

COVID-19 in pregnant women: description of a possible case of COVID-19-linked HELLP-like syndrome

Fara Russo,¹ Anna Vitiello,¹ Maria Carolina Russo,² Alfonso Riccio,³ Camillo Candurro¹

¹Anaesthesiology Unit, P.O. Villa Malta, Sarno; ²Cardiology Unit, P.O. Villa Malta, Sarno; ³Diseases of the Cardiovascular System Specialist Training, Grande Ospedale Metropolitano Niguarda, Milan, Italy

Abstract

New evidence suggests that Sars-CoV2 infection during pregnancy may result in complications such as hypertension, nephropathy, thrombocytopenia, and liver damage. A pre-eclampsia-like syndrome has also been proposed in pregnant women with severe SARS-CoV-2 infection, which meets the pre-eclampsia criteria but resolves without delivery, with improvement in respiratory symptoms. 31-year-old, second pregnancy, in Emergency Room for

PROM (premature rupture of membranes), has Sars-CoV2 infection and has not been vaccinated. Normal examinations and mild hypertension were present upon admission, but no treatment was administered. Vaginal Leukocytic Delivery 12 hours after admission, newborn Apgar score 9/10, weight 3.250 kg. At 20 hours after delivery, epigastric pain VAS 8-9 for 20 minutes, systolic/diastolic hypertension peak, increase in transaminases, LDH, ALP, Bilirubin, Dimer, platelet and fibrinogen drop. Neurological and respiratory objectivity were negative, and renal indices were within normal limits, so nifedipine 30mgx2/day + methyldopa 500 mgx2/day was started. Abdominal ultrasound revealed a thin perihepatic fluid stratum. A prophylaxis of dexamethasone 12mg twice a day and magnesium sulfate was introduced. At 32 hours after delivery, the laboratory detected an increase in transaminases, LDH, and worsening of thrombocytopenia. The patient is always eupnoic, and the diuresis is adequate. Blood tests improved gradually after 56 hours postpartum. Methyldopa and steroids are escalating. On day 7, discharge with normalized platelet and bilirubin counts and a decreasing trend in transaminases, LDH, and PAL. At the one-week follow-up, liver enzymes and coagulation were completely normal, and blood pressure was well controlled with methyldopa. We conclude that the simultaneous presence of the two diseases could have had a synergistic or opportunistic effect, resulting in severe clinical manifestations via interaction with the Renin-Angiotensin-Aldosterone system.

Correspondence: Fara Russo, Anaesthesiology Unit, P.O. Villa Malta, Sarno, Italy.
E-mail: fararusso@libero.it

Key words: pregnancy, COVID-19, HELLP-like syndrome.

Conflict of interest: the authors declare no potential conflict of interest, and all authors confirm accuracy.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: the authors have obtained consent from the patient and from the Hospital's Health Management to the processing of personal and sensitive data and the publication of this paper. The authors of this paper have not disclosed any details or information that could be used to identify the patient, nor have they used references to names, as well as pictures or videos. There was no use of compassionate or experimental therapies.

Availability of data and materials: the data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Acknowledgments: thanks to the hospital staff and the hospital management.

Received: 18 December 2023.
Accepted: 1 March 2024.

Publisher's note: all claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers. Any product that may be evaluated in this article or claim that may be made by its manufacturer is not guaranteed or endorsed by the publisher.

©Copyright: the Author(s), 2024

Licensee PAGEPress, Italy

Acute Care Medicine Surgery and Anesthesia 2024; 2:39
doi:10.4081/amsa.2024.39

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Introduction

Preeclampsia is a multisystem, multifactorial hypertensive disorder of pregnancy, mediated by the placenta. It has an incidence of about 5%, and it is considered a clinical manifestation of maternal endothelial dysfunction.¹ Clinically, preeclampsia presents with hypertension (BP \geq 140/90 mmHg) associated with proteinuria and/or alterations in renal or hepatic function, neurological signs, hemolysis or thrombocytopenia, and/or fetal hypodevelopment. As gestation progresses, preeclampsia can evolve into more serious conditions, such as eclampsia, hemorrhagic stroke, and HELLP (Hemolysis, Elevated liver enzymes and low platelets) Syndrome.²

