

REVIEW ARTICLE

Optimal management of ascites

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Abstract

Ascites is the most common complication of cirrhosis, which develops in 5%-10% of patients per year. Its management is based on symptomatic measures including restriction of sodium intake, diuretics and paracentesis. Underlying liver disease must always be treated and may improve ascites. In some patients, ascites is not controlled by medical therapies and has a major impact on quality of life and survival. TIPS placement and liver transplantation must therefore be discussed. More recently, repeated albumin infusions and Alfapump[®] have emerged as new therapies in ascites. In this review, the current data on these different options are analysed and an algorithm to help the physician make clinical decisions is suggested.

KEYWORDS

ascites, cirrhosis, portal hypertension

1 | INTRODUCTION

Ascites is the most common complication of cirrhosis, with 5%-10% of patients with cirrhosis developing this complication per year. Ascites has a major impact on quality of life and is associated with a poor outcome. Management involves two different approaches. The first approach is symptomatic, based on restriction of sodium intake, diuretics, albumin infusion and paracentesis. These symptomatic options should always be associated with treatment of the underlying cause of liver disease to improve liver function. Most patients recover with medical therapy.

When medical therapy fails, transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunts (TIPS) are the first-line treatment to be discussed in these patients as TIPS have been shown to improve ascites as well as survival compared to repeated paracentesis. TIPS are contraindicated in patients with the most severe presentation, with a high MELD or a high Child-Pugh score, or with hepatic encephalopathy (HE), and liver transplantation is the only curative option. An age of more than 65 or 70 years old is another important issue, as it may be a contra-indication for both TIPS placement and liver transplantation.

In this review, we will first focus on the pathophysiology of ascites in cirrhosis, and then discuss the different therapeutic options. Finally, we will suggest an algorithm to help the physician in different clinical situations. The management of hepatorenal syndrome, a severe complication that has the same pathophysiology than ascites, will not be discussed in this review.

2 | PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF ASCITES IN CIRRHOSIS

Ascites is defined as an accumulation of fluid in the peritoneal cavity and is because of cirrhosis in about 80% of cases. It can be graded according to its severity: grade 1 (mild ascites) if only detectable by ultrasound, grade 2 (moderate ascites) with moderate symmetrical distension of abdomen and grade 3 (large ascites) with marked abdominal distension.¹ Ascites affects 5%-10% of patients with compensated cirrhosis per year and is considered to be the most common complication of cirrhosis. Moreover, its prognosis is poor (2-year mortality of 40%). It appears later than

Abbreviations: ACLF, acute-on-chronic liver failure; AP, Alfapump[®]; HE, hepatic encephalopathy; LT, liver transplantation; LVP, large volume paracentesis; MDRO, multidrug-resistant organisms; MELD, model for end-stage liver disease; PTFE-covered, polytetrafluoroethylene-covered; RA, recurrent ascites; RCT, randomized controlled trial; SBP, spontaneous bacterial peritonitis; SMT, standard medical treatment; TIPS, transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt; XDRO, extended drug-resistant organisms.

variceal bleeding in the natural history of cirrhosis, with a **more severe** outcome.²

Ascites is known to be multifactorial and seems to result from the combination of **portal hypertension** and **liver insufficiency**. Several hypotheses have been suggested to explain its pathophysiology, in particular that ascites reflects a **reorganization** of **haemodynamics** in cirrhosis. Indeed, the reorganization of the hepatic structure in cirrhosis is responsible for an increase in hydrostatic pressure in the sinusoid capillaries, which leads to an **increase in local synthesis of vasodilator substances**, such as nitric oxide. Thus, there is a **decrease** in **splanchnic arterial resistance**.³ Compensatory mechanisms then occur, especially an increase in **cardiac output** and **activation of metabolic pathways** to **increase effective volemia** (sympathetic nervous system and **renin-angiotensin-aldosterone pathway**). **Synthesis of anti-natriuretic substances** is then increased and results in **sodium and water retention** in the proximal tubule, loop of Henle and distal tubule.³ This can result in **dilutional hyponatraemia**, which may **worsen** the **prognosis** and makes treatment of ascites more difficult. In a final stage, the **severe** systemic **vasodilation** and subsequent **renal vasoconstriction** are responsible for acute **kidney injury** by decreasing renal blood flow, defining the **hepatorenal syndrome**. Moreover, hypoalbuminaemia owing to hepatic insufficiency is responsible for a decrease in oncotic pressure, which facilitates the fluid leakage from the intravascular sector to interstitial space.³ Because of the reorganization of the hepatic structure in cirrhosis, the capillaries are no longer fenestrated and protein concentration is then poor in this fluid.

