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Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 16 June 6, 2021

REVIEW

3796 COVID-19 and the digestive system: A comprehensive review Wang MK, Yue HY, Cai J, Zhai YJ, Peng JH, Hui JF, Hou DY, Li WP, Yang JS

MINIREVIEWS

- 3814 COVID-19 impact on the liver Baroiu L, Dumitru C, Iancu A, Leșe AC, Drăgănescu M, Baroiu N, Anghel L
- 3826 Xenogeneic stem cell transplantation: Research progress and clinical prospects Jiang LL, Li H, Liu L

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Case Control Study

3838 Histopathological classification and follow-up analysis of chronic atrophic gastritis Wang YK, Shen L, Yun T, Yang BF, Zhu CY, Wang SN

Retrospective Study

- Effectiveness of sharp recanalization of superior vena cava-right atrium junction occlusion 3848 Wu XW, Zhao XY, Li X, Li JX, Liu ZY, Huang Z, Zhang L, Sima CY, Huang Y, Chen L, Zhou S
- 3858 Management and outcomes of surgical patients with intestinal Behçet's disease and Crohn's disease in southwest China

Zeng L, Meng WJ, Wen ZH, Chen YL, Wang YF, Tang CW

Clinical and radiological outcomes of dynamic cervical implant arthroplasty: A 5-year follow-up 3869 Zou L, Rong X, Liu XJ, Liu H

Observational Study

3880 Differential analysis revealing APOC1 to be a diagnostic and prognostic marker for liver metastases of colorectal cancer

Shen HY, Wei FZ, Liu Q

Randomized Clinical Trial

Comparison of white-light endoscopy, optical-enhanced and acetic-acid magnifying endoscopy for 3895 detecting gastric intestinal metaplasia: A randomized trial

Song YH, Xu LD, Xing MX, Li KK, Xiao XG, Zhang Y, Li L, Xiao YJ, Qu YL, Wu HL



World Journal of Clinical Cases

Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 16 June 6, 2021

	CASE REPORT	
3908	Snapping wrist due to bony prominence and tenosynovitis of the first extensor compartment: A case report	
	Hu CJ, Chow PC, Tzeng IS	
3914	Massive retroperitoneal hematoma as an acute complication of retrograde intrarenal surgery: A case report	
	Choi T, Choi J, Min GE, Lee DG	
3919	Internal fixation and unicompartmental knee arthroplasty for an elderly patient with patellar fracture and anteromedial osteoarthritis: A case report	
	Nan SK, Li HF, Zhang D, Lin JN, Hou LS	
3927	Haemangiomas in the urinary bladder: Two case reports	
	Zhao GC, Ke CX	
3936	Endoscopic diagnosis and treatment of an appendiceal mucocele: A case report	
	Wang TT, He JJ, Zhou PH, Chen WW, Chen CW, Liu J	
3943	Diagnosis and spontaneous healing of asymptomatic renal allograft extra-renal pseudo-aneurysm: A case report	
	Xu RF, He EH, Yi ZX, Li L, Lin J, Qian LX	
3951	Rehabilitation and pharmacotherapy of neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorder: A case report	
	Wang XJ, Xia P, Yang T, Cheng K, Chen AL, Li XP	
3960	Undifferentiated intimal sarcoma of the pulmonary artery: A case report	
	Li X, Hong L, Huo XY	
3966	Chest pain in a heart transplant recipient: A case report	
	Chen YJ, Tsai CS, Huang TW	
3971	Successful management of therapy-refractory pseudoachalasia after Ivor Lewis esophagectomy by bypassing colonic pull-up: A case report	
	Flemming S, Lock JF, Hankir M, Reimer S, Petritsch B, Germer CT, Seyfried F	
3979	Old unreduced obturator dislocation of the hip: A case report	
	Li WZ, Wang JJ, Ni JD, Song DY, Ding ML, Huang J, He GX	
3988	Laterally spreading tumor-like primary rectal mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue lymphoma: A case report	
	Wei YL, Min CC, Ren LL, Xu S, Chen YQ, Zhang Q, Zhao WJ, Zhang CP, Yin XY	
3996	Coronary artery aneurysm combined with myocardial bridge: A case report	
	Ye Z, Dong XF, Yan YM, Luo YK	
4001	Thoracoscopic diagnosis of traumatic pericardial rupture with cardiac hernia: A case report	
	Wu YY, He ZL, Lu ZY	