The pandemic of COVID-19 due to the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus resulted in a high number of critical patients and deaths.³ Emerging data on the maternal impact of COVID-19 suggest that the clinical course is similar regardless of pregnancy.^{4,5}

However, it has been shown that SARS-CoV-2 infection in pregnant women significantly increases the risk of going through serious complications.⁵ A meta-analysis published in 2023 involving 13,136 pregnant women found out that in the case of SARS-CoV-2 infection, the risk of death during pregnancy or delivery increases 7-fold.

In addition, the risk of intensive care unit admission is three times higher and the risk of mechanical ventilation is 15 times higher. Finally, the chance of thrombotic complications is 5-fold higher than in pregnant women who have never contracted the virus.⁶

In pregnant and postpartum women with severe inflammatory forms of COVID-19, an increased prevalence of preeclampsia has been proved, and many of these cases have evolved into HELLP syndrome.⁷ A new clinical-laboratory entity termed "COVID-19-Linked HELLP-Like Syndrome" (CLHLS) has been described.⁸

Case Report

We present the clinical case of a 31-year-old woman, second pregnancy, 38th week of gestation, who arrived at the emergency department of our hospital for Premature Rupture of Membranes (PROM) and the onset of labor.

At admission, we found nasopharyngeal swab positivity for SARS-CoV-2 (qRT-PCR).

The medical history was silent; the patient was not taking medications, and she had not had vaccination for SARS-CoV-2 and COVID-19 infections in the past.

On objective examination, there was apyrexia (body temperature 36.8°C), eupnea with RR of 16 acts/min, saturation of 99% in Ambient Air, and HR of 86 beats/min but mild hypertension emerged (NIBP 140/85 mmHg). The patient's BMI was 22 kg/m².

Laboratory tests were normal.

The patient began antibiotic prophylaxis with Cefazolin (first dose of 2 g intravenous, then 1 g every 8 hours) and antithrombotic prophylaxis with subcutaneous enoxaparin 4000 UIx2/day.

About 12 hours after admission, the woman delivered by vaginal delivery without any complications: a female fetus with a birth weight of 3.250 kg, Apgar 9-10.

On the second day after delivery, the patient presented with an episode of epigastric pain (VAS 8-9) lasting about 20 minutes and NIBP 160/100 mmHg finding. She started antihypertensive therapy with nifedipine 30 mgx2/day + methyldopa 500 mgx2/day orally.

Blood tests showed increased values of transaminases aspartate aminotransferase (AST) and alanine aminotransferase (ALT), lactate dehydrogenase (LDH), alkaline phosphatase (ALP), bilirubin, White Blood Cells, D-Dimer and decreased values of platelets and fibrinogen. An abdominal ultrasound was performed that showed a perihaptic fluid of about 7 mm.

Due to the increasing trend of liver enzymes, worsening thrombocytopenia (Plt 84,000 u/μL), and suspected HELLP syndrome, dexamethasone 12mg x 2/day was added in therapy, and prophylaxis with magnesium sulfate was started.

On the third day after delivery, blood tests recorded a further increase in AST, ALT, and LDH values and a worsening of thrombocytopenia (Plt 75,000 u/μL), with no change in the clinical picture.

From the fourth postpartum day on, there was a progressive decrease in AST, ALT, LDH, ALP, Bilirubin, D-dimer, and Fibrinogen values and a progressive increase in platelet count. Initiated descalation of antihypertensive therapy obtaining good control of blood pressure values with methyldopa 500 mg/day. Declaration of corticosteroid therapy was implemented based on platelet count.

The patient was discharged on day 8 based on the normalization of platelet count and bilirubin and the decreasing trend of AST, ALT, LDH, and alkaline phosphatase.

The patient was checked in the outpatient clinic one week after discharge and showed complete resolution of liver function and coagulation profile. Her blood pressure was well controlled with oral methyldopa 500 mg/day.

