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World J Clin Cases 2021 September 16; 9(26): 7614-7962



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INDEXING/ABSTRACTING

The *WJCC* is now indexed in Science Citation Index Expanded (also known as SciSearch®), Journal Citation Reports/Science Edition, Scopus, PubMed, and PubMed Central. The 2021 Edition of Journal Citation Reports® cites the 2020 impact factor (IF) for *WJCC* as 1.337; IF without journal self cites: 1.301; 5-year IF: 1.742; Journal Citation Indicator: 0.33; Ranking: 119 among 169 journals in medicine, general and internal; and Quartile category: Q3. The *WJCC*'s CiteScore for 2020 is 0.8 and Scopus CiteScore rank 2020: General Medicine is 493/793.

RESPONSIBLE EDITORS FOR THIS ISSUE

Production Editor: Jia-Hui Li; Production Department Director: Yu-Jie Ma; Editorial Office Director: Jin-Lai Wang.

NAME OF JOURNAL

World Journal of Clinical Cases

ISSN

ISSN 2307-8960 (online)

LAUNCH DATE

April 16, 2013

FREQUENCY

Thrice Monthly

EDITORS-IN-CHIEF

Dennis A Bloomfield, Sandro Vento, Bao-Gan Peng

EDITORIAL BOARD MEMBERS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/2307-8960/editorialboard.htm>

PUBLICATION DATE

September 16, 2021

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INSTRUCTIONS TO AUTHORS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/204>

GUIDELINES FOR ETHICS DOCUMENTS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/GerInfo/287>

GUIDELINES FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/240>

PUBLICATION ETHICS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/GerInfo/288>

PUBLICATION MISCONDUCT

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/208>

ARTICLE PROCESSING CHARGE

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/gerinfo/242>

STEPS FOR SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS

<https://www.wjgnet.com/bpg/GerInfo/239>

ONLINE SUBMISSION

<https://www.f6publishing.com>

Chronic active Epstein-Barr virus infection treated with PEG-asparaginase: A case report

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Author contributions: Song DL and Chen LL took care of the patient; Song DL wrote this article; Wang JS and Wang Z guided article writing; all authors have read and approved the final version for submission.

Supported by National Natural Science Foundation of China, No. 81871633; Beijing Natural Science Foundation, No. 7181003; and Beijing Municipal Administration of Hospitals' Ascent Plan, No. DFL20180101.

Informed consent statement: Informed written consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this report and any accompanying images.

Conflict-of-interest statement: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

CARE Checklist (2016) statement: The authors have read the CARE Checklist (2016), and the manuscript was prepared and revised according to the CARE Checklist (2016).

Open-Access: This article is an

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Chronic active Epstein-Barr virus infection (EBV) is a systemic EBV-positive lymphoproliferative disease, which may lead to fatal illness. There is currently no standard treatment regimen for chronic active EBV (CAEBV), and hematopoietic stem cell transplantation is the only effective treatment. We here report a CAEBV patient treated with PEG-asparaginase, who achieved negative EBV-DNA.

CASE SUMMARY

A 33-year-old female Chinese patient who had fever for approximately 3 mo was admitted to our hospital in December 2017. EBV-DNA was positive with a high copy number. She was diagnosed with chronic active EB virus infection. PEG-asparaginase was administered at a dose of 1500 U/m² at a 14-d interval, resulting in eradication of EBV for more than 6 mo. The effect of PEG-asparaginase in this patient was excellent.

CONCLUSION

A chemotherapy regimen containing PEG-asparaginase for CAEBV may be further considered.

Key Words: Chronic active Epstein-Barr virus infection; PEG-asparaginase; Chemotherapy; L-asparaginase; Case report

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Core Tip: Chronic active Epstein-Barr virus (EBV) infection may lead to fatal diseases, including EBV-positive lymphoproliferative disorders, lymphomas, and hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis. We present a chronic active EBV (CAEBV) patient who was treated with PEG-asparaginase and achieved decreased load of EBV-DNA. PEG-

open-access article that was selected by an in-house editor and fully peer-reviewed by external reviewers. It is distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution NonCommercial (CC BY-NC 4.0) license, which permits others to distribute, remix, adapt, build upon this work non-commercially, and license their derivative works on different terms, provided the original work is properly cited and the use is non-commercial. See: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Manuscript source: Unsolicited manuscript

