

Malignancies In Giant Cell Arteritis: A Population-Based Cohort Study

Pavlos Stamatis¹, Carl Turesson², Minna Willim¹, Jan-Åke Nilsson¹, Martin Englund³
and Aladdin J. Mohammad^{1,3,4}

¹Lund University, Department of Clinical Sciences Lund, Section of Rheumatology, Lund, Sweden,

²Lund University, Department of Clinical Sciences Malmö, Section of Rheumatology, Malmö, Sweden,

³Lund University, Department of Clinical Sciences Lund, Orthopaedics and Clinical Epidemiology Unit, Lund, Sweden,

⁴ Department of Medicine, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

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Correspondence

Pavlos Stamatis, MD

Department of Rheumatology,

Skåne University Hospital, Lund

SE-221 85 Lund, Sweden

Phone: +46 46 17 38 60

E-mail: pavlos.stamatis@med.lu.se

Initials, surnames, appointments, and highest academic degrees of authors:

P Stamatis, MD, Consultant in Rheumatology, Department of Clinical Sciences Lund, Rheumatology, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

C Turesson, MD, PhD, Professor of Rheumatology, Senior Consultant
Rheumatologist, Department of Clinical Sciences Malmö, Rheumatology, Lund
University, Lund, Sweden

M Willim, IT coordinator, Department of Clinical Sciences Lund, Rheumatology,
Lund University, Lund, Sweden

J-Å Nilsson, PhD, Statistician, Department of Clinical Sciences Lund, Rheumatology,
Lund University, Lund, Sweden

M Englund, MD, PhD, Professor of Epidemiology, Department of Clinical Sciences,
Lund, Clinical Epidemiology Unit, Lund, Sweden

AJ Mohammad, MD, PhD, Associate Professor of Rheumatology, Senior Consultant
Rheumatologist, Department of Clinical Sciences, Rheumatology, Lund University,
Lund, Sweden; Department of Clinical Sciences Lund, Clinical Epidemiology Unit,
Lund University, Lund, Sweden; Department of Medicine, University of Cambridge,
Cambridge, UK.

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Abstract

Purpose: To investigate the risk of cancer in patients with biopsy-proven giant cell arteritis (GCA) from a defined population in southern Sweden.

Methods: The study cohort consisted of 830 patients (mean age at GCA diagnosis was 76.3 years, 74 % women) diagnosed with biopsy-proven GCA between 1997 and 2010. Temporal artery biopsy results were retrieved from a regional database and reviewed to ascertain GCA diagnosis. The cohort was linked to the Swedish Cancer Registry. The patients were followed from GCA diagnosis until death or December 31, 2013. Incident malignancies registered after GCA diagnosis were studied. Based on data on the first malignancy in each organ system, age- and sex standardized incidence ratios (SIR) with 95 % confidence intervals (CI) were calculated compared to the background population.

Results: 107 patients (13%) were diagnosed with a total of 118 new malignancies after the onset of GCA. The overall risk for cancer after the GCA diagnosis was not increased (SIR 0.98; 95% CI 0.81 – 1.17). However, there was an increased risk for myeloid leukemia (2.31; 95% CI 1.06 – 4.39) and a reduced risk for breast cancer (0.33; 95% CI 0.12 – 0.72) and upper gastrointestinal tract cancer (0.16; 95% 0.004-0.91). Rates of other site-specific cancers were not different from expected.

Conclusion: In this Swedish population-based cohort of GCA, the overall risk for cancer was not increased compared to the background population. However, there was an increased risk for leukemia and a decreased risk for breast and upper gastrointestinal tract cancer.

Introduction

Giant cell arteritis (GCA) is a large vessel vasculitis, which usually affects persons 50 years of age and older and is more common among women. GCA is the most common primary systemic vasculitis especially in Northern Europe and North America with annual incidence estimates between 14 and 22 per 100 000 persons in the age group 50 years and older (1-3). The mean age at the time of GCA diagnosis is around 75 years. Previous studies have demonstrated that the long-term survival among patients with GCA overall is comparable to that of the general population (3-5). However, excess mortality has been found among those diagnosed before the age of 70 years (3, 4). Patients with GCA suffer higher rates of some comorbidities, including cardiovascular events, diabetes, severe infections and visual complications compared to the background population(6-9). Increased rates of malignancies have been described among patients with other systemic rheumatic diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus and ANCA associated vasculitis(10-13)

Systemic vasculitides other than GCA have also been associated with concurrent or subsequent malignancies and some types of vasculitides may mimic a malignant disease. There are some types of vasculitides with relatively strong association to malignancies (e.g. elderly-onset Henoch-Schönlein purpura and ANCA associated vasculitis)(14-16). On the other hand, there are malignancies related with specific vasculitic syndromes such as hairy cell leukemia with polyarteritis nodosa and leucocytoclastic vasculitis (17).