Discussion

We described the case of a pregnant patient with a mild form of COVID-19 in late pregnancy and preeclampsia who developed "COVID-19-Linked HELLP-Like Syndrome" CLHLS. This case adds to the growing body of evidence that there is considerable overlap in the clinical and laboratory presentations of the two etiologies, which may complicate the timely diagnosis of HELLP syndrome in the context of SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Both preeclampsia and COVID-19 infection are examples of microvascular disease causing endothelial damage. Both cause a high prothrombotic tendency leading to multi-organ failure. The presence of both diseases probably has a synergistic or opportunistic effect, which could lead to severe clinical manifestations through the interaction of the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system in their pathogenesis.

Indeed, although the pathology of COVID-19 appears to be multifactorial, it has been shown that angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE 2) mediates the entry of SARS-CoV-2 into target cells through binding to the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 itself.⁹

ACE 2 is found not only in the pulmonary epithelium, but also in the heart, intestines, kidneys, and blood vessels.¹⁰ It is one of the central enzymes in the renin-angiotensin system (RAS) that regulates blood pressure, fluid, electrolyte balance, and systemic vascular resistance, but it is also involved in mechanisms of platelet activation, thrombosis, and endothelial dysfunction.

ACE 2 is highly expressed in placental tissue, including the trophoblast syncytium, endothelium, cytotrophoblast, and vascular villus musculature.¹¹ Infection caused by COVID-19 can alter ACE2 expression, promoting a preeclamptic state.

Mendoza, in his case series, postulates a preeclamptic-like syndrome in patients with severe SARS-CoV-2 infection, who meet the criteria for preeclampsia but recover without delivery, only after improvement in respiratory status.¹² Recent reports on pregnant patients with COVID-19 show evidence of maternal vascular malperfusion, vascular injury, and thrombi.^{13,14}

The strong association between the severe form of COVID-19 and CLHLS was demonstrated in a Spanish study,¹⁵ with a prevalence of 28.6% (10/35 cases) of severe cases admitted to the ICU and no cases of CLHLS in mild cases of COVID-19 in pregnancy (0/34). These data would lead to the hypothesis that CLHLS is related to the severity of COVID-19.

However, recent literature reports several cases of mild COVID-19 infection and CLHLS.¹⁶⁻¹⁹

Because of the close similarity between CLHLS and classic HELLP syndrome in pregnant women with COVID-19, it is difficult to establish a differential diagnosis. Some authors are beginning to suggest laboratory parameters (such as LDH >600 UI/L) and imaging test results (such as uterine artery Doppler UtAPI >p95) to diagnose pre-eclampsia/HELLP syndrome.¹⁴ Angiogenic markers, including maternal sFlt-1/PlGF levels, have also shown clinical utility as they can help rule out suspicion of preeclampsia.¹⁵

The differential diagnosis between CLHLS and HELLP syndrome is important because the treatment approach is different.

For CLHLS, conservative treatment is recommended, and the viral infection and inflammatory condition should be allowed to resolve spontaneously and gestation continues, thus preventing the mother's condition from worsening and avoiding iatrogenic preterm birth.

Differently, in classic HELLP syndrome, increased blood pressure, alterations in blood tests, organ dysfunction, and alterations in placental function persist even after the viral infection has regressed, indicating the need for delivery.⁸

Conclusions

The pandemic of COVID-19 has introduced additional challenges in the diagnosis of HELLP as COVID-19 infection can cause other systemic complications including elevated blood pressure, hemolysis, thrombocytopenia, renal impairment, and hypertransaminasemia that mimic preeclampsia and features of HELLP-Syndrome.

Early diagnosis of HELLP syndrome is essential to avoid maternal and fetal complications. Physicians should be aware of the similarities in presentation between HELLP syndrome and COVID-19 for timely diagnosis and treatment.

Although our understanding of COVID-19 maternal-fetal health is incomplete, pregnant patients with concomitant COVID-19 may have an increased risk of complications. Therefore, a careful screening for SARS-CoV-2 infection in pregnant patients is advisable for appropriate treatment.