Specialty type: Hematology

Country/Territory of origin: China

Peer-review report's scientific quality classification

Grade A (Excellent): 0
Grade B (Very good): 0
Grade C (Good): C
Grade D (Fair): 0
Grade E (Poor): 0

Received: March 29, 2021

Peer-review started: March 29, 2021

First decision: April 28, 2021

Revised: May 8, 2021

Accepted: August 13, 2021

Article in press: August 13, 2021

Published online: September 16, 2021

P-Reviewer: Renzo ND

S-Editor: Liu M

L-Editor: A

P-Editor: Zhang YL



asparaginase requires further investigation as a chemotherapy drug for CAEBV to reduce the load of EBV-DNA.

Citation: Song DL, Wang JS, Chen LL, Wang Z. Chronic active Epstein-Barr virus infection treated with PEG-asparaginase: A case report. *World J Clin Cases* 2021; 9(26): 7845-7849

URL: <https://www.wjgnet.com/2307-8960/full/v9/i26/7845.htm>

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.12998/wjcc.v9.i26.7845>

INTRODUCTION

Chronic active Epstein-Barr virus infection (EBV) is a systemic EBV-positive lymphoproliferative disease, which may lead to fatal illness. There is currently no standard treatment regimen for chronic active EBV (CAEBV), and the only effective treatment is hematopoietic stem cell transplantation (HSCT)[1]. We here report a patient with CAEBV who achieved eradication of EBV for more than 6 mo following the completion of PEG-asparaginase treatment. PEG-asparaginase may provide a new treatment regimen to reduce EBV load for CAEBV.

CASE PRESENTATION

Chief complaints

A 33-year-old female Chinese patient was admitted to our hospital with intermittent fever and weakness for 3 mo.

History of present illness

About 2 mo previously, this patient was admitted to a local hospital due to fever and decreased appetite. The laboratory examination showed leukopenia and liver function damage. EBV-DNA was 6.09×10^5 IU/mL in September 2017. Fever was not effectively improved with cephalosporin and ganciclovir. Interferon was given; EBV-DNA decreased slightly, but fever persisted. The fever had lasted 3 mo when she was admitted to our hospital in December 2017.

History of past illness

The patient had no other previous medical history.

Personal and family history

The patient had no personal or family history of similar illnesses.

Physical examination

Physical examination revealed enlargement of multiple superficial lymph nodes and splenomegaly. Abdominal ultrasonography showed that the spleen was 15.7 cm in diameter.

Laboratory examinations

Complete blood count revealed bicytopenia with a white blood cell count of 1.39×10^9 /L, hemoglobin 14.2 gm/dL, and platelet count of 89×10^9 /L. ALT and AST were elevated to 95 U/L and 173.2 U/L, respectively. EBV-DNA (whole blood) was 5.1×10^4 copies/mL and EBV-DNA (plasma) was 5.60×10^4 copies/mL in December 2017. Natural killer cell was mainly involved in lymphocyte subsets of EBV infection, despite the accumulation of all lymphocyte subsets. Flow cytometry of the bone marrow revealed about 2.26% abnormal phenotype natural killer (NK) cells, expressing CD56bri, CD2, CD7, CD94bri, CD161, and CD159a. Biopsy was taken from the swollen left inguinal lymph node and bone marrow. However, no tumor was detected, and EBV-encoded small RNA (EBER) was not found by *in situ* hybridization of two biopsies. The tests of hepatitis virus, human immunodeficiency virus, antinuclear antibody, and rheumatoid antibody were all negative.

FINAL DIAGNOSIS

According to the diagnostic criteria for CAEBV, she was finally diagnosed with CAEBV.

TREATMENT

The patient started on PEG-asparaginase (1500 U/m²) treatment every 14 d from December 2017. The informed consent was obtained from the patient and this therapy was approved by the institutional ethics committee.

