E-ISSN 2250-0944

ISSN 2250-1150

doi: 10.48047/ijprt/15.02.537

Research Article

Assessment of Liver Function Abnormalities in Hospitalized Patients with Infectious Diseases: A Prospective Study from Pakistan

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Abstract: Liver function abnormalities are frequently encountered in hospitalized patients with infectious diseases, yet their prevalence, pattern, and clinical significance remain insufficiently characterized in low- and middle-income settings. This prospective study evaluated the burden and determinants of hepatic dysfunction among hospitalized patients with infectious etiologies in Pakistan. Adult patients admitted with confirmed infectious diseases were systematically assessed for liver function abnormalities using standardized biochemical criteria. Among 386 enrolled patients, 41.7% demonstrated abnormal liver function tests during hospitalization. The most prevalent abnormality was transaminase elevation, with mean alanine aminotransferase levels of 78.4 ± 34.6 IU/L compared to 32.1 ± 11.9 IU/L in patients without hepatic involvement ($p < 0.001$). Cholestatic patterns were significantly associated with systemic bacterial infections ($p = 0.003$), while mixed hepatocellular injury predominated in viral infections ($p < 0.001$). Multivariate analysis identified sepsis severity and prolonged hospital stay as independent predictors of liver dysfunction. These findings reveal a substantial and previously underreported burden of liver involvement in infectious disease hospitalizations and emphasize the need for early biochemical surveillance. The study introduces population-specific prospective data that strengthen risk stratification and clinical decision-making in infectious disease management.

Keywords: liver function tests; infectious diseases; hepatic dysfunction

Introduction: Infectious diseases remain a leading cause of hospitalization and morbidity in developing countries, exerting a substantial burden on healthcare systems. Beyond their primary organ involvement, systemic infections frequently induce secondary organ dysfunction, with the liver being particularly vulnerable due to its central role in metabolism, immune regulation, and detoxification. Hepatic involvement in infectious diseases may arise through direct pathogen invasion, immune-mediated injury, ischemia, or drug-induced hepatotoxicity during treatment. Despite its clinical relevance, liver dysfunction in hospitalized infectious disease patients often

remains underrecognized or underestimated.[1-4]

The liver serves as a critical immunological organ, integrating innate and adaptive immune responses against invading pathogens. During systemic infections, hepatic Kupffer cells and sinusoidal endothelial cells play a pivotal role in pathogen clearance. However, excessive inflammatory signaling, cytokine release, and oxidative stress can disrupt hepatocellular integrity, leading to biochemical abnormalities detectable as altered liver function tests. These alterations may be transient or may signify clinically significant hepatic injury with prognostic implications.[5-7].Previous investigations have documented liver enzyme derangements in a wide range of infectious conditions, including viral hepatitis, dengue fever, malaria, typhoid fever, sepsis, and respiratory infections. The reported prevalence of abnormal liver function tests varies widely across studies, reflecting heterogeneity in patient populations, disease severity, and diagnostic thresholds. Importantly, liver dysfunction has been associated with increased disease severity, prolonged hospitalization, and higher mortality, underscoring its relevance as a marker of systemic illness.[8-12]

In Pakistan, infectious diseases continue to account for a substantial proportion of hospital admissions. Endemic infections, coupled with delayed presentation and limited access to early diagnostic services, often result in advanced disease states at the time of hospitalization. Despite this context, prospective data evaluating liver function abnormalities in hospitalized infectious disease patients remain scarce. Existing studies are predominantly retrospective or focused on specific infections, limiting their applicability to broader clinical practice.

Moreover, liver dysfunction in infectious diseases may be multifactorial, arising not only from the infection itself but also from antimicrobial therapy, hemodynamic instability, and pre-existing metabolic conditions. Differentiating infection-related hepatic involvement from other etiologies is essential for appropriate clinical management. Failure to recognize liver dysfunction early may lead to inappropriate drug dosing, progression to liver failure, or missed opportunities for targeted intervention.

Recent research has emphasized the importance of routine biochemical monitoring to identify early organ dysfunction in hospitalized patients. However, there is limited consensus regarding the prevalence, patterns, and predictors of liver function abnormalities in mixed infectious disease populations, particularly in South Asian settings. This gap in knowledge hinders the development of context-specific clinical guidelines and risk stratification tools.

The present prospective study was designed to systematically assess liver function abnormalities among hospitalized patients with infectious diseases in Pakistan. By evaluating the prevalence, biochemical patterns, and clinical predictors of hepatic dysfunction, this study aims to provide robust, population-specific evidence to inform clinical decision-making and improve patient outcomes. The findings contribute novel insights into the hepatic manifestations of infectious diseases within a high-burden healthcare setting.

Methodology: This prospective observational study was conducted at a tertiary care hospital in Pakistan AIMC / Jinnah Hospital over a 12-month period from January to December 2023. Adult patients aged 18 years and above admitted with clinically and laboratory-confirmed infectious diseases were consecutively enrolled. Infectious diagnoses were established based on microbiological testing,

serology, or radiological findings in accordance with institutional protocols. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the study objectives and ensuring confidentiality.

Liver function assessment was performed at admission and repeated during hospitalization. Parameters included serum alanine aminotransferase, aspartate aminotransferase, alkaline phosphatase, total bilirubin, and serum albumin. Liver function abnormality was defined as elevation of transaminases greater than two times the upper limit of normal, alkaline phosphatase greater than 1.5 times normal, or total bilirubin exceeding 1.2 mg/dL. Patterns of liver injury were classified as hepatocellular, cholestatic, or mixed based on standard biochemical ratios.

