

Retrospective Evaluation of Non-Invasive Assessment Based on Routine Laboratory Markers for Assessing Advanced Liver Fibrosis in Chronic Hepatitis B Patients

Zeyu Wang^{1,*}, Yonghe Zhou^{2,3,*}, Pengzhi Yu^{2,3}, Yonggang Liu^{3,4}, Mei Mei⁵, Zhuo Bian², Wei Shao², Jinxia Lv², Xin Li², Wei Lu^{1,3,6}, Liang Xu^{3,6}

¹Department of Hepatobiliary Oncology, Tianjin Medical University Cancer Institute and Hospital, National Clinical Research Center for Cancer, Key Laboratory of Cancer Prevention and Therapy, Tianjin, Tianjin's Clinical Research Center for Cancer, Tianjin, 300060, People's Republic of China;

²Ultrasound department, Tianjin Second People's Hospital, Tianjin, 300192, People's Republic of China; ³Tianjin Research Institute of Liver Diseases, Tianjin, 300192, People's Republic of China; ⁴Pathology Department, Tianjin Second People's Hospital, Tianjin, 300192, People's Republic of China;

⁵Department of Gastroenterology, Tianjin Haihe Hospital, Tianjin, 300350, People's Republic of China; ⁶Department of Hepatology, Tianjin Second People's Hospital, Tianjin, 300192, People's Republic of China

*These authors contributed equally to this work

Correspondence: Wei Lu; Liang Xu, Email luwei1966@126.com; xuyangliang2004@sina.com

Background: At present, there is a lack of cheap, effective and convenient detection methods for hepatitis B-related liver fibrosis, especially in the developing area.

Aim: To evaluate the non-invasive methods for the significant and advanced fibrosis stage in chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) patients in basic hospitals and to assess their diagnostic utility.

Methods: The study included 436 consecutive naive HBV individuals who had their livers biopsied. They were examined in one week using aspartate aminotransferase-to-aspartate aminotransferase ratio (AAR), age-platelet index (API), aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio index (APRI), fibrosis-4 (FIB-4), Forns, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase-to-platelet ratio (GPR), S-index and transient elastography (TE). Scheuer scoring system was used to determine the histologic fibrosis grades (S0–S4). The diagnostic effectiveness was assessed using AUROCs and the DeLong test, both of which were based on statistical comparisons.

Results: For both substantial ($\geq S2$) and advanced ($\geq S3$) fibrosis phases, TE had good diagnostic performance in determining the hepatic fibrosis. Similar diagnostic performance was shown with Forns and S-index when it came to detecting fibrosis stages lower than S3. One model's diagnostic value was not significantly improved by combining serum models. Correlation coefficients between clinical features and fibrosis phases were greatest for Forns ($r = 0.397$), S-index ($r = 0.382$) and TE ($r = 0.535$) when compared to other variables.

Conclusion: This investigation showed that Forns and S-index may be helpful strategies for detecting advanced fibrosis in HBV patients admitted to community hospitals.

Keywords: hepatitis B virus, non-invasive, basic hospital, transient elastography, Forns, S-index

Introduction

Chronic hepatitis B virus (HBV) infections continue to be a global pandemic, with the majority of cases progressing to liver cirrhosis, hepatic failure or hepatocellular carcinoma.^{1–3} Thus, HBV continues to be a significant public health concern.⁴ Fibrosis of the liver is a typical complication of chronic hepatitis virus infection (CHV).⁵ Although liver biopsy remains the gold standard for fibrosis grading, it has significant disadvantages, including sample bias and the possibility of serious consequences.⁶ As a result, it is critical to investigate accurate, simple, and noninvasive approaches for

evaluating liver fibrosis. Numerous imaging modalities and non-invasive models for the assessment of liver fibrosis have been developed.^{7–9}

Transient elastography (TE), magnetic resonance (MR) elastography, shear wave elasticity imaging (SWEI), acoustic radiation force impulse imaging (ARFI), and supersonic shear wave imaging (SSI) have all been developed significantly during the last two decades.¹⁰ TE is the most frequently used approach in everyday clinical practice and has been well validated in large patient cohorts.^{11–13} There are a number of serum indicators that may be used to diagnose liver fibrosis, including Forns, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase to platelet ratio (GPR), liver fibrosis-4 (FIB-4), and the aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio index (APRI).¹¹ The predictive value of these blood indicators is currently debatable, which limits their widespread clinical use despite their accessibility benefits. Cirrhosis may easily occur if fibrosis of the liver is not treated in a timely manner. At accordance with the recommendations, patients in the fibrosis stage need medication intervention \geq S2.¹⁴ Studies in progress have showed that serum biomarker for S1 patients is of limited effectiveness,^{15,16} and it still relies on pathological examination. Therefore, we conducted this research focusing on the fibrosis stage \geq S2 and \geq S3.

Because of the asymptomatic nature of liver fibrosis, it is essential to do routine screenings for the condition. More than a quarter of all patients might be saved from the onset of chronic disease by starting an early detection program at their primary care facilities. We expect to find many people who had no idea they had a persistent hepatitis infection. For example, hyaluronidase and laminin, type III procollagen peptide and type IV collagen levels,¹⁷ as well as several novel indicators such as ceruloplasmin¹⁸ and N-glycan¹⁹ cannot be measured in many hospitals. Aspartate aminotransferase to aspartate aminotransferase ratio (AAR), age platelet index (API), APRI, FIB-4, Forns, GPR and S-index were among the non-invasive models we chose from the already existing pool. These seven non-invasive models are all based on the most common clinical parameters, such as age, platelet, aspartate aminotransferase (AST), alanine aminotransferase (ALT), gamma-glutamyl transferase (GGT), cholesterol, and albumin (ALB), which can be obtained in blood routine and liver function tests. Non-invasive models that are comparable to TE in terms of diagnostic performance and are best suited for basic-level hospital promotion are our goal. Additionally, efforts are being made to better integrate the serological indications for use in diagnostics. Most investigations of non-invasive liver fibrosis detection currently have limited sample sizes and lack the ability to identify coupled hepatic fibrosis. We want to find the most accessible, most accurate noninvasive diagnostic technology available.

