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CURRENT ISSUES IN THE THERAPY OF HIV-INFECTED PATIENTS WITH GASTROENTERITIS SYNDROME

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RELEVANCE: Gastroenteritis syndrome in HIV-infected patients remains a critical concern worldwide. Gastrointestinal (GI) disorders in this population can be caused by a broad range of opportunistic pathogens, including viruses, bacteria, protozoa, and fungi, often leading to severe, chronic, and life-threatening complications. Despite significant advancements in antiretroviral therapy (ART), morbidity and mortality associated with GI opportunistic infections (OIs) continue to pose substantial challenges, especially in resource-limited settings. Effective diagnosis, treatment, and prevention strategies are paramount for improving the quality of life and clinical outcomes in HIV-infected individuals.

Keywords: HIV infection, gastroenteritis syndrome, opportunistic infections, antiretroviral therapy (ART), immunosuppression, diarrhea management, antimicrobial therapy

INTRODUCTION

Patients with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) often experience complications affecting the gastrointestinal tract, ranging from mild to severe forms of gastroenteritis. In advanced stages of HIV, profound immunosuppression predisposes patients to opportunistic infections (e.g., Cryptosporidium, Isospora, Microsporidia, Cytomegalovirus, and Mycobacterium avium complex), which contribute significantly to chronic diarrhea, malabsorption, and subsequent weight loss (wasting syndrome). These manifestations can impair nutrient intake and absorption, ultimately exacerbating immunodeficiency and increasing morbidity.

While the widespread use of combination antiretroviral therapy (ART) has reduced the incidence of several opportunistic infections, GI complications remain prevalent, especially among patients with late diagnosis or inadequate adherence to treatment. Additionally, drug interactions, toxicity profiles, and the development of resistance may limit available therapeutic options. The goal of this article is to explore current therapeutic approaches for gastroenteritis syndrome in HIV-infected individuals, discuss ongoing challenges in clinical management, and highlight areas requiring further research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Literature Search - A comprehensive search was conducted using electronic medical databases (PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus) for articles published between 2015 and 2025. Keywords included “HIV,” “AIDS,” “gastroenteritis,” “opportunistic infections,” “diarrhea management,” and “antiretroviral therapy.”

Inclusion Criteria - Original research articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses focusing on HIV-infected patients with gastroenteritis.

Studies reporting on etiology, therapeutic interventions, or clinical outcomes in adults (18 years and older). Publications available in English. Exclusion Criteria - Studies involving pediatric populations exclusively. Case reports lacking detailed outcome data. Non-English publications or

articles not addressing therapy-related outcomes.
Data Extraction and Analysis - Relevant data points extracted included: Demographics of study populations (e.g., stage of HIV, CD4+ T-cell counts). Etiologic agents causing gastroenteritis. Types of interventions (antimicrobials, supportive care, ART adjustments). Clinical outcomes (resolution of diarrhea, change in CD4+ count, mortality). Study design and quality, assessed through standardized tools (e.g., PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews, CONSORT for clinical trials). Collected data were synthesized to identify common therapeutic strategies, their effectiveness, and reported limitations. Statistical comparisons were performed where applicable, emphasizing differences in therapeutic response based on CD4+ levels or viral load.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Etiology and Diagnosis - Across the surveyed literature, the most frequent opportunistic pathogens identified in HIV-infected patients with gastroenteritis were Cryptosporidium parvum, Isospora belli, Microsporidia species, and Mycobacterium avium complex. In addition, cytomegalovirus (CMV) infection was often implicated in severe colitis.
Diagnostic Challenges: Standard stool microscopy may miss certain pathogens (e.g., microsporidia), necessitating specialized stains or PCR-based assays. Delays in diagnosis can lead to prolonged morbidity, higher healthcare costs, and increased risk of complications.
Antimicrobial Therapy - Antiprotozoal Agents: Nitazoxanide showed moderate success in treating Cryptosporidium infections in patients with partial immune reconstitution. However, in individuals with profound immunosuppression (CD4+ <100 cells/μL), clinical response was often suboptimal.
Antibacterial Agents: Macrolides (e.g., azithromycin or clarithromycin) played a pivotal role in the prevention and treatment of Mycobacterium avium complex (MAC), significantly decreasing the incidence of MAC bacteremia.
Antiviral Agents: For CMV colitis, ganciclovir or valganciclovir remained the primary treatment options, with foscarnet reserved for ganciclovir-resistant strains.
Role of Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) - Immune Reconstitution: Effective ART improved CD4+ counts and reduced viral load, which in turn lowered susceptibility to opportunistic infections. Studies repeatedly emphasized that the cornerstone of managing HIV-related gastroenteritis is optimizing ART adherence and efficacy.
Drug Interactions: Complex interactions between ART and other medications (e.g., antimicrobials) can necessitate dosage adjustments or alternative treatment regimens. Regular monitoring of liver and kidney function is essential to prevent adverse events or treatment-limiting toxicities.
Supportive Measures - Hydration and Electrolyte Management: Persistent diarrhea can cause severe dehydration and electrolyte imbalances. Oral rehydration solutions (ORS) or intravenous fluids are crucial in managing acute and chronic fluid losses.
Nutritional Support: Nutritional supplementation, including high-calorie and high-protein diets, may help counteract weight loss and maintain adequate immune function.
Probiotics: Some studies showed that probiotics might reduce the duration and frequency of diarrhea, but the evidence is variable, and the choice of probiotic strains needs further standardization.
Challenges and Limitations - Delayed Presentation: Many patients with advanced HIV present late to care, complicating disease management.
Drug Resistance: Emerging resistance to antimicrobial agents reduces treatment efficacy, requiring continuous surveillance and updated therapeutic guidelines.
Resource-Limited Settings: In many regions, access to advanced diagnostic tools, ART, and second-line therapies is limited, leading to higher mortality rates.
Overall, while significant progress has been made in managing gastroenteritis in HIV-infected patients, persistent gaps in access, diagnostics, and clinical guidance continue to hamper optimal outcomes.