Sample size calculation was performed using Epi Info software, assuming an expected prevalence of liver function abnormalities of 40%, a 95% confidence level, and a 5% margin of error. The calculated minimum sample size was 369 patients; a total of 386 patients were included to compensate for incomplete data. Inclusion criteria comprised confirmed infectious disease diagnosis and availability of baseline liver function tests. Exclusion criteria included known chronic liver disease, viral hepatitis B or C, alcoholic liver disease, pregnancy, and use of hepatotoxic medications prior to admission.

Clinical data collected included demographic variables, type of infection, severity indicators, length of hospital stay, and in-hospital outcomes. Statistical analysis was conducted using standard statistical software. Continuous variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation and compared using independent t-tests. Categorical variables were analyzed using chi-square tests. Multivariate logistic regression was performed to identify independent predictors of liver function abnormalities. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Results

Table 1. Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of Patients

Variable	Total (n = 386)
Age (years)	44.6 ± 16.2
Male (%)	214 (55.4)
Viral infections (%)	146 (37.8)
Bacterial infections (%)	182 (47.2)
Parasitic infections (%)	58 (15.0)
Length of stay (days)	7.8 ± 3.4

This table summarizes baseline demographic and clinical characteristics of the study population.

Table 2. Liver Function Test Abnormalities

Parameter	Abnormal LFT Group	Normal LFT Group	p-value
ALT (IU/L)	78.4 ± 34.6	32.1 ± 11.9	<0.001
AST (IU/L)	84.7 ± 39.2	36.5 ± 14.3	<0.001
Total bilirubin (mg/dL)	1.9 ± 0.8	0.7 ± 0.3	<0.001
Albumin (g/dL)	3.1 ± 0.6	3.8 ± 0.4	0.002

This table demonstrates statistically significant differences in liver biochemical parameters between patients with and without hepatic involvement.

Table 3. Multivariate Predictors of Liver Function Abnormalities

Predictor	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	p-value
Severe infection/sepsis	2.41 (1.52–3.83)	<0.001
Hospital stay >7 days	1.89 (1.18–3.02)	0.007
Viral infection	2.76 (1.71–4.46)	<0.001

This table identifies infection severity, prolonged hospitalization, and viral etiology as independent predictors of liver dysfunction.

Discussion: The findings of this prospective study demonstrate that liver function abnormalities are highly prevalent among hospitalized patients with infectious diseases, affecting more than two-fifths of the study population. This observation highlights the liver as a frequently involved organ during systemic infections and underscores the importance of routine biochemical monitoring in hospitalized patients. The magnitude of hepatic involvement observed in this cohort reflects the complex interplay between infection-related inflammation, immune activation, and metabolic stress.[13-14]

Transaminase elevation emerged as the most common biochemical abnormality, consistent with hepatocellular injury patterns observed in systemic infections. The significant increase in alanine and aspartate aminotransferase levels suggests direct or immune-mediated hepatocyte injury rather than isolated cholestasis in most cases. Viral infections demonstrated a particularly strong association with hepatocellular and mixed injury patterns, reinforcing the hepatotropic and immunopathogenic mechanisms underlying viral disease processes.[15-17]

Cholestatic abnormalities were more frequently observed in patients with bacterial infections, particularly those presenting with sepsis. This pattern likely reflects infection-induced cholangiocyte dysfunction, cytokine-mediated bile flow impairment, and hypoperfusion-related injury. The association between liver dysfunction and sepsis severity further emphasizes the liver's vulnerability to systemic inflammatory responses and circulatory compromise.[18-20]

The identification of prolonged hospital stay as an independent predictor of liver dysfunction suggests a bidirectional relationship between hepatic involvement and disease severity. Liver abnormalities may both reflect and contribute to prolonged illness by affecting drug metabolism, nutritional status, and immune competence. These findings support the incorporation of liver function parameters into severity assessment models for hospitalized infectious disease patients.

Hypoalbuminemia observed in patients with abnormal liver function tests further indicates impaired synthetic function and systemic inflammation. Albumin levels serve as a surrogate marker of nutritional and inflammatory status and have been associated with adverse outcomes in infectious diseases. The observed reduction in serum albumin underscores the need for comprehensive metabolic assessment and supportive care in affected patients.

The prospective design and exclusion of patients with pre-existing liver disease strengthen the validity of the findings by isolating infection-related hepatic involvement. However, the study is limited by its single-center design and lack of long-term follow-up to assess persistent liver dysfunction. Future studies incorporating multicenter data and longitudinal assessment are warranted to better define long-term hepatic outcomes.

Overall, the results provide clinically relevant evidence that liver function abnormalities are common, multifactorial, and prognostically significant in hospitalized patients with infectious diseases. Early identification and monitoring of hepatic involvement may facilitate optimized therapeutic strategies and improved patient outcomes.

Conclusion: Liver function abnormalities are common among hospitalized patients with infectious diseases and are strongly associated with infection severity and prolonged hospitalization. This study provides prospective, population-specific evidence highlighting the clinical importance of hepatic monitoring in infectious disease management. The findings address a critical knowledge gap and support the integration of routine liver function assessment into standard inpatient care protocols.

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