Methods

Patient Characteristics

Patients enrolled in this study, from Tianjin Second People's Hospital, China between April 2016 and December 2020, who were underwent a series of laboratory tests, liver biopsy and FibroScan. All of these patients were positive for serum hepatitis B surface antigen (HBsAg) for at least 6 months. The exclusion criteria were as follows: 1) age less than 18 years old; 2) co-infection with other hepatitis virus and HIV; 3) with hepatocellular carcinoma; 4) with drug-induced liver injury; 5) daily alcohol consumption >30 g for men and >20 g for women; 6) any type of positive autoantibody above 1:160; 7) immune suppressive treatment within 1 year. Before the research, all of the patients provided written informed consent. This study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of Tianjin Second People's Hospital and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Clinical and Laboratory Data Collection

Laboratory data such as ALT, AST, GGT, alkaline phosphatase (ALP), total bilirubin (TBIL), ALB, glucose (GLU), cholesterol (CHO), triglyceride (TG), hemoglobin (HGB), mean corpuscular volume (MCV) and Platelet (PLT) were measured and the demographic information, including age, sex and history of previous diseases were evaluated before clinical therapy. The APRI index was calculated as follows: $\text{AST (IU/L)} / (\text{upper limit of normal range (40 IU/L)}) \times 100 / \text{platelet count (10}^9\text{/L)}$; FIB-4 score: $\text{age (year)} \times \text{AST (U/L)} / (\text{platelet count (10}^9\text{/L)} \times (\text{ALT (U/L)})^{1/2})$; Forns score was calculated as: $7.811 - 3.131 \times \ln(\text{platelet count (10}^9\text{/L)}) + 0.781 \times \ln(\text{GGT (IU/L)}) + 3.467 \times \ln(\text{age (year)}) - 0.014 \times \text{total cholesterol (mg/dl)}$; GPR was calculated as: $\text{GGT (U/L)} / \text{platelet count (10}^9\text{/L)}$. AAR was calculated as: $\text{AST (U/L)} / \text{ALT (U/L)}$; API is the sum of age

(<30 = 0; 30–39 = 1; 40–49 = 2; 50–59 = 3; 60–69 = 4; >70 = 5) and platelet count ($PLT \times 10^9/L$: 225 = 0; 200–224 = 1; 175–199 = 2; 150–174 = 3; 125–149 = 4; <125 = 5); S-index: $1000 \times GGT/Platelets \times Albumin$.

Transient Elastography

TE was used for all patients by FibroScan[®]-502 (Echosens, Paris, France) with a 3.5 MHz M probe to capture CAP and TE simultaneously.^{20,21} Prior to this study, the operators had performed TE evaluations for at least 500 patients. The results of liver stiffness measurements (LSM) were expressed as kPa, and CAP was expressed in dB/m. The CAP values range from 100 to 400 dB/m, while the LSM values are expressed as kilopascals (kPa) and range from 1.5 to 75 kPa. If the success rate was more than 60% and the ratio of interquartile range to median under 30%, the median value of ten successful measurements was considered valid.

Liver Biopsy

All of the enrolled patients finished ultrasound-guided liver biopsy. Histological findings were reviewed by two experienced hepatic pathologists and consensus was reached in case of disagreement. The liver fibrosis was evaluated by using Scheuer scoring system,^{22,23} which was staged on a 0–4 scale as follows: S0 no fibrosis; S1 fibrous portal expansion; S2 periportal or rare portal-portal septa; S3 fibrous septa with architectural distortion; S4 cirrhosis. Necroinflammatory activity grades were as follows: G0, no portal or periportal and lobular activity; G1, portal or periportal inflammation activity and minimal occasionally spotty lobular activity; G2, mild piecemeal portal or periportal necrosis and mild or focal lobular necrosis; G3, moderate piecemeal portal or periportal necrosis and moderate or noticeable liver change inside the lobule; and G4, severe piecemeal necrosis and severe or diffuse liver damage inside the lobule.²⁴

Statistical Analysis

All data were analyzed by R software v3.6.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria). The diagnostic performances were analyzed by computing the areas under the receiver operating characteristics curves (AUROCs). The optimal diagnostic cut-off value for each degree of histological steatosis was found by maximizing the Youden Index. For each cut-off, a corresponding sensitivity and specificity values were also calculated. The diagnostic performances between two measures were compared using the DeLong test. The combination of different methods was performed by “ROCR” and “pROC” packages. AUROCs, specific and sensitivity values were calculated by the “pROC” package. “pROC” packages also used to compare the significance of AUROCs. For correlation studies, we carried out Pearson’s statistical analyses. A *P*-value of less than 0.05 on a two-tailed test was considered significant.