Finally, some studies suggest that **bacterial translocation**, which is frequent in cirrhosis and responsible for local and systemic **inflammation**, plays a role. This mechanism may increase permeability of capillaries and facilitate fluid leakage to the peritoneal cavity.³

3 | OPTIMAL MANAGEMENT OF ASCITES

We will focus on the treatment of ascites in patients: (a) without refractory ascites, (b) with refractory ascites and (c) with spontaneous bacterial peritonitis (SBP). In patients with complicated ascites, that is with either refractory ascites or SBP, liver transplantation (LT) must be discussed.

3.1 | Patients without refractory ascites

3.1.1 | Classical treatments

The treatment of ascites is based on symptomatic therapies, including **sodium restriction** and **diuretics**, as patients with ascites have a **positive sodium balance**. Dietary sodium should be moderately restricted (80–120 mmol/day) to prevent a reduced calorie intake, which could impair nutritional status. The aim of diuretic therapy is

weight loss of **<0.5 kg/day** (or **1 kg/day** in the presence of **peripheral oedema**). Patients should receive an **anti-mineralocorticoid** drug alone, starting at 100 mg/day, with a stepwise increase to a maximum of 400 mg/day. **Furosemide** should be added in **non-responders** or in patients who develop hyperkalaemia, at a dose of **40 mg/day** to a maximum dose of **160 mg/day**. Other general measures and treatments have also been evaluated: (a) it has not been shown that prolonged maintenance of the supine position improves the resolution of ascites; (b) there is evidence that the treatment of underlying liver disease can improve ascites, such as abstinence from alcohol or viral suppression; (c) the use of several drugs is **contraindicated** to avoid renal impairment, such as **non-steroidal** anti-inflammatory drugs, **angiotensin-converting enzyme** inhibitors or **aminoglycosides** (except in patients with severe bacterial infections); (d) other treatments such as midodrine, **terlipressine** or clonidine are **not recommended**.

3.1.2 | New therapeutics in patients without refractory ascites: albumin and TIPS

Hypoalbuminaemia and the synthesis of dysfunctional albumin are increasingly recognized as key factors in the pathophysiology of the complications of cirrhosis including ascites. Patients with **moderate** ascites were considered to be the **most appropriate** candidates to evaluate the efficacy of **repeated albumin** infusions to improve **survival**, prevent further complications of cirrhosis including encephalopathy, sepsis, as well as to **reduce ascites**. In the **ANSWER study**,⁴ patient with ascites who were receiving diuretics and were not considered refractory received either **albumin** (40 g twice a week for 2 weeks and **then 40 g weekly**) or standard medical treatment (SMT). Patients in the **albumin** group showed a **38% decrease** in the **mortality** hazard ratio, **fewer** episodes of **HE** and **sepsis**, and a **later** need for **paracentesis**. Finally, during the 18 months of follow-up, fewer patients developed refractory ascites. Interestingly, a post hoc analysis (ILC 2019 presented data) of the ANSWER study showed that the albumin level after 1 month of treatment was strongly predictive of survival. In particular, 18-month survival reached 90% when the albumin level was **>40 g/L**. This suggests that the **amount of albumin infused is highly important** and may need to be adapted on a case by case basis. In another RCT, patients awaiting liver transplantation received either midodrine 15–30 mg/day and albumin 40 g/day or placebo. There was no difference between the groups, for survival on the waiting list for the complications of cirrhosis or control of ascites.⁵ However, rapid access to LT (median treatment 80 days in both groups) may have prevented this trial from more significant results.

