

# SERUM ZINC LEVEL IN CHRONIC HEPATITIS C PATIENTS: DOES IT HAVE A ROLE IN THE PROGRESSIONOF LIVER DISEASE?

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# ABSTRACT

Introduction: Chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) is the most frequent disease states responsible for the induction of liver fibrosis. Zinc(Zn) has a protective effect against liver fibrosis. Aim of study: To estimate serum zinc levels in patients with chronic HCVand determine the correlation between their levels and clinical, laboratory and histopathological profiles assess its role in the pathogenesis of chronic HCV. Subjects and methods: Seventy five patients with chronic HCV. Their age ranged from 22 to 58 years with a mean age  $\pm$  SD of 40.5  $\pm$  6.5. They were 48 (64%) males and 27(36%) females. In addition to twenty-five healthy individuals matched in age and sex as a control group. All subjects were submitted to full clinical and laboratory investigations, serum zinc levels estimation by atomic absorption spectrophotometry. Liver biopsy was done for patients to assess liver fibrosis. Results: A statistically significantly lower serum levels of zinc was observed among patients with chronic HCV when compared with control group ( $46\pm 3.1$  and  $67\pm 7.2$ , respectively). There was an inverse correlation between serum zinc level and age. No significant correlation was found between amounts of HCV RNA, duration of interferon therapy. The serum zinc concentration of the patients on interferon therapy group was significantly higher than that of the untreated group. A high significant difference was found between the different grades of histopathological changes in liver biopsy findings as regard serum zinc levels. In conclusion: The serum concentration of zinc decreased significantly in chronic HCV and has been implicated in liver disease progression.

*Keywords*: Zinc, chronic hepatitis C virus, HCV, chronic liver disease.

## **INTRODUCTION**

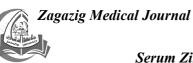
Hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection is a major health problem in Egypt, where the seroprevalence is 10–20-fold higher than that in the United States<sup>1,2</sup>.HCV is the most frequent disease state responsible for the induction of liver fibrosis.Understandingthe mechanisms that contribute to liver fibrosis will prove helpful in designing more efficacious diagnostic and treatment strategies<sup>3</sup>.

Zinc is an essential trace element, exerting important antioxidant, antiinflammatory, and antiapoptotic effects<sup>4</sup>. The liver is important for the regulation of zinc homeostasis, while zinc is necessary for proper liver function. Decreased zinc levels have been implicated in both acute and chronic liver disease states, and in the diseases<sup>5</sup>.zinc pathogenesis of liver supplementation enhances the response to

interferon therapy in patients with intractable chronic hepatitis  $C^6$ .

It has long been speculated that Zn has a protective effect against liver fibrosis'. Zn could directly affect the fibrotic process by influencing the activity of proteins and enzymes that participate in collagen synthesis and degradation (e.g., collagenase, prolyl-hydroxylase, and matrix metalloproteinases)<sup>8</sup>. Indirectly, Zn could inhibit the fibrotic process by its anti-inflammatory, antiapoptotic, and antioxidant properties and by controlling the function of the hepatic stellate cells (HSCs) that play a central role in collagen metabolism in the liver<sup>9</sup>.

Although Zn is a redox inert molecule, it has important antioxidant properties. The most important of the antioxidant properties of Zn are the protection through the antagonism of



redox-active transition metals like copper (Cu) and iron (Fe) and the protection of protein sulfhydryl groups from oxidative damage<sup>10,11</sup>.

# SUBJECTS AND METHODS

The present study was carried out in the departments of Tropical medicine (outpatient clinic) and Biochemistry, Pathology, Faculty of Medicine, Zagazig University Hospitals during the period from December 2009 to June 2010.

This study included 75 patients with chronic hepatitis C. They were 48 (64%) males and 27 (36%) females. Their age ranged from 22 to 58 years with a mean age  $\pm$  SD of 40.5  $\pm$  6.5 years, in addition to 25 healthy individuals who matched patient groups for age and sex as a control group.

Forty-four patients were on interferon therapy for a duration ranging from 1month to 12 months with a mean duration  $\pm$  SD of 6.2  $\pm$ 0.9and 31patients not on interferon therapy.

An informed written consent was signed from each subject prior to participation in this work.

*All patients and controls were subjected to:* 1- Full medical history and complete physical examination.

2- Laboratory investigation including; urine and stool analysis, complete blood count, Liver and kidney function tests.