Results

Patients’ Characteristics and Histological Findings

During the study period, 436 patients with HBV who underwent liver biopsy and FibroScan were enrolled in this study. There were 14 cases (3.2%) concomitant NASH which reached disagreement of pathological diagnosis by two experienced hepatic pathologists. The majority (312/436) of the study subjects were male, and the median age was 39.61 years (18–65 years old). The distribution of liver biopsy-proven fibrosis were S0 8 (1.8%), S1 224 (51.4%), S2 132 (30.3%), S3 43 (9.9%), S4 29 (6.7%). 18 cases (4.1%) of these patients with G0, 123 cases patients (28.2%) were G1, 247 cases patients (56.7%) were G3, just 48 cases patients were G3 and none patients with G4. The characteristics of all patients are given in Table 1.

Diagnostic Performance of AAR, API, APRI, FIB-4, Forns, GPR, S-Index and TE for Fibrosis Stages

The AUROC values of AAR, API, APRI, FIB-4, Forns, GPR, S-index and TE of the patients for predicting $\geq S2$ and $\geq S3$ fibrosis stages are shown in Table 2. The corresponding AUROC values of AAR, API, APRI, FIB4, Forns, GPR, S-index and TE were 0.588, 0.679, 0.667, 0.693, 0.701, 0.687, 0.697 and 0.796 for fibrosis grades $\geq S2$ and 0.584, 0.759, 0.712, 0.763, 0.793, 0.759, 0.791 and 0.836 for $\geq S3$. Compared with AUROC values of TE, Forns and

Table 1 Patients and Trial Characteristics of Included Studies

		n=436
Age (mean (SD))		39.61 (10.98)
Sex (%)	Female	124 (28.4)
	Male	312 (71.6)
ALT (mean (SD))		87.99 (107.36)
AST (mean (SD))		58.91 (81.82)
GGT (mean (SD))		68.88 (77.12)
ALP (mean (SD))		79.12 (31.24)
TBIL (mean (SD))		17.64 (11.76)
ALB (mean (SD))		44.74 (6.90)
GLU (mean (SD))		5.80 (1.60)
CHO (mean (SD))		4.52 (0.89)
TG (mean (SD))		1.42 (0.93)
HGB (mean (SD))		148.57 (16.84)
MCV (mean (SD))		89.90 (6.93)
PLT (mean (SD))		196.38 (70.35)
S (%)	0	8 (1.8)
	1	224 (51.4)
	2	132 (30.3)
	3	43 (9.9)
	4	29 (6.7)
G (%)	0	18 (4.1)
	1	123 (28.2)
	2	247 (56.7)
	3	48 (11.0)

Abbreviations: ALT, alanine aminotransferase; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; GGT, γ -glutamyl transpeptidase; ALP, alkaline phosphatase; TBIL, total bilirubin; ALB, albumin; GLU, glucose; CHO, cholesterol; HGB, hemoglobin; TG, triglyceride; MCV, mean corpuscular volume; PLT, platelet.

S-index showed similar diagnostic performance for \geq S3 fibrosis stage ($P = 0.127$ and $P = 0.09$). But the diagnostic performances of AAR, API, APRI, FIB-4, and GPR were significantly lower than TE for the fibrosis stage \geq S3. The diagnostic performance of TE in assessing hepatic fibrosis was excellent for fibrosis stage \geq S2 (all $P < 0.001$).

Table 2 Diagnostic Performances of Serum Markers and FibroScan for Significant Liver Fibrosis According to Optimal Cutoffs

		AUROC	Threshold	Specificity (%)	Sensitivity (%)	Accuracy (%)	AUROC vs TE
$\geq S2$	AAR	0.588	0.649	52.155	65.196	58.257	<0.001
	API	0.679	3.5	67.241	59.314	63.532	<0.001
	APRI	0.667	0.568	69.397	58.824	64.45	<0.001
	FIB4	0.693	1.229	75.431	55.392	66.055	<0.001
	Forns	0.701	7.828	82.759	50.49	67.661	0.001
	GPR	0.687	0.55	74.569	57.353	66.514	<0.001
	S-index	0.697	0.113	65.517	65.196	65.367	<0.001
	TE	0.796	8.75	80.603	68.627	75	-
$\geq S3$	AAR	0.584	0.649	47.253	72.222	51.376	<0.001
	API	0.759	4.5	73.352	70.833	72.936	0.015
	APRI	0.712	0.568	62.088	73.611	63.991	<0.001
	FIB4	0.763	1.252	69.231	73.611	69.954	0.011
	Forns	0.793	7.144	61.813	87.5	66.055	0.127
	GPR	0.759	0.866	82.692	62.5	79.358	0.008
	S-index	0.791	0.229	83.516	66.667	80.734	0.09
	TE	0.836	7.75	57.143	93.056	63.073	-

Abbreviations: TE, transient elastography; FIB-4, fibrosis 4 score; APRI, aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio index; AAR, aspartate aminotransferase-to-aspartate aminotransferase ratio; API, age-platelet index; GPR, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase-to-platelet ratio.

Diagnostic Performance of Combination Serum Markers for Fibrosis Stages

The AUROC values of the combination of two serum markers are shown in Figure 1. TE is superior to the combination of serum markers when diagnosing the fibrosis stage $\geq S2$ (all $P < 0.001$). Combination of serum markers may not significantly increase AUROC values (Table 3). Similar results were found in the fibrosis stage $\geq S3$. For the fibrosis stage $\geq S3$, combination of serum markers may not significantly increase the diagnostic performance. There was no significance for Forns or S-index combined with other serum markers (Table 4).