TIPS placement induces **decompression** of the **portal** circulation by shunting an **intrahepatic portal branch into a hepatic vein**. Its indications in the treatment of refractory ascites are better defined and will be discussed later in this manuscript. However, the benefit of TIPS insertion in **less severe** patients, such as in those with **recurrent** ascites (RA) remains **uncertain**. RA was first

defined in a 1996 consensus as ascites that recurs at **least three** times **within 12 months despite** sodium restriction and diuretic treatment.⁶ Recently, EASL guidelines defined early RA as ascites that recurs earlier than 1 month after initial control.¹ None or very few of these patients were included in initial RCTs comparing TIPS with bare metal stents to standard medical treatment (SMT). Recently, a study by Bureau et al compared the prognosis of patients with RA receiving either TIPS with PTFE-covered stents or SMT.⁷ However, these patients were more severe than the previous definition of RA. To be included, they had to have required at least two LVPs at least 3 weeks apart. It is important to note that 30% of patients had a history of variceal bleeding, and 20% had a history of renal failure, showing the severity of their circulatory dysfunction. There was a significant increase in **1-year survival** without transplantation (93% vs 52% $P = .003$) in the **TIPS** group, which was the primary endpoint of the study. It is interesting to note that **hepatic encephalopathy (HE) did not** occur **more frequently** in the **TIPS** group. These results, obtained in patients with RA, moderate hepatic insufficiency and an absence of previous overt HE, illustrate the importance of defining which patients are the best candidates for TIPS and the more severely ill patients, who should be listed for transplantation.

3.2 | Patients with **refractory** ascites

3.2.1 | Definition of refractory ascites

According to the International Ascites Club, refractory ascites is defined as "ascites that **cannot be mobilized** or the **early recurrence** of which cannot be satisfactorily prevented by medical therapy."⁶ This definition includes **diuretic-resistant** ascites, (ascites that cannot be mobilized or the early recurrence of which cannot be prevented because of a lack of response to sodium restriction and diuretic treatment), and diuretic-intractable ascites, (ascites that cannot be mobilized or the early recurrence of which cannot be prevented because of the development of diuretic-induced complications that preclude the use of an effective diuretic dosage). From a practical point of view, it is very difficult to reach the maximal doses of diuretics and 90% of patients have intractable ascites. HE, renal failure, **hyponatraemia**, hypo- or **hyper-kalaemia** and muscle cramps are the main **reasons for the withdrawal of diuretics**.¹

3.2.2 | **Large volume paracentesis**

Large volume paracentesis (LVP) is the **first-line** treatment of **refractory** ascites.⁶ **Plasma volume expansion** is needed to prevent post-paracentesis dysfunction. In a meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials, **albumin** infusion has been shown to be **more effective** than other plasma expanders in the prevention of post-paracentesis dysfunction.⁸ **Albumin infusion** should therefore be performed in patients undergoing **LVP >5L (8 g/L of ascites removed)**.¹

3.2.3 | **Albumin**

Long-term administration of **albumin** has also been shown to reduce mortality in patients with refractory ascites. The single center, non-randomized study by Di Pascoli et al, evaluated the prognosis of patients with refractory ascites treated with 40 g albumin twice a week vs SMT.⁹ Two-year **mortality**, which was the primary endpoint, was significantly **lower** in the **albumin** group (41.6% vs 65.5%, $P = .032$). This study has many limitations including TIPS as an alternative therapy in these patients. However, long-term administration of albumin, which was shown to improve survival in more severe patients, such as those with refractory ascites, could be an interesting option in selected patients, especially liver transplantation candidates.