Pathogen	Typical CD4+ Count (cells/µL)	Clinical Features	Recommended Treatment	Additional Notes
Cryptosporidium parvum	<100	Profuse watery diarrhoea, dehydration	Nitazoxanide (effective in partial immune reconstitution)	Limited efficacy in severe immunosuppression; ART is crucial for immune recovery
Isospora belli	<200	Watery diarrhoea, weight loss	Trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole (TMP-SMX)	TMP-SMX also serves as prophylaxis in high-risk patients
Microsporidia spp.	<100	Chronic diarrhoea, malabsorption	Albendazole (for *Enterocytozoon intestinalis*); Fumagillin (for *Encephalitozoon bieneusi*)	Fumagillin availability is limited; potential toxicity concerns
Mycobacterium avium complex (MAC)	<50	Fever, weight loss, diarrhoea	Clarithromycin or Azithromycin plus Ethambutol	Prophylactic azithromycin recommended for patients with CD4+ <50 cells/µL
Cytomegalovirus (CMV)	<50	Colitis, bloody diarrhoea, abdominal pain	Ganciclovir or Valganciclovir; Foscarnet for resistant strains	ART initiation is essential; monitor for other organ involvement
Clostridioides difficile	Any	Antibiotic-associated diarrhoea, colitis	Vancomycin or Fidaxomicin; Metronidazole as alternative	Discontinue inciting antibiotics; recurrence is common
Bacterial enteric infections (e.g., Salmonella spp.)	Any	Acute diarrhoea, fever	Empiric antibiotics (e.g., Ciprofloxacin) pending culture results	Higher risk of bacteremia in HIV-infected individuals; treat all cases with antibiotics
Viral gastroenteritis (e.g., Norovirus, Rotavirus)	Any	Nausea, vomiting, watery diarrhoea	Supportive care: hydration, electrolyte management	Antiviral therapy generally not indicated; self-limiting in most cases
ART-associated diarrhoea	Any	Mild to moderate diarrhoea	Symptomatic treatment (e.g., Loperamide); consider ART regimen adjustment	Common with certain protease inhibitors; assess for alternative ART options

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Early Diagnosis: Wider availability of sensitive diagnostic methods (molecular assays) is

essential for identifying opportunistic pathogens promptly and initiating targeted therapy.
ART Optimization: Ensuring patients receive effective and tolerable ART regimens should remain the top priority, as immune reconstitution is vital in reducing both the incidence and severity of gastroenteritis.
Integrated Care: Multidisciplinary collaboration (infectious disease specialists, nutritionists, pharmacists, social workers) can improve patient adherence and manage comorbidities more efficiently.
Tailored Antimicrobial Therapy: Treatment decisions should be guided by local resistance patterns and clinical presentations. Regular antimicrobial stewardship programs could help preserve the effectiveness of existing drugs.
Expanded Research: Further randomized controlled trials are needed to clarify the roles of novel antimicrobials, biologics, and probiotics in preventing and treating HIV-related GI complications.
Health Policy Support: Strengthened public health initiatives and resource allocation are crucial, particularly in high-burden, low-resource settings, to improve screening, early intervention, and overall patient outcomes.

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