Correlations Analysis of Clinical Characteristics and Stages of Fibrosis Patients

To observe the correlation of clinical characteristics, non-invasive measurements and fibrosis stages, we performed the correlation analysis that included the factors of AAR, Age, ALB, ALP, ALT, API, APRI, AST, CHO, FIB-4, Forns, GGT, GLU, GPR, HGB, MCV, PLT, Sex, S-index, TBIL, TG and TE. At the end, we found most of the factors significantly correlated with fibrosis stages ($P < 0.05$). The correlation coefficients were markedly highest in Forns ($r=0.397$), S-index ($r=0.382$) and TE ($r=0.535$) as compared to other factors (Table 5 and Figure 2).

Discordance Rates of Degree of Liver Fibrosis Between Sindex, Forns and TE, and Liver Biopsy

Among 436 patients with CHB, 204 patients were diagnosed $\geq S2$ and 72 patients were diagnosed $\geq S3$ by liver biopsy. All of 436 patients were divided into $\geq S2$ and $\geq S3$, respectively. We analyzed the discordance of Sindex-diagnosed, Forns-diagnosed and TE-diagnosed patients with $\geq S2$ and $\geq S3$. The discordance was defined as discordance of these two stages simultaneously. Detection rates of discordance were 8.9% (39/436) with S-index, 13.8% (60/436) with Forns and 13.5% (59/436) with TE. Twelve



Figure 1 AUROC curves of AAR, API, APRI, FIB-4, Forns, GPR, S-index, TE and combination of two serum markers for fibrosis stage $\geq S2$ and $\geq S3$.

Table 3 Comparison of Different Non-Invasive Tools for Fibrosis Stage $\geq S2$

Combination	AUROC	vs TE (AUROC=0.796)	vs Forns (AUROC=0.701)	vs S-Index (AUROC=0.697)
		P-value	P-value	P-value
AAR+API	0.684	<0.001	-	-
AAR+APRI	0.676	<0.001	-	-
AAR+FIB4	0.684	<0.001	-	-
AAR+GPR	0.702	<0.001	-	-
APRI+API	0.694	<0.001	-	-
APRI+FIB4	0.692	<0.001	-	-
FIB4+API	0.693	<0.001	-	-
Forns+AAR	0.701	0.001	0.682	-
Forns+API	0.693	0.001	0.378	-
Forns+APRI	0.703	0.001	0.736	-
Forns+FIB4	0.702	0.001	0.426	-
Forns+GPR	0.703	0.001	0.42	-
GPR+API	0.698	<0.001	-	-
GPR+APRI	0.686	<0.001	-	-
GPR+FIB4	0.709	0.001	-	-
S-index+AAR	0.665	<0.001	-	0.848
S-index+API	0.694	<0.001	-	0.995
S-index+APRI	0.683	<0.001	-	0.229
S-index+FIB4	0.706	0.001	-	0.667
S-index+Forns	0.703	0.001	0.245	0.823
S-index+GPR	0.692	<0.001	-	0.983

Abbreviations: TE, transient elastography; FIB-4, fibrosis 4 score; APRI, aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio index; AAR, aspartate aminotransferase-to-aspartate aminotransferase ratio; API, age-platelet index; GPR, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase-to-platelet ratio.

patients were underestimated by S-index, 20 patients by Forns and 14 patients by TE for the stage $\geq S2$. For the stage $\geq S3$, 27 patients were underestimated by S-index, 51 patients by Forns and 5 patients by TE. Additionally, 27 patients had overestimated steatosis by S-index, 40 patients by Forns and 45 patients by TE for the stage $\geq S2$. For the stage $\geq S3$, 12 patients were overestimated steatosis by S-index, 9 patients by Forns and 54 patients by TE. Based on discordance of $\geq S2$ and $\geq S3$ stages simultaneously. We then performed multivariate stepwise regression analysis to detect the factors associated with discordance of results between each noninvasive diagnostic tool and liver biopsy. Finally, we found that the discordance with S-index was correlated with ALT ($B = 0.001$, $P = 0.03$), AST ($B = -0.001$, $P = 0.02$), GGT ($B = 0.001$, $P < 0.001$) and GLU ($B = -0.031$, $P < 0.001$). The discordance with Forns was correlated with age ($B = 0.201$, $P < 0.05$), sex ($B = 0.004$, $P < 0.05$), HGB ($B = -0.004$, $P < 0.05$) and PLT ($B = 0.038$, $P < 0.05$). However, there is no independent predictor was detected of discordance correlated with TE.

Table 4 Comparison of Different Non-Invasive Tools for Fibrosis Stage $\geq S3$

Combination	AUROC	vs TE (AUROC=0.836)	vs Forns (AUROC=0.793)	vs S-index (AUROC=0.791)
		P-value	P-value	P-value
AAR+API	0.758	0.015	-	-
AAR+APRI	0.702	<0.001	-	-
AAR+FIB4	0.737	0.02	-	-
AAR+GPR	0.748	0.002	-	-
APRI+API	0.775	0.044	-	-
APRI+FIB4	0.748	0.012	-	-
FIB4+API	0.773	0.036	-	-
Forns+AAR	0.783	0.137	0.497	-
Forns+API	0.781	0.112	0.136	-
Forns+APRI	0.798	0.135	0.427	-
Forns+FIB4	0.79	0.124	0.61	-
Forns+GPR	0.797	0.112	0.252	-
GPR+API	0.772	0.035	-	-
GPR+APRI	0.756	0.004	-	-
GPR+FIB4	0.784	0.009	-	-
S-index+AAR	0.709	0.066	-	0.81
S-index+API	0.778	0.054	-	0.655
S-index+APRI	0.747	0.078	-	0.821
S-index+FIB4	0.783	0.098	-	0.889
S-index+Forns	0.796	0.134	0.197	0.882
S-index+GPR	0.77	0.006	-	0.136

Abbreviations: TE, transient elastography; FIB-4, fibrosis 4 score; APRI, aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio index; AAR, aspartate aminotransferase-to-aspartate aminotransferase ratio; API, age-platelet index; GPR, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase-to-platelet ratio.