3.2.4 | **Transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt**

Transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt (TIPS) placement induces **decompression of the portal circulation** by **shunting an intrahepatic portal branch into a hepatic vein**. In an evaluation of refractory ascites, six prospective randomized controlled trials (RCT) compared non-covered TIPS and LVP for recurrence of ascites, hepatic encephalopathy and survival (Tables 1 and 2).¹⁰⁻¹⁵ The results were analysed in several meta-analyses. In the meta-analysis of individual data by Salerno et al **ascites recurrence** and **transplant-free survival** were better in the **TIPS** group, compared to LVP.¹⁶ However, the average **number of HE** episodes was **higher** in the **TIPS** group. It seems important to note that these studies were **published before** the use of **PTFE-covered stents**. More recent results obtained in recurrent ascites suggest that the earlier results would probably have been better using covered stents.⁷ To date, no prospective controlled trial has been published using covered stents in refractory ascites. In the study published by Bureau et al, patients were included in case of recurrent ascites, defined by two LVPs at least 3 weeks apart, and excluding those who had undergone >6 LVP in the last 3 months. These criteria were quite different from both the historical definition of recurrent ascites and those of refractory ascites, as previously discussed.

TIPS insertion is **contraindicated** in patients with **heart failure**, **advanced liver** failure, defined by a Child-Pugh score >13 or a MELD score >19, and significant HE. Thus, patients must be carefully selected for TIPS placement. Although exclusion criteria in RCT were heterogeneous, there were certain similarities, such as >70 or 75 years old, HE on the day of TIPS placement, Child-Pugh >11, HCC outside of the Milan criteria and heart failure.

Three main **complications** negatively influence **prognosis after TIPS** placement: (a) **liver failure** and death; (b) **refractory HE** and (c) **heart failure**. One study presented a simple predictive model of survival combining platelet count and total bilirubin level¹⁷ and showed that the actuarial 1-year survival rate in patients with both a platelet count >75 × 10⁹/L and a total bilirubin level <50 μmol/L

TABLE 1 Main studies comparing LVP and other therapeutics in patients with refractory or recurrent ascites

| Bare TIPS | Refractory ascites | | Enrolled patients (n) | | Improvement of ascites (%) | | Development of hepatic encephalopathy (%) | | Survival (%) | |
|-----------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|-----|----------------------------|-----|---|-----|--------------|-----|
| | | | TIPS | LVP | TIPS | LVP | TIPS | LVP | TIPS | LVP |
| | | | | | | | | | | |
| | Randomized controlled studies | Lebrec et al ¹⁰ 1996 | 13 | 12 | 38 | 0 | 15 | 6 | 29 | 60 |
| | | Gines et al ¹¹ 2002 | 35 | 35 | 51 | 17 | 60 | 34 | 26 | 30 |
| | | Sanyal et al ¹² 2003 | 52 | 57 | 58 | 16 | 38 | 21 | 35 | 33 |
| | | Narahara et al ¹³ 2011 | 30 | 30 | 87 | 30 | 20 | 5 | 20 | 5 |
| | | Rössle et al ¹⁴ 2000 | 29 | 31 | 84 | 43 | 23 | 13 | 58 | 32 |
| | | Salerno et al ¹⁵ 2004 | 33 | 33 | 79 | 42 | 61 | 39 | 59 | 29 |
| | Refractory + recurrent ascites | Meta-analysis for refractory ascites | | | | | | | | |
| | | Salerno et al ¹⁶ 2007 | 149 | 156 | 58 | 11 | 58 | 38 | 56 | 50 |
| | Covered TIPS | Randomized controlled study | 29 | 33 | 89 | 29 | 34 | 33 | 93 | 52 |
| | | Bureau et al ⁷ 2017 | | | | | | | | |

Abbreviations: LVP, large volume paracentesis; TIPS, transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt.