World Journal of Clinical Cases		
Conte	nts Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 16 June 6, 2021	
4007	Delayed diagnosis and comprehensive treatment of cutaneous tuberculosis: A case report	
	Gao LJ, Huang ZH, Jin QY, Zhang GY, Gao MX, Qian JY, Zhu SX, Yu Y	
4016	Rapidly progressing primary pulmonary lymphoma masquerading as lung infectious disease: A case report and review of the literature	
	Jiang JH, Zhang CL, Wu QL, Liu YH, Wang XQ, Wang XL, Fang BM	
4024	Asymptomatic carbon dioxide embolism during transoral vestibular thyroidectomy: A case report	
	Tang JX, Wang L, Nian WQ, Tang WY, Xiao JY, Tang XX, Liu HL	
4032	Transient immune hepatitis as post-coronavirus disease complication: A case report	
	Drăgănescu AC, Săndulescu O, Bilașco A, Kouris C, Streinu-Cercel A, Luminos M, Streinu-Cercel A	
4040	Acute inferior myocardial infarction in a young man with testicular seminoma: A case report	
4040	Scafa-Udriste A, Popa-Fotea NM, Bataila V, Calmac L, Dorobantu M	
	Scuju Surisie I., Fopu Foicu I.M., Bulunu F, Cumue E, Dorobunu M	
4046	Asymptomatic traumatic rupture of an intracranial dermoid cyst: A case report	
	Zhang MH, Feng Q, Zhu HL, Lu H, Ding ZX, Feng B	
4052	Parotid mammary analogue secretory carcinoma: A case report and review of literature	
	Min FH, Li J, Tao BQ, Liu HM, Yang ZJ, Chang L, Li YY, Liu YK, Qin YW, Liu WW	
4062	Liver injury associated with the use of selective androgen receptor modulators and post-cycle therapy: Two case reports and literature review	
	Koller T, Vrbova P, Meciarova I, Molcan P, Smitka M, Adamcova Selcanova S, Skladany L	
4072	Spinal epidural abscess due to coinfection of bacteria and tuberculosis: A case report	
	Kim C, Lee S, Kim J	
4081	Rare complication of inflammatory bowel disease-like colitis from glycogen storage disease type 1b and its surgical management: A case report	
	Lui FCW, Lo OSH	
4090	Thymosin as a possible therapeutic drug for COVID-19: A case report	
	Zheng QN, Xu MY, Gan FM, Ye SS, Zhao H	
4095	Arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy characterized by recurrent syncope during exercise: A case report	
	Wu HY, Cao YW, Gao TJ, Fu JL, Liang L	
4104	Delayed pseudoaneurysm formation of the carotid artery following the oral cavity injury in a child: A case report	
	Chung BH, Lee MR, Yang JD, Yu HC, Hong YT, Hwang HP	
4110	Atezolizumab-induced anaphylactic shock in a patient with hepatocellular carcinoma undergoing immunotherapy: A case report	
	Bian LF, Zheng C, Shi XL	

Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 9 Number 16 June 6, 2021

ABOUT COVER

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CASE REPORT

Thymosin as a possible therapeutic drug for COVID-19: A case report

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Author contributions: Zheng QN and Zhao H reviewed the literature and drafted the manuscript; Ye SS drafted all figures; Zheng QN, Xu MY, and Gan FM treated the patient and participated in collecting the data; Zhao H guided the treatment; all authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

There are no effective antiviral therapies for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) at present. Although most patients with COVID-19 have a mild or moderate course of disease, up to 5%-10% of patients may have a serious and potentially life-threatening condition, indicating an urgent need for effective therapeutic drugs. The therapeutic effect of thymosin on COVID-19 has not been previously studied. In this paper, for the first time we report a case of thymosin treatment of COVID-19.

CASE SUMMARY

A 51-year-old man with imported COVID-19 was admitted with definite symptoms of chest tightness, chest pain, and fatigue. The polymerase chain reaction results for severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 were negative. The antibody test was positive, confirming the diagnosis of COVID-19. As many orally administered drugs were not well tolerated due to gastrointestinal symptoms, an emergency use of thymosin, a polypeptide consisting of 28 amino acids, was administered by injection. Finally, after the implementation of the treatment program, symptoms and lung imaging improved significantly.