Discussion

Liver fibrosis testing has revolutionized the treatment of chronic liver disease, allowing for more accurate diagnosis and a more accurate assessment of the severity of the illness.²⁵ Liver fibrosis evaluation is critical to identifying individuals who are at risk of developing severe clinical problems and to determining therapy options for those with persistent HBV infection.²⁶ Patients showing hepatic fibrosis and especially $\geq S3$ are at significant risk for developing complications such as portal hypertension and hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC),^{27–29} so they are considered to have priority for antiviral therapy and anti-fibrosis therapy. Antiviral medication may repair liver fibrosis if individuals get it early enough. Correct diagnosis and treatment of CHB patients with fibrosis can help to reduce morbidity and mortality and enhance the quality of life for these patients.^{30,31} With the invisibility of liver scarring, many asymptomatic HBV carriers, even those who had no symptoms, will be discovered by screening for liver fibrosis in basic hospitals. However, the basic hospital lacks

Table 5 Correlations Between Non-Invasive Measurements and Stages of Fibrosis Patients

S Stage Correlation with	r	P-value
AAR	0.151	0.002
Age	0.208	<0.001
ALB	−0.262	<0.001
ALP	0.067	0.16
ALT	0.096	0.045
API	0.366	<0.001
APRI	0.309	<0.001
AST	0.221	<0.001
CHO	−0.038	0.427
FIB4	0.369	<0.001
Forns	0.397	<0.001
GGT	0.282	<0.001
GLU	0.078	0.104
GPR	0.352	<0.001
HGB	−0.183	<0.001
MCV	0.156	0.001
PLT	−0.319	<0.001
Sex	−0.136	0.004
S-index	0.382	<0.001
TBIL	0.195	<0.001
TG	0.039	0.422
TE	0.535	<0.001

Abbreviations: TE, transient elastography; FIB-4, fibrosis 4 score; APRI, aspartate aminotransferase-to-platelet ratio index; AAR, aspartate aminotransferase-to-aspartate aminotransferase ratio; API, age-platelet index; GPR, gamma-glutamyl transpeptidase-to-platelet ratio; ALT, alanine aminotransferase; AST, aspartate aminotransferase; GGT, γ -glutamyl transpeptidase; ALP, alkaline phosphatase; TBIL, total bilirubin; ALB, albumin; GLU, glucose; CHO, cholesterol; HGB, hemoglobin; TG, triglyceride; MCV, mean corpuscular volume; PLT, platelet.

imaging and serum biomarker testing devices. Seven non-invasive models based on the most prevalent clinical factors were developed in our study.

The stiffness of the liver may be measured using elastography methods such as FibroScan.³² FibroScan is an effective diagnostic tool. However, the liver's metabolic activity has a substantial impact on the stiffness of the liver. This means that while assessing liver stiffness, it is necessary to consider the patient's biochemical condition. The extracellular matrix turnover alterations that occur during fibrogenesis are thought to be connected to serum indicators.^{33,34} Noninvasive indicators or models such as APRI, FIB-4, Forns, and others have been suggested to predict the severity of liver fibrosis. It has been shown that the sensitivity and specificity of four noninvasive serum indicators, Forns, FIB-4,

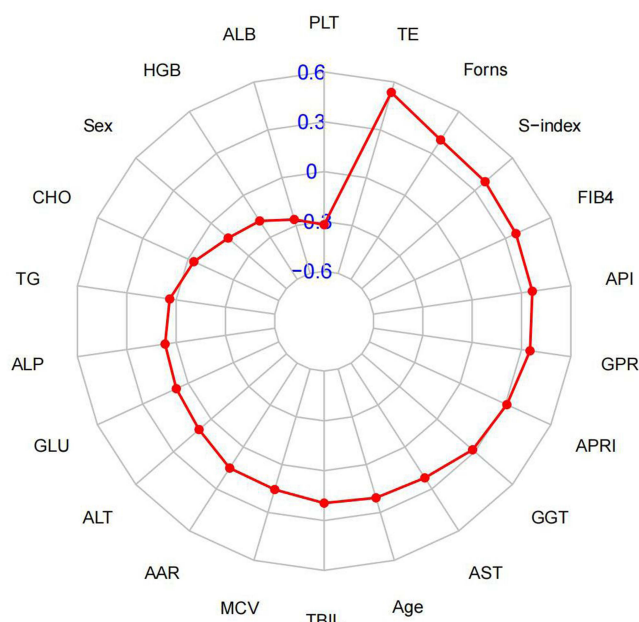


Figure 2 Correlations between non-invasive measurements and stages of fibrosis patients.