TABLE 2 Outcome of Alfapump® for patients with cirrhosis and refractory ascites

| Number of LVP per patient per month (median) | | | Development of adverse effects (n) | | | | | Child-Pugh score (mean) | | | MELD score (mean) | | | Improvement of Quality of life (HRQoL score) | | | |
|--|------------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------|------------|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------|---------------------|-------------------------|---------|---------------------|--|--------------------|-----------------|-------|
| Enrolled patients (n) | Length of follow-up (months) | At baseline | At the end of follow-up | Infections | Catheter issues | Pump malfunction | Alfapump® explant | At the end of follow-up | | | At the end of follow-up | | | Death, n (%) | Abdominal symptoms | Activity scores | |
| | | | | | | | | At baseline | At 6 mo | At end of follow-up | At baseline | At 6 mo | At end of follow-up | | | | |
| Observational studies | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Bellot et al ²⁰ 2013 | 40 | 6 | 3.4 | 0.2 | 24 (60%) | 10 (25%) | 2 (5%) | 3 (7.5%) | 8.5 | 8.6 | 8.6 | 12.6 | 11.7 | 11.7 | 9 (22%) | | |
| Stirnemann et al ²¹ 2017 | 56 | 24 | 2.2 | 0.2 | 28 (50%) | 11 (20%) | | 27 (48%) | 8.8 | 9.8 | 7.5 | 13.42 | 17.04 | 9.11 | 23 (41%) | | |
| Randomized controlled study | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Bureau et al ²² 2017 | 27 | 6 | 1.6 | 0.3 | 25 (93%) | 5 (9%) | 4 (7%) | 3 (5.4%) | 8.2 | | | 12.2 | | | 15 (56%) | +1.25 | +0.80 |

Abbreviation: LVP, large volume paracentesis.

[3 mg/dL] was 73.1% compared to 31.2%, in patients with a platelets count $<75 \times 10^9/L$ or a total bilirubin level $>50 \mu\text{mol/L}$. In another study several risk factors for the worsening of HE were described: older age, poor liver function, a previous episode of HE, sarcopenia and minimal hepatic encephalopathy. Nevertheless, there is no predictive model for the selection of patients according to their risk of developing HE. We recently recommended excluding TIPS as a non-urgent option in patients with a history of at least two episodes of HE, or with HE on the day of TIPS placement.¹⁸ Moreover, our group suggested that TIPS placement be discussed on a case-by-case basis in patients older than 70. Finally a very recent prospective study has shown that **cardiac decompensation** occurs in about **20% of patients following TIPS** placement.¹⁹ The authors reported that a combination of a BNP $<40 \text{ pg/mL}$ and a **NT-proBNP $<125 \text{ pg/mL}$** before TIPS and the **exclusion of diastolic dysfunction** on echocardiography **excluded the risk of cardiac decompensation**.

3.2.5 | **Alfapump®**

Alfapump® (AP) is a fully implantable, programmable and rechargeable pump system that **automatically diverts ascitic fluid from the peritoneal cavity** to the **urinary bladder**, allowing fluid removal by micturition (Tables 1 and 2).^{20,21} In a recent multicenter RCT in patients with refractory ascites, AP significantly **reduced the number of LVP and improved the quality of life as well as nutritional parameters**.²² Quality of life was also shown to improve by AP in another study.²³ AP is contraindicated in patients with chronic renal failure, because it can **cause acute, but reversible, renal failure**. Moreover, some patients, especially with HE, may experience technical difficulties. Thus, it seems reasonable not to recommend AP as an alternative therapy in patients with HE unless there is a relative to take care of the device.

3.2.6 | **Liver transplantation**

LT should be discussed in all patients with refractory ascites because of the poor survival in this group. Nevertheless, despite the poor prognosis of this complication, some patients will present with a low MELD score that can delay LT. Liver transplantation could be prioritized based on a MELD score exception in these patients. However, prioritization can only be considered in patients with a strict contraindication to TIPS placement.²⁴ Thus, TIPS should be the first option in these patients.