CONCLUSION

In this case report, it is confirmed that thymosin may help alleviate the severity of COVID-19 symptoms.

Key Words: COVID-19; Thymosin; SARS-CoV-2; Treatment; Therapeutic drug; Case report

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Core Tip: A 51-year-old Chinese man returned from Russia to Yueqing Hospital Affiliated to Wenzhou Medical University on April 27, 2020. He had 2-wk symptoms of chest pain, chest tightness, fatigue, and conscious fever. Oxygen inhalation was given and thymosin was injected twice a week, at 1.6 mg per injection. The patient was successfully treated and discharged after 15 d in the hospital.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak in China in December 2019, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has spread worldwide[1]. The numbers of infections and deaths have increased significantly^[2]. Although there are many reports on the treatment of COVID-19, it is clear that currently no specific drugs are available to treat COVID-19 infection[3]. Thus, new treatment strategies for COVID-19 are urgently needed to be developed. Research confirms that COVID-19 is a human-to-human transmission caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)[4]. Similar to other virally infectious diseases, the immune function plays a decisive role in the consequences of viral infection. The prognosis of the elderly and immunocomp-romised patients is therefore often poor[5]. Thymosin, a polypeptide consisting of 28 amino acids, can effectively regulate the body's immunity by inducing the differentiation and maturation of T cells and enhancing the production of cytokines and B cell antibody responses, resulting in enhanced immunity in patients[6]. At the time of this writing, no thymosin-like treatment of COVID-19 has been reported. Herein, we report a clinical case of COVID-19, and introduce the effect of thymosin on the symptoms, imaging, and prognosis of a COVID-19 patient. It is hoped that this report can enrich our understanding of the current treatments for COVID-19 and explore the therapeutic potential of thymosin for patients with COVID-19.

CASE PRESENTATION

Chief complaints

A 51-year-old male patient had 2-wk symptoms of chest pain, chest tightness, fatigue, and conscious fever.

History of present illness

On April 13, 2020, the patient developed chest pain, chest tightness, fatigue, and conscious fever, and was not treated in Russia. On April 27, 2020, he was admitted to Yueqing Hospital Affiliated to Wenzhou Medical University for treatment.

History of past illness

The patient had no history of hypertension, diabetes, or other systemic diseases.

Personal and family history

The patient had no history of smoking or underlying lung disease or any other risk factors. His family members were healthy.

Physical examination

Physical examination showed that a body temperature of 37.9 °C, blood pressure of 132/87 mmHg, pulse of 94 beats per minute, respiration of 20 breaths per minute, and SPO₂ of 94%. Moist rales were heard in the right lung.

Laboratory examinations

The results showed a white blood cell count of 4.6×10^9 cells/L (reference range: 4.0-



 10.0×10^9 cells/L). Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) for SARS-CoV-2 was negative. The IgM antibodies for common pathogens such as influenza A, influenza B, adenovirus, respiratory syncytial virus, parainfluenza, Mycoplasma pneumoniae, and Chlamydia pneumoniae were all negative. SARS-CoV-2-specific IgM and IgG antibodies (the results of the kit produced by Xiamen Innodx Biotech Co., Ltd., China) were immediately detected and the results were all positive.

Imaging examinations

On April 28, chest computed tomography (CT) showed multiple patchy shadows and ground glass shadows in both lungs (Figure 1A). On May 1, chest CT showed obvious absorption of both lungs lesions (Figure 1B). On May 11, reexamination of chest CT showed that the lesions in both lungs were absorbed (Figure 1C).

FINAL DIAGNOSIS

The final diagnosis was COVID-19.

TREATMENT

The patient was then sent to the air isolation ward for clinical observation and immediately given an oxygen therapy. The patient was also treated with arbidol and lopinavir-ritonavir, but due to obvious nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, the drug treatments were halted. On April 28, thymosin was subcutaneously injected twice a week, at 1.6 mg per injection.

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

At the follow-up one month after discharge, the patient showed no discomfort, and the chest CT lesions were completely absorbed.