GPR (and APRI), may be used to identify and assess the severity of liver fibrosis in individuals who have been infected with the chronic hepatitis virus.^{8,13} Detection rates in S2 might be as high as 0.7 in this study as well. This shows that the non-invasive models may have a positive influence on the development and progression of liver disease at important stages but cannot be used as a substitute for TE. However, several non-invasive models of phase \geq S3, such as Forns and S-index, may achieve comparable diagnostic performance as TE, which may become a suitable index for clinical promotion. Most studies found that Forns and S-index had a greater diagnostic accuracy than other models, even if the AUROC values of models in various studies were substantially diverse.^{35,36} Currently, however, the study sample size is too small, and the majority of studies are focused on NAFLD or HCV instead. In this study, we looked at a large group of HBV-positive individuals, a total of 436. Instead of using a low-efficiency diagnostic approach, we relied on TE as the gold standard for our work. We want to show how effective Forns and S index are in diagnosing liver fibrosis, compared to how effective TE imaging was in \geq S3. These noninvasive serum indicators have been shown to be more effective when used in combination. When used in conjunction with the FIB-4 or APRI, GPR, according to Hu et al, might greatly increase the sensitivity and specificity of diagnosing hepatic fibrosis in CHB.³⁷ An investigation of how the mix of models affects diagnostic performance will be conducted in this project. No substantial increase in diagnostic performance can be achieved by combining non-invasive diagnostic models in a pairwise fashion. This might be because the included markers in these non-invasive models are so similar to one another. These patients' liver fibrosis was also evaluated in this research. According to this research, the coefficient of S-index ($r = 0.382$), Forns ($r = 0.397$), and the coefficient of TE ($r = 0.535$) all strongly linked with the stage of liver fibrosis, although the correlations were less than those for TE. ALP, CHO, TG, ALP, and GLU had inadequate diagnostic performance for clinical use. PLT and GGT are the common components of Forns and S-index. Serum GGT may be a good predictive marker of liver fibrosis. GGT is a key enzyme in glutathione metabolism. It is a cell-surface heterodimeric glycoprotein and highly expressed in the biliary epithelium, kidney tubules and brain capillaries.³⁸ In some researches, regression analysis demonstrated that GGT was the independent predictor of liver fibrosis.^{39,40} Compared with AST and ALT, GGT has a stronger association with fibrosis stage and inflammation stage in HBV infected patients,^{41,42} which is consistent with our research result. However, differentiation of liver fibrosis by GGT has a unique role in HBV. In patients with hepatitis B, the mean GGT level in the low activity group was significantly lower than in the high activity group ($P < 0.05$). In the hepatitis C patients, no significant difference was found between two groups with regard to GGT levels.⁴³ The mechanism of the

increasing in GGT activity in liver fibrosis remains unclear. Some researches suggested that the GGT alteration in hepatitis and liver cirrhosis is associated with the increased GGT synthesis in the liver. It is an adaptive response to the pathological changes and result in an overflow of the enzyme into the bloodstream.⁴⁴ Hepatic fibrosis non-invasive models containing GGT (Forns and S-index) showed higher diagnostic value than models containing AST or ALT (APRI, AAR and FIB-4) in HBV patients.^{39,45,46} The effect and mechanism of GGT on HBV-related liver fibrosis need further basic researches.

A number of flaws are found in our research. To begin with, our research is based on a retrospective design with a small sample size. This study did not include critical clinical data like CRP and cell count. A possible reason for this is that our investigation did not detect the overestimation of the impact of high ALT levels indicated in earlier studies.^{47,48}

Forns and S-index were proven to be a good blood marker for determining hepatic fibrosis grades $\geq S2$ and $\geq S3$ in this investigation. For grades $\geq S3$, Forns and the S-index may perform as well as TE in terms of diagnostic accuracy. When serum models were combined, the diagnostic value was only slightly elevated above that of using a single model. Patients who previously had no idea they had hepatitis B might now be identified by primary serological screening and treated as soon as possible.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by 1. The National Key Basic Research Project, No. 2012CB517501. 2. The Chinese Foundation for Hepatitis Prevention and Control—Tian Qing Hepatitis Research Fund, No. TQGB20210175; 3. Research project of Chinese traditional medicine and Chinese traditional medicine combined with Western medicine of Tianjin municipal health and Family Planning Commission (2017070/2021022); 4. Tianjin Key Medical Discipline (Specialty) Construction Project.

Author Contributions

All authors met the following conditions:

1. Made a significant contribution to the work reported, whether that is in the conception, study design, execution, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation.
2. Took part in drafting, revising or critically reviewing the article.
3. Agreed on the journal to which the article has been submitted and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.
4. Agreed on the final approval of the version to be published.
5. Agreed to take responsibility and be accountable for the contents of the article.

Disclosure

All authors declare no competing interests in this work.

References

1. Lavanchy D. Evolving epidemiology of hepatitis C virus. *Clin Microbiol Infect.* **2011**;17(2):107–115. doi:10.1111/j.1469-0691.2010.03432.x
2. European Association for the Study of the Liver. EASL clinical practice guidelines: management of hepatitis C virus infection. *J Hepatol.* **2011**;55(2):245–264. doi:10.1016/j.jhep.2011.02.023
3. Williams R. Global challenges in liver disease. *Hepatology.* **2006**;44(3):521–526. doi:10.1002/hep.21347
4. Serraino R, Mazzitelli M, Greco G, et al. Risk factors for hepatitis B and C among healthy population: a community-based survey from four districts of Southern Italy. *Infez Med.* **2020**;28(2):223–226.
5. Bataller R, Brenner DA. Liver fibrosis. *J Clin Invest.* **2005**;115(2):209–218. doi:10.1172/JCI24282
6. Grant A, Neuberger J. Guidelines on the use of liver biopsy in clinical practice. British Society of Gastroenterology. *Gut.* **1999**;45(Suppl 4):IV1–IV11. doi:10.1136/gut.45.2008.iv1
7. Pinzani M, Vizzutti F, Arena U, Marra F. Technology insight: noninvasive assessment of liver fibrosis by biochemical scores and elastography. *Nat Clin Pract Gastroenterol Hepatol.* **2008**;5(2):95–106. doi:10.1038/ncpgasthep1025
8. Martinez SM, Crespo G, Navasa M, Forns X. Noninvasive assessment of liver fibrosis. *Hepatology.* **2011**;53(1):325–335. doi:10.1002/hep.24013
9. Gorka-Dynysiewicz J, Pazgan-Simon M, Zuwała-Jagiello J. Pentraxin 3 detects clinically significant fibrosis in patients with chronic viral hepatitis C. *Biomed Res Int.* **2019**;2019:2639248. doi:10.1155/2019/2639248
10. European Association for Study of Liver, Asociacion Latinoamericana para el Estudio del H. EASL-ALEH clinical practice guidelines: non-invasive tests for evaluation of liver disease severity and prognosis. *J Hepatol.* **2015**;63(1):237–264.