3.2.7 | **Summary of available therapeutics, indications**

As previously mentioned, LVP should be performed in patients with refractory ascites (Figure 1). If LVP is the first-line treatment, a second line therapy has to be considered as soon as the diagnosis is made to improve the prognosis. A careful clinical, biological and morphological examination must be performed. This includes obtaining a clinical

history, including age, and a systematic search for a previous episode of HE or heart decompensation. The **physical examination** should screen for **confusion, flapping, sarcopenia** and left or right signs of **heart failure**. The biological evaluation should include routine blood exams, hepatic function, renal and cardiac function with **BNP and NT-proBNP**. Finally, the morphological evaluation should include an abdominal ultrasound exam, CT scan and **echocardiography**. TIPS seems to be the best therapeutic option in patients under the age of 65, with no previous episodes of HE, a Child-Pugh score <13 , a MELD score <19 , total bilirubin levels $<50 \mu\text{mol/L}$, a platelet count $>75 \times 10^9/L$, **normal BNP/NT-proBNP values** and **normal echocardiography**. TIPS should be contraindicated in patients over 70 years old, with history of more than two episodes of HE. AP can be considered in the latter unless they present with normal renal function (Cr Creat $\geq 50 \text{ mL/min}$). A case-by-case discussion is needed in patients considered to be at high risk, according to liver function, cardiac function, and the risk of HE after TIPS. As there is a theoretical risk of developing either liver failure or refractory HE after TIPS, we believe that liver transplantation should be discussed in all patients.

3.3 | **Patients with spontaneous bacterial peritonitis**

SBP is the **most frequent** site of bacterial infection in patients with cirrhosis. SBP is still associated with **high mortality** and may trigger **worsening of liver function** and other complications of cirrhosis such as HE, renal failure and bleeding. The increasing prevalence of multidrug-resistant organisms (**MDRO**) is a concern in the treatment of SBP. This mainly includes **extended spectrum beta lactamases** producing Enterobacteriaceae and **beta lactams-resistant Gram-positive** bacteria. The emergence of extended drug-resistant organisms (**XDRO**), in hospitalized patients but also in the community in some parts of the world, emphasizes the need for data on the use of new antibiotics in patients with cirrhosis. European data support a **high prevalence of MDRO** infections in **decompensated** or **acute** on **chronic liver failure (ACLF)** patients. About **29%** of the strains isolated in the 264 culture-positive infections among the 1146 patients with decompensated cirrhosis or ACLF followed in the **CANONIC cohort** (2011) were **MDRO**.²⁵ There are large discrepancies among centres and countries, with a higher prevalence in Western European countries in these almost 10-year-old data. The **only factors significantly associated** with the occurrence of **MDRO** were **nosocomial** infections, **hospitalization within the previous 3 months** and **intensive care** unit admission. It is important to note that **long-term exposure to norfloxacin was not identified as a risk factor**. More recent data (2017-2018) in 883 European patients with decompensated cirrhosis showed that **39.7%** of **culture-positive** infections among the 284 patients who developed infection were **MDRO**, which is a nearly **10% increase** compared to **2011 data**. It is interesting to note that there was a shift towards a higher prevalence in Eastern and Southern European countries. Worldwide, the study by Piano et al reported 1302 infections in hospitalized patients with cirrhosis.²⁶ MDRO were isolated in 34% of cases. **Risk factors** were nosocomial or healthcare-associated infections, **antibiotic exposure within**