References

1. Sánchez-Aranguren LC, Prada CE, Riaño-Medina CE, Lopez M. Endothelial dysfunction and preeclampsia: role of oxidative stress. *Front Physiol* 2014;10:372.
2. Poon LC, Shennan A, Hyett JA, et al. The International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) – Initiative on Preeclampsia: A pragmatic guide for first-trimester screening and prevention. *Int J Gynecol Obstet* 2019;145:1-33.
3. Mullins E, Evans D, Viner RM, et al. Coronavirus in pregnancy and delivery: rapid review. *Ultrasound Obstet Gynecol* 2020;55:586-92.
4. Dashraath P, Wong JLL, Lim MXK, et al. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and pregnancy. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2020;222:521-31.
5. Di Mascio D, Khalil A, Saccone G, et al. Outcome of coronavirus spectrum infections (SARS, MERS, COVID-19) during pregnancy: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Am J Obstet Gynecol MFM* 2020;2:100107.
6. Smith ER, Oakley E, Grandner GW, et al. Adverse maternal, fetal, and newborn outcomes among pregnant women with SARS-CoV-2 infection: an individual participant data meta-analysis. *BMJ Glob Health* 2023;8:e009495.
7. Lai J, Romero R, Tarca AL, et al. SARS-CoV-2 and the subsequent development of preeclampsia and preterm birth: evidence of a dose-response relationship supporting causality. *Am J Obstet Gynecol* 2021;225:689–93.
8. da Cunha Sobieray NLE, Zanela M, Padilha SL, et al. HELLP syndrome and COVID-19: A minor revision of a possible new "COVID-19-linked HELLP-like syndrome". *Review Eur J Obstet Gynecol Reprod Biol* 2023;283:90-4.
9. Yan R, Zhang Y, Li Y, et al. Structural basis for the recognition of SARS-CoV-2 by full-length human ACE2. *Science* 2020;367:1444-8.
10. Gusev E, Sarapultsev A, Solomatina L, Chereshnev V. SARS-CoV-2-Specific Immune Response and the Pathogenesis of COVID-19. *Int J Mol Sci* 2022;23:1716.
11. Shanes ED, Mithal LB, Otero S, et al. Placental Pathology in COVID-19. *Am J Clin Pathol* 2020;154:23-32.
12. Mendoza M, Garcia-Ruiz I, Maiz N, et al. Pre-eclampsia-like syndrome induced by severe COVID-19: a prospective observational study. *BJOG* 2020;127:1374-80.
13. Coronado-Arroyo JC, Concepción-Zavaleta MJ, Zavaleta-Gutiérrez FE, Concepción-Urteaga LA. Is COVID-19 a risk factor for severe preeclampsia? Hospital experience in a developing country. *Eur J Obstet Gynecol Reprod Biol* 2021;256:502-3.
14. Ronnje L, Länsberg JK, Vikhareva O, et al. Complicated COVID-19 in pregnancy: a case report with severe liver and coagulation dysfunction promptly improved by delivery. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 2020;20:511.
15. Figueras F, Martinez-Portilla RJ, Llorba E, et al. VP45.03: COVID-19 causing HELLP-like syndrome in pregnancy and the role of angiogenic factors for differential diagnosis. *Ultrasound Obstet Gynecol* 2020;56:257–8.
16. Arslan E. COVID-19: A Cause of HELLP Syndrome? A Case Report. *Int J Womens Health* 2022;14:617-623.
17. Ahmed I, Eltaweel N, Antoun L, Rehal A. Severe pre-eclampsia complicated by acute fatty liver disease of pregnancy, HELLP syndrome and acute kidney injury following SARS-CoV-2 infection. *BMJ Case Rep* 2020;13:e237521.
18. Madaan S, Talwar D, Kumar S, et al. HELLP Syndrome and COVID-19; association or accident: A case series. *J Family Med Prim Care* 2022;11:802-6.
19. Čivrná J, Skanderová D, Ehrmann J, Pilka R. HELLP syndrome and HELLP-like syndrome in pregnancies with covid-19 - case reports. *Ceska Gynekol* 2021;86:236-41.