11. Shiha G, Ibrahim A, Helmy A, et al. Asian-Pacific Association for the Study of the Liver (APASL) consensus guidelines on invasive and non-invasive assessment of hepatic fibrosis: a 2016 update. *Hepatol Int*. 2017;11(1):1–30. doi:10.1007/s12072-016-9760-3
12. Sporea I, Bota S, Peck-Radosavljevic M, et al. Acoustic radiation force impulse elastography for fibrosis evaluation in patients with chronic hepatitis C: an international multicenter study. *Eur J Radiol*. 2012;81(12):4112–4118. doi:10.1016/j.ejrad.2012.08.018
13. Tachi Y, Hirai T, Kojima Y, et al. Liver stiffness measurement using acoustic radiation force impulse elastography in hepatitis C virus-infected patients with a sustained virological response. *Aliment Pharmacol Ther*. 2016;44(4):346–355. doi:10.1111/apt.13695
14. Terrault NA, Lok ASF, McMahon BJ, et al. Update on prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of chronic hepatitis B: AASLD 2018 hepatitis B guidance. *Hepatology*. 2018;67(4):1560–1599. doi:10.1002/hep.29800
15. Peng X, Tian A, Li J, et al. Diagnostic value of FibroTouch and non-invasive fibrosis indexes in hepatic fibrosis with different aetiologies. *Dig Dis Sci*. 2021. doi:10.1007/s10620-021-07049-4
16. Guo L, Zheng L, Hu L, Zhou H, Yu L, Liang W. Transient elastography (FibroScan) performs better than non-invasive markers in assessing liver fibrosis and cirrhosis in autoimmune hepatitis patients. *Med Sci Monit*. 2017;23:5106–5112. doi:10.12659/MSM.907300
17. Bai DS, Zhou BH, Qian JJ, Zhang C, Jin SJ, Jiang GQ. Effects of laparoscopic splenectomy and azygoportal disconnection on liver synthesis function and cirrhosis: a 2-year prospective study. *Surg Endosc*. 2020;34(11):5074–5082. doi:10.1007/s00464-019-07307-7
18. Kang NL, Zhang JM, Lin MX, et al. Serum ceruloplasmin can predict liver fibrosis in hepatitis B virus-infected patients. *World J Gastroenterol*. 2020;26(27):3952–3962. doi:10.3748/wjg.v26.i27.3952
19. Cao X, Shang QH, Chi XL, et al. Serum N-glycan markers for diagnosing liver fibrosis induced by hepatitis B virus. *World J Gastroenterol*. 2020;26(10):1067–1079. doi:10.3748/wjg.v26.i10.1067
20. Sandrin L, Tanter M, Gennisson JL, Catheline S, Fink M. Shear elasticity probe for soft tissues with 1-D transient elastography. *IEEE Trans Ultrason Ferroelectr Freq Control*. 2002;49(4):436–446. doi:10.1109/58.996561
21. Boursier J, Zarski JP, de Ledinghen V, et al. Determination of reliability criteria for liver stiffness evaluation by transient elastography. *Hepatology*. 2013;57(3):1182–1191. doi:10.1002/hep.25993
22. Bedossa P; The French METAVIR Cooperative Study Group. Intraobserver and interobserver variations in liver biopsy interpretation in patients with chronic hepatitis C. *Hepatology*. 1994;20(1):15–20. doi:10.1002/hep.1840200104
23. Scheuer PJ. Classification of chronic viral hepatitis: a need for reassessment. *J Hepatol*. 1991;13(3):372–374. doi:10.1016/0168-8278(91)90084-O
24. Zhuang Y, Ding H, Zhang Y, Sun H, Xu C, Wang W. Two-dimensional shear wave elastography performance in the noninvasive evaluation of liver fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B: comparison with serum fibrosis indexes. *Radiology*. 2017;283(3):873–882. doi:10.1148/radiol.2016160131
25. Wong GL, Espinosa WZ, Wong VW. Personalized management of cirrhosis by non-invasive tests of liver fibrosis. *Clin Mol Hepatol*. 2015;21(3):200–211. doi:10.3350/cmh.2015.21.3.200
26. Zhu MY, Zou X, Li Q, et al. A novel noninvasive algorithm for the assessment of liver fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B virus infection. *J Viral Hepat*. 2017;24(7):589–598. doi:10.1111/jvh.12682
27. Younossi ZM, Stepanova M, Rafiq N, et al. Pathologic criteria for nonalcoholic steatohepatitis: interprotocol agreement and ability to predict liver-related mortality. *Hepatology*. 2011;53(6):1874–1882. doi:10.1002/hep.24268
28. Yano M, Kumada H, Kage M, et al. The long-term pathological evolution of chronic hepatitis C. *Hepatology*. 1996;23(6):1334–1340. doi:10.1002/hep.510230607
29. Unalp-Arida A, Ruhl CE. Liver fibrosis scores predict liver disease mortality in the United States population. *Hepatology*. 2017;66(1):84–95. doi:10.1002/hep.29113
30. Crossan C, Tsochatzis EA, Longworth L, et al. Cost-effectiveness of noninvasive liver fibrosis tests for treatment decisions in patients with chronic hepatitis B in the UK: systematic review and economic evaluation. *J Viral Hepat*. 2016;23(2):139–149. doi:10.1111/jvh.12469
31. Tsochatzis EA, Crossan C, Longworth L, et al. Cost-effectiveness of noninvasive liver fibrosis tests for treatment decisions in patients with chronic hepatitis C. *Hepatology*. 2014;60(3):832–843. doi:10.1002/hep.27296
32. Xu XY, Wang WS, Zhang QM, et al. Performance of common imaging techniques vs serum biomarkers in assessing fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *World J Clin Cases*. 2019;7(15):2022–2037. doi:10.12998/wjcc.v7.i15.2022
33. Castera L. Noninvasive methods to assess liver disease in patients with hepatitis B or C. *Gastroenterology*. 2012;142(6):1293–1302. doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2012.02.017
34. Castera L. Hepatitis B: are non-invasive markers of liver fibrosis reliable? *Liver Int*. 2014;34(Suppl 1):91–96. doi:10.1111/liv.12393
35. da Silva RGJ, de Miranda MLQ, de Araujo Caldeira Brant PE, et al. Acoustic radiation force impulse elastography and liver fibrosis risk scores in severe obesity. *Arch Endocrinol Metab*. 2021;65(6):730–738. doi:10.20945/2359-3997000000397
36. Liu J, Li Y, Yang X, et al. Comparison of two-dimensional shear wave elastography with nine serum fibrosis indices to assess liver fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B: a prospective cohort study. *Ultraschall Med*. 2019;40(2):237–246. doi:10.1055/a-0796-6584
37. Hu YC, Liu H, Liu XY, et al. Value of gamma-glutamyltranspeptidase-to-platelet ratio in diagnosis of hepatic fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B. *World J Gastroenterol*. 2017;23(41):7425–7432. doi:10.3748/wjg.v23.i41.7425
38. Huang R, Yang CC, Liu Y, et al. Association of serum gamma-glutamyl transferase with treatment outcome in chronic hepatitis B patients. *World J Gastroenterol*. 2015;21(34):9957–9965. doi:10.3748/wjg.v21.i34.9957
39. Zhou K, Gao CF, Zhao YP, et al. Simpler score of routine laboratory tests predicts liver fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B. *J Gastroenterol Hepatol*. 2010;25(9):1569–1577. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1746.2010.06383.x
40. Ding R, Zheng J, Huang D, et al. INR-to-platelet ratio (INPR) as a novel noninvasive index for predicting liver fibrosis in chronic hepatitis B. *Int J Med Sci*. 2021;18(5):1159–1166. doi:10.7150/ijms.51799
41. Lu XJ, Yang XJ, Sun JY, Zhang X, Yuan ZX, Li XH. FibroBox: a novel noninvasive tool for predicting significant liver fibrosis and cirrhosis in HBV infected patients. *Biomark Res*. 2020;8:48. doi:10.1186/s40364-020-00215-2
42. Zeng DW, Liu YR, Zhang JM, et al. Serum ceruloplasmin levels correlate negatively with liver fibrosis in males with chronic hepatitis B: a new noninvasive model for predicting liver fibrosis in HBV-related liver disease. *PLoS One*. 2013;8(10):e77942. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0077942
43. Eminler AT, Irak K, Ayyildiz T, et al. The relation between liver histopathology and GGT levels in viral hepatitis: more important in hepatitis B. *Turk J Gastroenterol*. 2014;25(4):411–415. doi:10.5152/tjg.2014.3693