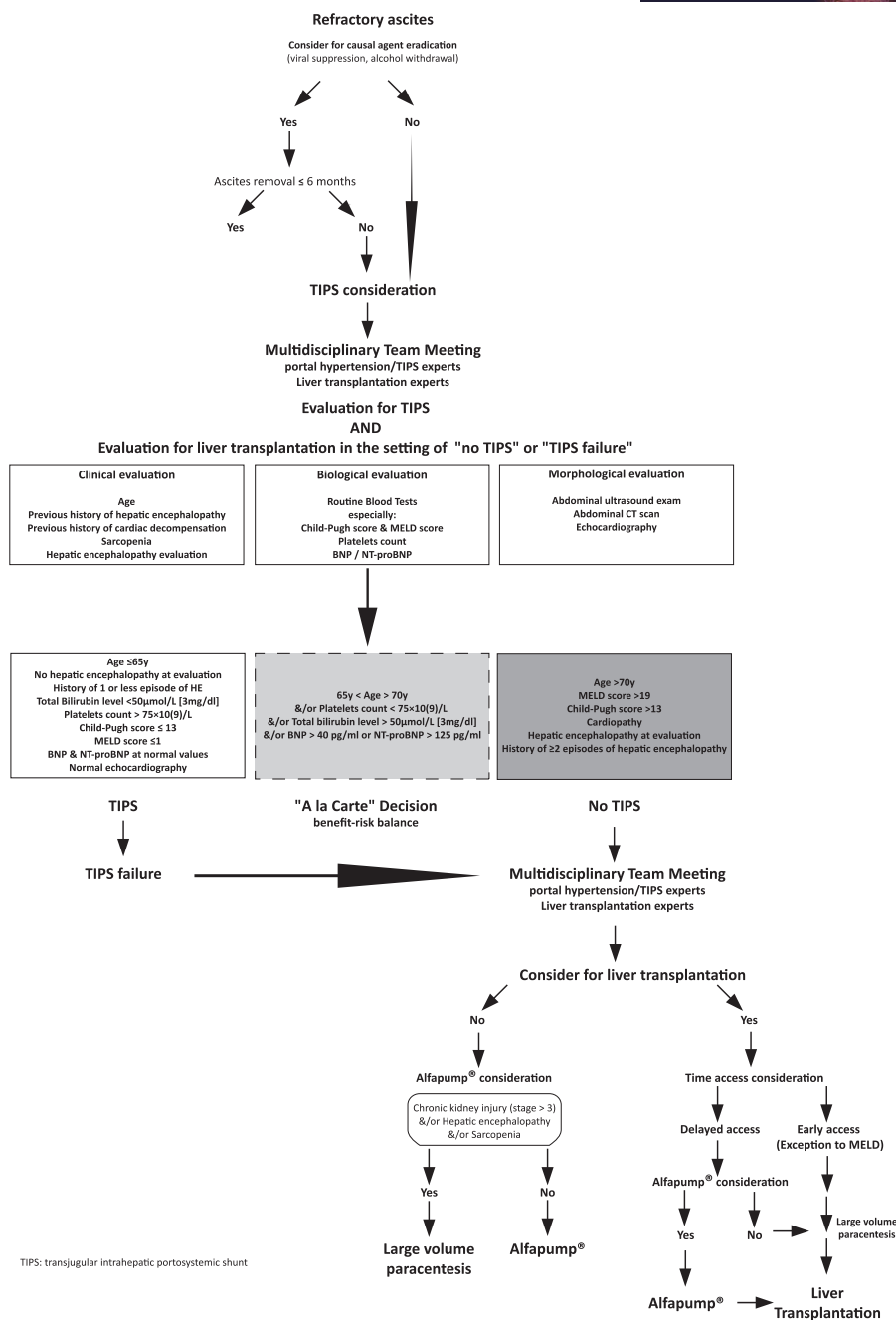


FIGURE 1 Algorithm for the management of refractory ascites in patients with cirrhosis

the previous 3 months but also geographical origin, in particular India where the rate of MDRO and XDRO was the highest. The sites most concerned by MDR infections were pneumonias and urinary tract infections. Prevalence was lower in SBP (27%), like in the CANONIC cohort (13.9% for SBP vs 29.3% all sites included). An Italian RCT has compared initial antibiotic therapy with meropenem plus daptomycin vs ceftazidim to treat nosocomial SBP. There was a significantly higher response to treatment for the decrease in neutrophils count in ascites in the meropenem plus daptomycin group, but 90-day transplant-free survival was similar in both groups. On multivariate analysis, ineffective first-line treatment was a significant predictor of mortality, as described in previous studies. Thus, recommendations about antibiotic