DISCUSSION

In this case, although the RT-PCR results were negative for SARS-CoV-2, the specific IgM and IgG antibodies for SARS-CoV-2 were all positive, indicating a clear diagnosis of COVID-19[7]. The patient was initially treated with arbidol and lopinavir-ritonavir, but because of severe nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea, the treatment was switched to thymosin injection, which was the only medicine. To date, the pathogenesis of COVID-19 is not clearly understood and there are no effective drug treatments available for the disease. Although various therapeutic drugs have been reported, their biological effects are non-specific. Thymosin, as an immune enhancer, has a therapeutic potential for the treatment of infections and immunocompromised diseases such as cancer[6,8,9]. Thymosin is a hormone with 28 amino acids naturally secreted by the thymus. It has a variety of immunomodulatory activities. It can activate Toll-like receptors in dendritic cells and other immune cells, thus enhancing the function of Thelper 1 cells, natural killer cell activity, and antibody response to T-cell-dependent antigen[10,11]. Thymosin has been used in China for the treatment of viral hepatitis for more than two decades[12]. The reason may be that thymosin can promote T lymphocyte responses and function involved in the host antiviral defenses. We report here an effective case of thymosin injection for the treatment of COVID-19 when other available antiviral drugs could not be tolerated. However, further studies are still needed to explain the exact efficacy and mechanism of thymosin on COVID-19. We summarize the patient's course of therapy schedule (Figure 2). The symptoms of chest tightness, chest pain, and fatigue gradually improved under the action of thymosin alone. Thymosin therapy may also increase the survival rate of sepsis and reduce the bacterial load in a sepsis model as reported by King and Tuthill^[13]. Although there are no large-scale studies, considering the encouraging result and the proven safety for human use, we believe that thymosin may be a feasible therapeutic drug against COVID-19 and warrants further investigation. Clinical trials can verify the role of thymosin in alleviating the symptoms of COVID-19 and shortening the course of



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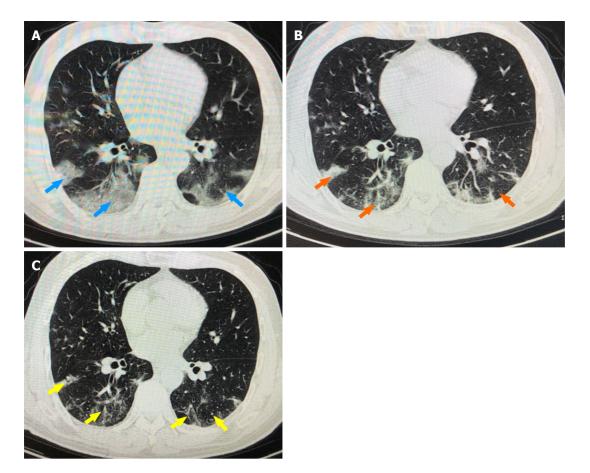


Figure 1 Chest computed tomography results of the coronavirus disease 2019 patient. A: Computed tomography (CT) of the chest on April 28. Blue arrows show multiple patchy shadows and ground glass shadows in both lungs; B: CT of the chest on May 1. Orange arrows show obvious absorption of the lesions in both lungs; C: CT of the chest on May 11. Yellow arrows show that the lesions in both lungs were absorbed.

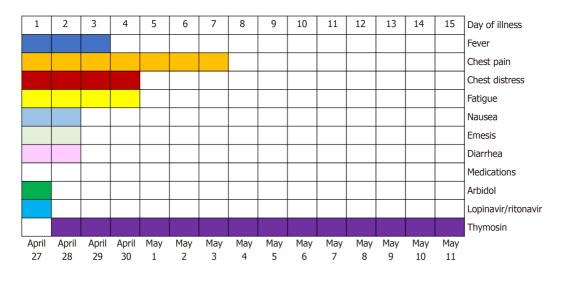


Figure 2 Symptoms and treatments of the patient outlined accordingly to days post symptom onset since April 27, 2020.

treatment in a large cohort.

CONCLUSION

Relieving symptoms, safeness, and effectiveness make thymosin a potentially ideal choice for the treatment of COVID-19. Although we had only one case, as described here, the significant effect in alleviating symptoms of COVID-19 demonstrates the



potential therapeutic effect of this naturally derived compound.

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