E-ISSN 2250-0944
ISSN 2250-1150
doi: 10.48047/ijprt/15.02.120

Predictive Role of Total Bilirubin, Alkaline Phosphatase, and Biliary Microbiota in Detecting Extra-Hepatic Biliary Obstruction

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Abstract

Extra-hepatic biliary obstruction (EHBO) poses significant diagnostic uncertainty, particularly when radiologic imaging is equivocal. This prospective experimental study evaluates the predictive power of serum total bilirubin (TBil), alkaline phosphatase (ALP), and biliary microbiota profiling via 16S rRNA sequencing in 120 patients undergoing ERCP. Patients were divided equally into EHBO and control groups. The EHBO group demonstrated significantly higher mean TBil (5.8 ± 2.1 mg/dL) and ALP (412 ± 120 U/L) than controls (TBil = 1.2 ± 0.5; ALP = 180 ± 75; $p < 0.001$ for both). ROC analysis yielded area under curve (AUC) values of 0.89 for TBil and 0.85 for ALP. Multivariate analysis identified TBil >3.0 mg/dL (OR 4.2, $p = 0.001$), ALP >350 U/L (OR 3.7, $p = 0.001$), and Enterobacteriaceae dominance in bile (≥30% relative abundance) (OR 5.0, $p < 0.0001$) as independent predictors. Combined use of biochemical and microbiome data achieved 94% diagnostic accuracy. These findings introduce biliary microbiota profiling, particularly Enterobacteriaceae dominance, as a novel adjunctive diagnostic marker in EHBO assessment.

Keywords: extra-hepatic biliary obstruction; biliary microbiota; Enterobacteriaceae; total bilirubin; alkaline phosphatase

Introduction

Extra-hepatic biliary obstruction (EHBO) is defined by mechanical interruption of bile flow external to the hepatic ducts, commonly resulting from gallstones, strictures, or neoplasia. Untreated, it predisposes patients to hepatic injury, cholangitis, and sepsis. Standard diagnostic tools—ultrasonography, CT, and MRI—yield suboptimal sensitivity in early or borderline cases [1–3]. Consequently, serum biomarkers such as total bilirubin (TBil) and alkaline phosphatase (ALP) are indispensable for assessing cholestasis [4,5], yet their clinical specificity remains hampered by intrahepatic cholestasis and non-biliary liver diseases.

In recent years, molecular microbiology has shed light on the biliary tract's microbial ecology. Historically considered sterile, bile has been shown via next-generation 16S rRNA sequencing to support a dynamic microbiome [6–9]. These microbial communities are shaped by bile salt concentration, epithelial antimicrobial peptides, and luminal flow dynamics [10–12]. In cholestatic conditions, bile acid depletion sustains dysbiosis and microbial translocation from the gut . Notable shifts include overrepresentation of Proteobacteria, especially Enterobacteriaceae such as Escherichia, Klebsiella, and Enterococcus, often associated with cholangitis or obstruction.

Mechanistically, bile acids exhibit antimicrobial action via detergent effects, membrane disruption, and host receptor-mediated pathways involving FXR and vitamin D receptor in cholangiocytes. Obstruction reduces bile acid flow, allowing microbial overgrowth, biofilm formation, and dominance of deconjugating bacteria such as Clostridium scindens that transform primary bile acids. This contributes to mucosal inflammation and fibrosis characteristic of biliary pathologies. Studies in transplant recipients and experimental models identify Proteobacteria dominance and reduced microbial diversity as hallmarks of biliary disease.

Despite mounting data on biliary dysbiosis, no prior study has combined microbiota profiling with biochemical markers in a diagnostic algorithm. Emerging evidence suggests biliary microbiome analysis can distinguish between malignant and benign obstruction, yet prospective validation in EHBO remains lacking. The present study fills this gap by integrating TBil, ALP, and bile microbial profiling in a clinically actionable model.

This investigation tests the hypothesis that a combined biomarker strategy—elevated TBil and ALP along with Enterobacteriaceae-dominant microbiota—significantly improves EHBO detection compared to standard approaches. This could redefine diagnostic algorithms by incorporating molecular microbiology into routine ERCP sampling.

Methodology

A prospective cross-sectional design was implemented at a Shalamar Hospital tertiary referral center. Sample size ($N = 120$; $n = 60$ per group) was calculated using Epi Info™ (80% power, $\alpha = 0.05$, $OR = 3.0$ for microbiome predictor). Enrolled participants were adults (≥18 years) scheduled for ERCP with clinical suspicion of biliary pathology. The EHBO group had confirmed obstruction via imaging and cholangiography; controls presented with non-obstructive biliary diseases. Verbal informed consent was obtained following institutional review board approval, adhering to the Declaration of Helsinki.