therapy for SBP are very difficult and highly important for clinical outcome. They must depend on the local bacterial ecology and individual risk factors such as previous antibiotic therapy, healthcare associated, or nosocomial infections. The EASL guidelines for community acquired SBP recommend third generation cephalosporins or piperacillin plus tazobactam.¹ Meropenem is recommended for nosocomial SBP, in association with linezolid or daptomycin when the prevalence of drug-resistant Gram-positive bacteria is high. Administration of 20% albumin is also recommended during SBP at the dose of 1.5 g/kg at day 1 and 1 g/kg at day 3. Indeed, in the study by Sort et al, this treatment resulted in a significant decrease in hospital mortality and occurrence of renal failure compared to antibiotic therapy with cefotaxime

alone (10% vs 29%, respectively, $P = .01$) and (10% vs 33%, respectively, $P = .02$).²⁷ Severe patients (serum creatinine $\geq 88 \mu\text{M}$ or total bilirubin $\geq 68 \mu\text{M}$) seemed to benefit most from treatment. Whether it should be administrated to all patients with cirrhosis is therefore a subject of debate.

Prophylaxis of SBP is another clinically important issue. Norfloxacin is the only drug recommended and concern is growing about its safety and efficacy because of the increasing prevalence of MDRO. Frequent neurological and osteo-articular side effects have led drug regulation agencies to issue warnings about this drug and advise limiting its use to when no alternative is available. In primary prophylaxis, norfloxacin is recommended when ascites fluid protein level is below 15 g/L in association with severe cirrhosis (Child-Pugh score ≥ 9 and total bilirubin level $\geq 3 \text{ mg/dL}$ ($51 \mu\text{mol/L}$), with either impaired renal function or hyponatraemia).¹ A French RCT compared norfloxacin to placebo in Child Pugh C patients without previous SBP.²⁸ Six-month mortality was only significantly lower in patients with low ascitic fluid protein levels ($<15 \text{ g/L}$), confirming that primary prophylaxis should be restricted to the most severe patients. However, these are not recent data (2010-2014) and cannot take into account the change in susceptibility of Gram-negative bacteria to fluoroquinolones, which may affect the effectiveness of prophylaxis. Norfloxacin use in secondary prophylaxis is an even greater issue because of the high prevalence of recurrent SBP after a first episode. It was shown to be effective in a single RCT published in 1990, significantly decreasing the rate of recurrent SBP from 68% in the placebo group to 20% in the norfloxacin group. There are no similar more recent results. However, a recent German observational study in patients receiving primary or secondary prophylaxis with norfloxacin suggests a significantly greater risk of SBP in patients with quinolone-resistant Gram-negative bacteria. These results in a population with a 50% rate of baseline MDRO highlight the importance of resistance to fluoroquinolones and suggest that routine screening patients for MDRO could be advisable. Finding an alternative to oral fluoroquinolones is also important. Preliminary results and a recent meta-analysis support the effectiveness of rifaximin in primary or secondary prophylaxis of SBP.²⁹ However, the results of a RCT including a larger number of patients, comparing rifaximin to oral fluoroquinolones are still awaited.

4 | CONCLUSION

Prognosis is poor in patients with complicated ascites, including refractory ascites or SBP. In these situations, TIPS placement and liver transplantation must both be discussed, because TIPS may be either contraindicated or with an uncertain outcome in patients at high risk of developing further liver failure, HE or cardiac decompensation. The recent study by Bureau et al conducted patients with recurrent ascites suggests that TIPS placement could be indicated at an earlier stage, before the development of refractory ascites. We believe that there should be a multidisciplinary discussion to improve selection of patients for the best therapeutic option.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

MR: speaker for Gore, Gilead, Abbvie; MM: none; PS: none; CB: speaker for Gilead, Abbvie; DT: consultancy for Gore, Alfasigma, Gilead, MSD, AbbVie, Medday.

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