44. Silva IS, Ferraz ML, Perez RM, Lanzoni VP, Figueiredo VM, Silva AE. Role of gamma-glutamyl transferase activity in patients with chronic hepatitis C virus infection. *J Gastroenterol Hepatol*. 2004;19(3):314–318. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1746.2003.03256.x
45. Cheng D, Wan G, Sun L, Wang X, Ou W, Xing H. A novel diagnostic nomogram for noninvasive evaluating liver fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B virus infection. *Biomed Res Int*. 2020;2020:5218930. doi:10.1155/2020/5218930
46. Nishikawa H, Hasegawa K, Ishii A, et al. A proposed predictive model for advanced fibrosis in patients with chronic hepatitis B and its validation. *Medicine*. 2016;95(35):e4679. doi:10.1097/MD.0000000000004679
47. Arena U, Vizzutti F, Corti G, et al. Acute viral hepatitis increases liver stiffness values measured by transient elastography. *Hepatology*. 2008;47(2):380–384. doi:10.1002/hep.22007
48. Song ZZ. Acute viral hepatitis increases liver stiffness values measured by transient elastography. *Hepatology*. 2008;48(1):349–350; author reply 350. doi:10.1002/hep.22385

International Journal of General Medicine

Dovepress

Publish your work in this journal

The International Journal of General Medicine is an international, peer-reviewed open-access journal that focuses on general and internal medicine, pathogenesis, epidemiology, diagnosis, monitoring and treatment protocols. The journal is characterized by the rapid reporting of reviews, original research and clinical studies across all disease areas. The manuscript management system is completely online and includes a very quick and fair peer-review system, which is all easy to use. Visit <http://www.dovepress.com/testimonials.php> to read real quotes from published authors.

Submit your manuscript here: <https://www.dovepress.com/international-journal-of-general-medicine-journal>