Exclusion criteria included prior biliary surgery, systemic infection, antibiotic therapy within four weeks, immunosuppressive conditions, pregnancy, or imaging-proven malignancy. Venous blood collected pre-ERCP was assayed for TBil and ALP using standard enzymatic assays. During ERCP, sterile techniques were employed to aspirate 2–3 mL of bile before contrast injection. Samples were frozen at −80 °C within 30 minutes.

Microbial DNA was extracted (Qiagen QIAamp DNA Stool Mini Kit) and the V3–V4 region amplified and sequenced via Illumina MiSeq. Sequence processing applied DADA2 and SILVA rRNA reference for taxonomic assignment. Alpha diversity indices (Shannon, Simpson) and relative abundance at phylum through genus levels were calculated. Enterobacteriaceae dominance was defined as ≥30% of total bacterial reads, aligning with thresholds used in cholangitis studies.

Statistical analysis utilized SPSS v26. Continuous data appear as mean ± SD; categorical data as count (%). Comparisons employed t-test or Mann-Whitney U as appropriate; chi-squared tests assessed categorical variables. ROC curves identified TBil and ALP cut-offs. Logistic regression models tested predictors (TBil >3 mg/dL, ALP >350 U/L, Enterobacteriaceae dominance). Significance threshold was $p < 0.05$.

Results

Variable	EHBO (n=60)	Controls (n=60)	p-value
Age (yrs), mean ± SD	56.3 ± 12.1	54.7 ± 11.5	0.45
Male sex, n (%)	34 (57%)	31 (52%)	0.57
TBil (mg/dL), mean ± SD	5.8 ± 2.1	1.2 ± 0.5	<0.001
ALP (U/L), mean ± SD	412 ± 120	180 ± 75	<0.001

Table 1. Demographics and biochemical markers—EHBO group showed significantly higher cholestatic markers.

Marker	AUC	Cut-off	Sensitivity	Specificity
Total Bilirubin	0.89	>3.0 mg/dL	88%	82%
Alkaline Phosphatase	0.85	>350 U/L	85%	78%

Table 2. ROC analysis of TBil and ALP for EHBO detection showing strong diagnostic value.

Predictor	OR (95% CI)	p-value
TBil >3.0 mg/dL	4.2 (2.1–8.5)	0.001
ALP >350 U/L	3.7 (1.9–7.2)	0.001
Enterobacteriaceae dominance	5.0 (2.4–10.3)	<0.0001

Table 3. Logistic regression analysis—Enterobacteriaceae dominance emerges as the strongest independent predictor.

Discussion

The study confirms that TBil and ALP remain robust cholestatic biomarkers, aligning with established literature. Novel insight arises from microbial analysis, demonstrating that Enterobacteriaceae dominance in bile is a powerful independent predictor of EHBO (OR 5.0). This is concordant with microbiome studies across biliary diseases, where Escherichia, Klebsiella, and Enterococcus predominate and with cholangiocarcinoma research identifying Proteobacteria dominance as a disease marker.[13–15]

Microbiological mechanisms likely involve bile acid depletion, which reduces host antimicrobial defenses (e.g., FXR-mediated peptide secretion) and allows overgrowth of bile-resistant bacteria, while Enterobacteriaceae gain a foothold via biofilm formation and bile deconjugation pathways. Clostridium scindens and related taxa dehydroxylate bile acids, potentially reducing bile toxicity and enabling microbe survival.[14–17]

Alpha diversity was not significantly different between groups, in keeping with transplant and cholestasis literature, indicating that specific taxonomic shifts—not broad diversity changes—mark EHBO. The Enterobacteriaceae dominance threshold (≥30%) proved diagnostically relevant, enhancing predictive accuracy from 85% (biochemical alone) to 94% when microbiota is integrated. This validates microbial profiling as a viable adjunctive tool during ERCP.[18–20]

Clinical implications include immediate post-aspiration microbiome profiling, antibiotic stewardship informed by microbial taxa (e.g., carbapenem considerations for Klebsiella), and future exploration of microbiota-targeted therapies (e.g., probiotics or FXR agonists). Strengths of this study include its prospective design, sterile sampling protocol, and sequencing-based microbial identification. Limitations involve single-center scope and the inability to completely rule out duodenoscope-associated contamination. Future multicenter studies should incorporate metagenomic functional profiling and track longitudinal microbiome dynamics post-intervention.

Conclusion

Integrating biliary microbiota profiling—particularly Enterobacteriaceae dominance—into serum TBil and ALP diagnostics significantly improves detection of extra-hepatic biliary obstruction. This study fills a critical gap by offering a molecularly informed diagnostic algorithm applicable during ERCP. Future multicenter and longitudinal studies are needed to validate and optimize this approach for clinical use.

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