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Strategies for Early Detection and Treatment of Autoimmune Hepatitis

Isabella Rossi*

Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, University of Milan, Milan, Italy

DESCRIPTION

Autoimmune hepatitis is a chronic inflammatory liver disease characterized by an inappropriate immune response directed against hepatocytes, leading to progressive liver injury. The condition can affect individuals of all ages and genders, but it shows a higher prevalence among women. Autoimmune hepatitis is classified into type 1 and type 2, with type 1 being more common and associated with the presence of antinuclear antibodies and smooth muscle antibodies. Type 2 is less common, typically seen in children and young adults and associated with liver kidney microsomal antibodies. The ethology of autoimmune hepatitis involves a complex interplay between genetic predisposition, environmental triggers and immune dysregulation. Although the precise cause is not fully understood, infections, medications and other environmental factors are believed to initiate or exacerbate the immune response in genetically susceptible individuals.

The pathogenesis of autoimmune hepatitis is characterized by loss of immune tolerance to liver antigens. Genetic factors, particularly certain human leukocyte antigen haplotypes, contribute to disease susceptibility and severity. Environmental triggers, such as viral infections, may provoke an aberrant immune response. The immune system, through the activation of autoreactive T cells, targets hepatocytes, leading to inflammation, necrosis and subsequent fibrosis. Pro-inflammatory cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor alpha and interferon gamma play critical roles in mediating hepatocyte injury. Persistent inflammation and fibrosis can progress to cirrhosis, liver failure and an increased risk of hepatocellular carcinoma. The disease may present with acute, subacute, or chronic onset, which influences the clinical course and therapeutic approach.

Clinical manifestations of autoimmune hepatitis vary widely. Many patients are asymptomatic and diagnosed incidentally during routine laboratory testing, which may reveal elevated liver enzymes. Symptomatic patients may present with fatigue, jaundice, right upper quadrant discomfort, arthralgia, or features of chronic liver disease. In acute presentations, patients may exhibit severe jaundice, coagulopathy and hepatic encephalopathy. Laboratory findings typically include elevated alanine aminotransferase and aspartate aminotransferase levels, hypergammaglobulinemia and the presence of specific autoantibodies. Serologic testing helps distinguish between type 1 and type 2 autoimmune hepatitis, while imaging studies evaluate liver structure and exclude alternative causes of liver injury.

Management of autoimmune hepatitis is aimed at suppressing the immune response, reducing inflammation, preventing progression to cirrhosis and improving long-term survival. Immunosuppressive therapy with corticosteroids, often combined with azathioprine, is the mainstay of treatment. Prednisone is commonly initiated at high doses to induce remission, followed by gradual tapering to minimize adverse effects. Azathioprine serves as a steroid-sparing agent and is used for long-term maintenance therapy. In patients intolerant to standard therapy or with refractory disease, alternative immunosuppressants such as mycophenolate mofetil, cyclosporine, or tacrolimus may be considered. Treatment goals include normalization of liver enzymes, improvement of symptoms and histological resolution of inflammation. Close monitoring of laboratory parameters and clinical status is essential to detect relapses and adjust therapy accordingly.

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Corresponding author: Isabella Rossi, Department of Gastroenterology and Hepatology, University of Milan, Milan, Italy; E-mail: i.rossi@gastro.unimi.it

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Early diagnosis and initiation of treatment are crucial in improving prognosis. When autoimmune hepatitis is recognized and treated promptly, most patients achieve remission and maintain normal liver function. Delayed diagnosis or inadequate treatment increases the risk of progressive fibrosis, cirrhosis and liver failure, potentially necessitating liver transplantation. Liver transplantation is a definitive treatment for patients with decompensated cirrhosis or acute liver failure due to autoimmune hepatitis. Post-transplant recurrence is possible but can be managed with immunosuppressive therapy. Multidisciplinary care involving hepatologists, dietitians and mental health professionals is critical in addressing the medical and psychosocial needs of patients, optimizing adherence to therapy and improving quality of life.

Research continues to advance our understanding of autoimmune hepatitis, exploring the roles of genetic factors, immune pathways and potential therapeutic targets. Novel therapies aimed at more selective immunomodulation and minimizing systemic side effects are being investigated in clinical trials. Early identification of high-risk individuals through genetic and serologic markers may facilitate timely intervention and prevent complications. Patient education regarding disease management, medication adherence and recognition of early symptoms of relapse is essential for achieving favourable outcomes. Lifestyle measures, including avoidance of hepatotoxic substances, vaccination against hepatitis viruses and routine health monitoring, support overall liver health and long-term disease control.

In conclusion, autoimmune hepatitis is a chronic autoimmune liver disease resulting from dysregulated immune responses against hepatocytes. Its presentation ranges from asymptomatic laboratory abnormalities to severe liver failure, making early recognition essential. Diagnosis relies on a combination of serologic testing, liver biopsy and exclusion of other liver diseases. Immunosuppressive therapy with corticosteroids and azathioprine remains the cornerstone of management, while alternative agents and liver transplantation are reserved for refractory or advanced cases. Early detection, adherence to therapy and multidisciplinary care are important in achieving remission, preventing complications and preserving liver function.