3- Abdominal ultrasound; was done after an overnight fast using Aloka SSD-200 (a 3.5 MHz transducer). 4- Viral markers: Hepatitis hepatitis B surface antigen (HBs Ag) and HCV antibodies by enzyme linked immunosorbant assay and HCV RNA – PCR (All of the patients were positive for serum HCV RNA).

5- Estimation of plasma concentrations of Zn was performed using conventional atomic absorption spectrometry using a Z-6100 polarized Zeeman Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometer (HITACHI, Tokyo, Japan) within 48 h of collection of blood<sup>12</sup>.Reference range (Adults 60-130  $\mu$ g/dL) and detection limit 10  $\mu$ g/dL.

6- Liver biopsy was done for patients only. **Exclusion criteria:**All conditions that affect zinc homeostasis are excluded from the study examples:

- Advanced renal disease, kidney dialysis.

- Severe malnutrition, tube feeding, tracheostomy or chronic ventilator use.

- Heavy parasitic infestation.

- Neoplastic diseases.

- Decompensated liver cirrhosis.

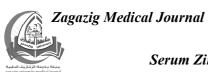
- Chronic steroid treatment >10 mg/d, use of immunosuppressive drugs, use of antibiotics, diuretics within the prior 2 weeks.

-More than the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) level supplements of vitamins E, C, B<sub>6</sub>, selenium, zinc,  $\beta$ -carotene, or fish oil<sup>13</sup>.

- Stop intake of supplements within 1 week of the study.

<b>Recommended Dietary Allowances</b>	(RDAs) f	for Zinc <sup>14</sup>
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Age	Male	Female	Pregnancy	Lactation
0–6 months	2 mg	2 mg		
7–12 months	3 mg	3 mg		
1–3 years	3 mg	3 mg		
4–8 years	5 mg	5 mg		
9–13 years	8 mg	8 mg		
14-18 years	11 mg	9 mg	12 mg	13 mg
19+ years	11 mg	8 mg	11 mg	12 mg



## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Analysis of data was performed using SPSS windows (Version 12). All data were presented as the mean±SDand were compared using independent t test. Analysis of variance test (ANOVA) was used when comparing between more than two means, and the least significant difference (LSD) was calculated. Correlation coefficient (r) was calculated to measure correlation between variables.A P value> 0.05 was considered nonsignificant.

## RESULTS

Table (1) shows a high significant difference of serum zinc level between cases and controls. Controls had a higher serum zinc level than cases.

There was an inverse correlation between serum zinc levels and age, while there was no significant correlation between duration of interferon therapy and serum zinc levels as shown in table (2).

Regarding gender, there was no significant difference between the mean

value of serum zinc level in males and females, while statistical analysis indicated that there was a highly significant difference between serum Zn levels in smokers and nonsmokers as shown in table (3).

There was an inverse high correlation between serum zinc level and liver enzymes, bilirubin, prothrombin time (PT) and gamma- glutamyl transferase (GGT) parameters, while no significant correlation was found as regard other laboratory parameters as shown in table (4).

A high significant difference was found between the different grades of histopathological changes in liver biopsy findings as regard serum zinc level as shown in table (5). There was no statistically significant difference of serum zinc levels between patients received interferon therapy and patients did not receive interferon therapyas shown in table (6).

Table (1) Comparison of mean value $\pm$ SD of serum zinc level ( $\mu$ g/dL) of cases and controls		
	Serum zinc levels (µg/dL)	P value
	mean± SD	
Cases (n=75)	46± 3.1	< 0.001**
Control (n=25)	67± 7.2	
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\*\*= Highly significant

Table (2) Correlation between serum zinc level ( $\mu g/dL$ ) and age and duration of interferon therapy among HCV patients.