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

The patient's body temperature gradually dropped, and fever improved on the 7th day during the first treatment course with PEG-asparaginase. On the 14th day, the patient's liver enzymes had returned to normal and the spleen shrank to normal size. EBV-DNA (whole blood) was 760 copies/mL and EBV-DNA (plasma) was < 500 copies/mL in January 2018. EBV-DNA had maintained negative for more than 6 mo (Figure 1) since February 2018. Re-examination of the bone marrow showed that abnormal NK cells disappeared. Hypofibrinogenemia was recorded during PEG-asparaginase treatment, but bleeding or thromboembolism did not occur. No other side effects of PEG-asparaginase, such as allergy, pancreatitis, and hepatotoxicity, were noted. The patient rejected allogeneic HSCT for personal reasons. Unfortunately, the patient eventually died due to relapse of CAEBV and occurrence of hemophagocytic lymphohistiocytosis (HLH) after more than 6 mo of PEG-asparaginase treatment. Due to severe liver dysfunction at the time of relapse, the patient could no longer receive PEG-asparaginase therapy.

DISCUSSION

CAEBV is a chronic disease with persistent infectious mononucleosis-like symptoms, such as fever, lymphadenopathy, and hepatosplenomegaly. CAEBV may develop into fatal diseases, including multi-organ failure, EBV-associated T/NK cell lymphoproliferative disorder, T or NK cell lymphomas, and HLH[1].

The diagnostic criteria for CAEBV are as follows: (1) Sustained or recurrent infectious mononucleosis-like symptoms persistent for > 3 mo; (2) Increased amounts of EBV detected by Southern blot hybridization, EBER-positive cells in affected tissues or the peripheral blood, or $\geq 10^{2.5}$ copies/ μ g of EBV-DNA in peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMCs); and (3) No evidence of previous immunological abnormalities or other recent infection that might explain the existing condition[2]. Our patient met the above three criteria, and was diagnosed with CAEBV. Cohen *et al*[3] have suggested that the diagnosis of CAEBV must be combined with lymphocytic infiltration and EBV in the tissues to ensure that the organ damage was attributed to EBV-infected lymphocytes. However, EBER was not detected by *in situ* hybridization of the biopsy samples taken from the left inguinal lymph node and bone marrow of the patient that we reported. In a study by Kawamoto *et al*[4], the median count of EBER-positive cells in the affected lesion of patients with CAEBV was 53 per high-power field, and 86.3% (44/51) of the cases showed ≥ 10 EBER-positive cells per high-power field. Hence, in some patients, EBER may be negative in tissues, but high EBV-DNA load is detected in PBMCs.

There is currently no standard treatment for CAEBV. Sawada *et al*[5] suggested a sequential treatment strategy consisting of prednisolone, cyclosporine A, and etoposide, a so-called cooling therapy as the first step, and combination chemotherapies, such as CHOP (cyclophosphamide, doxorubicin, vincristine, and prednisone) regimen. However, the conventional chemotherapy regimen for CAEBV is unsatisfactory, and the resolution rates of CAEBV disease activity by chemotherapy are very low, approximately 10%[1]. The only effective treatment for this disease is HSCT. The high load of EBV-DNA before HSCT may lead to a high risk of recurrence after HSCT. Therefore, more effective chemotherapy could improve outcome and reduce EBV-DNA load of CAEBV patients[1].

PEG-asparaginase, a pegylated form of L-asparaginase, has a prolonged circulation time and diminished immunogenicity compared with native L-asparaginase[6].

