]. Diabetes also increases the risk of HBV-related cirrhotic decompensation[[18](#_ENREF_18)] and liver-related mortality[[19](#_ENREF_19)].

Large-population cohort studies have further established the association of diabetes with liver-related clinical outcomes. A cohort study involving 23,820 Taiwan residents and a mean follow-up duration of 14 years found diabetes independently increasing the risk of HCC in HBsAg-positive individuals[[20](#_ENREF_20)]. In addition, in a recent study involving 512,891 Chinese adults (both HBsAg-positive and -negative) with a median follow-up duration of 10.1 years, the presence of diabetes significantly increased the risk of HCC and cirrhosis (adjusted hazards ratio 1.49 and 1.87 respectively). In addition, in patients without previously diagnosed diabetes, an increase of plasma glucose levels by 1 mmol/L, even in the non-diabetic range, significantly increased the probability of HCC and cirrhosis (adjusted hazards ratio 1.04 and 1.07 respectively)[[21](#_ENREF_21)].

**METABOLIC RISK FACTORS IN COMBINATION**

The combination of different metabolic risk factors in HBV-infected patients can increase the risk of liver-related events. Metabolic syndrome, which is a combination of increased waist circumference or obesity with the presence of different metabolic risk factors (hyperglycemia, hyperlipidemia, hypertriglyceridemia or hypertension) is a known risk factor for the development of HBV-related fibrosis progression[[22](#_ENREF_22)]. More recently, a Taiwanese study followed up 1690 men with chronic HBV infection for a median duration of 19 years. Having 3 or more metabolic risk factors (including diabetes, obesity, hypertriglyceridemia, hypercholesterolemia or hypertension) increased the risk of HCC and liver-related death (hazards ratio 2.32 and 2.72 respectively). Notably, in patients with available virological data, the risk of HCC among patients with 3 or more metabolic risk factors was especially accentuated when serum HBV DNA was less than 2000 IU/mL (hazards ratio 14.38)[[23](#_ENREF_23)].

**CONCLUSION**

***HBV and metabolic risk factors: Partners in crime?***

Despite the emerging evidence of metabolic risk factors being associated with HBV-related outcomes, one fundamental question remains unanswered: are HBV and metabolic-related liver injury synergistic of each other, or simply two unrelated and different disease processes? Mechanistic studies to investigate their interaction are technically difficult, mainly due to the limitations of current HBV animal models which are unable to support the full HBV life cycle, restricting the study of host-viral interactions[[24](#_ENREF_24)].

Nonetheless, the more important clinical question will be the magnitude of impact of different metabolic risk factors on HBV-related clinical outcomes. From available evidence, this impact is especially prominent in quiescent HBV disease[[8](#_ENREF_8),[12](#_ENREF_12),[23](#_ENREF_23)], either in treatment-naïve patients with intrinsically low HBV DNA levels or in nucleos(t)ide analogue-treated patients with effective virological suppression. The proportion of patients receiving long-term treatment is increasing worldwide[[25](#_ENREF_25)], while at the same time, the HBV patient cohort is ageing, implicating the concomitant presence of metabolic risk factors will increase. All these suggest the metabolic impact on the disease course of HBV will become more and more predominant. Finally, well-designed longitudinal studies will be needed to define if interventions directed at metabolic risk factors *e.g.*, glycemic control in diabetes or weight loss, can improve HBV-related outcomes. Clinical data on this metabolic-HBV interaction will prove useful if we are to meet the World Health Organization’s objective in removing HBV as a public health threat by 2030.

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**Figure 1 Potential association of metabolic risk factor with the natural history and treatment response of chronic hepatitis B virus infection.** HBV: Hepatitis B virus.