	R	P value
Age	-0.45	< 0.001 **
duration of interferon therapy	0.20	> 0.05

**\*\***= Highly significant



Table (3): The mean serum zin	c levels ( $\mu g/dL$ ) in relation to gene	der and smoking habit.	
	Serum zinc levels (µg/dL)	P value	
	Mean± SD		
Gender			
Male(n=48)	44 ±7.1	>0.05	
Female (n=27)	$47 \pm 6.0$		
Smoking Habit		< 0.001**	
Smokers (n=39)	$43 \pm 7.3$	< 0.001	
Non-smokers (n=36)	$51 \pm 3.2$		
Table (4) Correlation between	serum zinc level (µg/dL) and diffe	erent laboratory parameters.	
	R	P value	
Haemogloubin	0.20	>0.05	
Platelets	0.12	>0.05	
ALT	-0.39	< 0.001**	
AST	-0.38	< 0.001**	
Bilirubin	-0.70	< 0.001**	
Albumin	0.20	>0.05	
GGT	-0.38	< 0.001**	
ALP	-0.09	> 0.05	
РТ	-0.70	< 0.001**	
RBS	-0.11	> 0.05	
Serum creatinine	-0.15	>0.05	
PCR (quantitative)	-0.16	>0.05	

ALT, alanine aminotranferease; AST,aspartate aminotransferase GGT, gamma-glutamyl transferase; ALP, alkaline phosphatase; PT, prothrombin time; RBS, random blood sugar; PCR, polymerase chain reaction

\*\*= Highly significant

Table (5) Mean serum zinc level ( $\mu$ g/dL) and liver biopsy findings in patients.

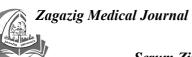
	No	Mean±SD	
1/6	21	$51 \pm 3.2$	
2/6	18	$46 \pm 1.2$	
3/6	15	$41 \pm 4.1$	
4/6	12	$35 \pm 4.0$	
5/6	9	31 ± 2.0	

P < 0.001 = Highly significant

Table (6) Relation between serum zinc level ( $\mu g/dL$ ) and interferon therapy among patients.

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No	Mean $\pm$ SD
44	44±7.2
31	45±5.3
	No 44 31

P > 0.05 = Significant



## DISCUSSION

Zinc is an essential trace element, exerting important antioxidant, antiinflammatory, and antiapoptotic effects. The liver is important for the regulation of zinc homeostasis, while zinc is necessary for proper liver function. Zinc deficiency has been implicated in the pathogenesis of liver diseases<sup>4,5</sup>.

In study, statistically this а significantly lower serum level of zinc was observed among cirrhotic patients with chronic HCV when compared with control group<sup>15</sup>. It can be explained by inadequate dietary intake and impaired intestinal mucosa with the development of liver with resultant decreases in disease. absorption of zinc through the mucosa. In addition to the reduced intrahepatic content of zinc secondary to decreases in the number of viable hepatocytes, which finally results in decreases in the serum zinc concentration<sup>16</sup>.

There are an inverse correlation between serum zinc level and agebecause Egypt is considered one of the developing countries with low socioeconomic standards and diet contains few animal sources, in addition to the absence of programs of geriatric care, bad nutritional habits of elderly. There was a negative correlation between Zn concentrations and smoking habit. This may be due to deficient absorption of Zn caused by a tobacco chelation effect<sup>17</sup>.

Although most of zinc that exists in blood bound to albumin, there was no correlation between serum zinc and albumin levels because all patients were compensated with normal serum albumin. On the other hand, the serum concentration of zinc inversely correlated significantly with liver enzymes, bilirubin, prothrombinPT and GGT. The previous parameters were increased with disease progression<sup>18</sup>.

In this study, there was no correlation between the serum zinc concentration and the amount of HCV RNA. This suggests that the presence of HCV itself has no influence on the serum zinc concentration. This result was in agreement with Himotoet al<sup>19</sup>who found that administration of zinc in patients with hepatitis C virus-related chronic liver disease improved serum zinc level but did not affect HCV-RNA load.

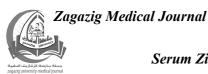
Moreover, no significant correlation was found between duration of interferon therapy and serum zinc level. Also, no statistically significant difference was found between the serum zinc concentration of the patients on interferon therapygroup and that of the untreated group.However, these results need further studies to determine Zn level before, during and after treatment from every patient on interferon therapy as well as between responder and non responderto compare effect of interferon on serum zinc level.

A high significant increase was found among different histopathologicalgrades in liver biopsy as regard serum zinc level. This result denotes close relations between zinc and fibrosis of the liver as reported by Kojima-Yuasa et al.<sup>9</sup>. Zn deficiency induced by chronic liver disease enhances oxidative stress in the liver and, thus, the fibrotic process<sup>11,20</sup>. Zn deficiency could have a direct effect on HSCs activation that play a key role in liver fibrosis induction<sup>9</sup>.

In conclusion, the serum concentration of zinc decreased significantly in chronic HCV and has been implicated in liver disease progression

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