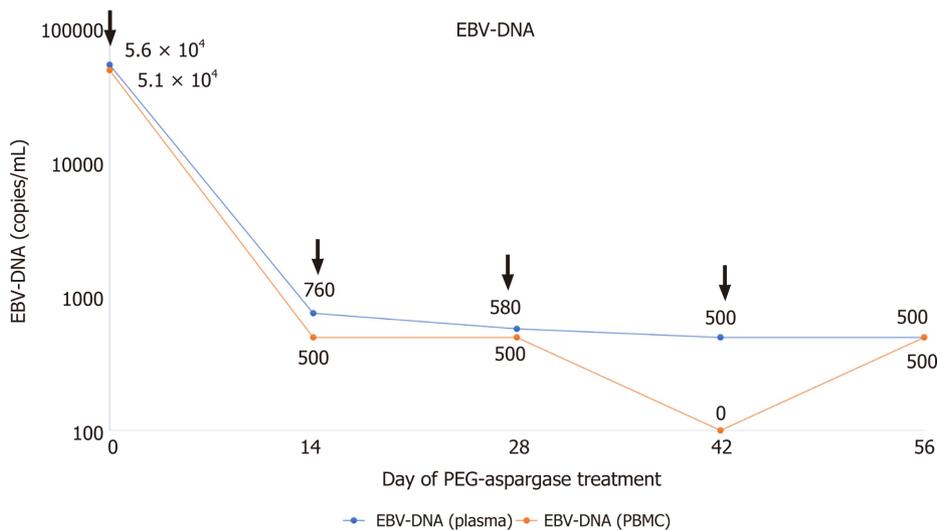


Figure 1 Graph of the Epstein-Barr virus-DNA change trend of the patient after PEG-asparaginase treatment. There is a significant decrease after the first PEG-asparaginase treatment. After the third course of treatment, the patient's Epstein-Barr virus-DNA (EBV-DNA) turned negative (according to our hospital test standard, EBV-DNA < 500 copies/mL is negative). The arrow indicates the time of for PEG-asparaginase treatment. EBV: Epstein-Barr virus.

Therefore, PEG-asparaginase requires less frequent administration and has better treatment efficacy compared to L-asparaginase. Multiple studies on NK/T-cell lymphoma have found that chemotherapy regimens containing PEG-asparaginase significantly reduce the load of EBV-DNA while treating lymphoma, and the reduced load of EBV-DNA after treatment suggests longer survival[7,8]. Our study on refractory relapsed EBV-HLH found that the L-DEP regimen (PEG-asparaginase and DEP combination therapy) can reduce EBV-DNA load while effectively controlling HLH-induced fever and organ dysfunction[9]. Therefore, it can be speculated that PEG-asparaginase may have an "eliminating" effect on EBV infection. In the present patient, EBV was eradicated after treatment with PEG-asparaginase, and EBV-DNA remained negative for more than 6 mo.

The possible mechanisms underlying this may include the following aspects. First, PEG-asparaginase accelerates apoptosis in EBV-positive T and NK cells, which has been confirmed in *in vitro* experiments. Ando *et al*[10] have reported specific antitumor activity of L-asparaginase against NK-cell tumors *in vitro*. Jinta *et al*[11] confirmed that L-asparaginase decreased the number of living cells in all examined EBV-positive cell lines in a dose-dependent manner, an effect not seen in the PBMCs. The "apoptosis" induced by L-asparaginase of EBV-infected T/NK cells may decompose asparagine, an essential amino acid for protein synthesis, such as the effect of treating NK/T cell lymphomas. Second, the expression of P-glycoprotein may be a cause of chemoresistance of EBV-positivity-related malignant disease. Yamaguchi *et al*[12] found that tumor cells from nine of 10 patients with Extranodal natural killer/T-cell lymphoma, an EBV-positive NK-LPD, were positive for P-glycoprotein. They also examined P-glycoprotein expression in ENKL by immunohistochemistry. Yoshimori *et al*[13] reported that EBV-infected T cells in EBV-T-LPDs expressed functional P-glycoprotein. The effect of PEG-asparaginase is not influenced by P-glycoprotein. Therefore, compared to other chemotherapeutic drugs, PEG-asparaginase, which is not a substrate of P-glycoprotein, can more effectively reduce EBV-positive T/NK cells.

Whether CAEBV patients are suitable for PEG-asparaginase therapy remains unclear. Ando *et al*[10] found that the level of asparagine synthetase expression in NK-cell tumors was related to sensitivity and clinical response to L-asparaginase in ENKL. However, Jinta *et al*[11] suggested that the level of asparagine synthetase did not sufficiently determine the response to L-asparaginase on EBV-T/NK-LPDs. Therefore, which indicators reflect the response of patients to PEG-asparaginase should be further explored. In addition, the mechanism of asparaginase therapy is asparagine depletion. However, the optimum target of asparaginase activity to achieve optimal asparagine depletion of PEG-asparaginase still needs to be fully elucidated[14]. Therefore, further clinical study is required to confirm whether regimens containing PEG-asparaginase are effective in treating CAEBV, who can respond to this treatment and how to achieve maximum therapeutic benefit.

CONCLUSION

PEG-aspargase may be effective in reducing the load of EBV-DNA in CAEBV patients. A chemotherapy regimen containing PEG-aspargase for treatment of CAEBV may warrant further study.

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