Conflicting results have been reported on the relation between GCA and malignancies. A study with patients with biopsy proven GCA from Australia and a

population-based cohort study from Olmsted County Minnesota did not demonstrate an increased risk for cancer in patients with GCA (18, 19). On the other hand, a recent meta-analysis, which includes the 2 aforementioned studies from the USA and Australia, demonstrated a slight but statistically significant increased risk for malignancy in patients with GCA and/or PMR, especially during the first 6-12 months after the onset of GCA/PMR (20).

In this population-based study from Southern Sweden, the main objective was to investigate the overall cancer risk in patients with biopsy-proven GCA. As secondary objectives, we described the differences in the incidence of site-specific malignancies and the temporal relationship between GCA and cancer.

Patients and Methods

Study area and population

The study area is the Skåne region, the southernmost region in Sweden, with a total population of 1 274 069 on December 2013 (13.2% of the total Swedish population in 2.7% of the total area of Sweden)(21). More than 95% of the population is Caucasian.

Case ascertainment and identification

The GCA cohort

The case identification and retrieval of patients with biopsy-proven GCA in this study was described in detail previously(3). In short, all patients that underwent temporal artery biopsy (TAB) during 1997-2010 were identified from the database at the Department of Pathology in Skåne which operates at the major hospitals in the area: Skåne University Hospital in Lund and Malmö, Helsingborg hospital and the

Central Hospital in Kristianstad. A total of 4216 unique persons who underwent a TAB during the study period were identified. After reviewing all the histopathology reports; 840 patients (626 women) were found to have positive TAB diagnostic for GCA.

Temporal relationship of occurrence of cancer and GCA

To assess any temporal relationship between the time of GCA diagnosis and cancer occurrence, 4 controls per case were randomly selected from the background population. The matching criteria were age, gender and area of residence. The index date for cases and their controls was the date of GCA diagnosis. The time of cancer diagnosis for patients with GCA and their controls was studied in relation to the corresponding index date. Four time periods were studied: up to 2 years before index date; within 2 years before index date; within 2 years after index date and 2 years or more after index date.

The Swedish cancer registry

The Swedish Cancer Registry (SCR) was founded in 1958 and covers the whole population of Sweden. It is obligatory for every health care provider to report newly detected cancer cases to the registry. A report has to be sent for every cancer case diagnosed at clinical-, morphological -, other laboratory examinations as well as cases diagnosed at autopsy. Information available in the SCR includes gender, age and place of residence, date of diagnosis, reporting clinical and pathology unit and the identification number for the tissue specimen (22). Outcome data in the SCR are also available and include date of death or migration, and cause of death. In addition, clinical data, i.e. the site and the histological type of tumour classified according to the International Classification of Disease (ICD), seventh edition, are also available.

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Data linking

The linking of the two cohorts, the GCA cohort and the control cohort, to the SCR was performed using the unique personal identification number (PIN). For people born in Sweden, the number is specified at birth. Immigrants are given a number if they stay longer than three months. Medical organizations use these numbers to store information about the individual's health status. Using the PIN, the patients in the GCA cohort and the controls were linked to the SCR to identify all cases diagnosed with cancer during their lifetime.

Statistical analysis

Using the statistical database for cancer from the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, we calculated the age-specific, sex-specific and calendar year-specific incidence rate of cancer for every cancer category and for cancer at all sites in males and females in Skåne who were older than 50 years old for the period 1997-2013. Each age stratum covered a 5-year-old period and the data were divided for every calendar year. The study start was defined as the date of positive TAB and study endpoints, was the first cancer diagnosis, death or the end of the study on December 31, 2013. Based on these dates, we calculated the time (person-years) during which the patients in the cohort were at risk of developing cancer. As a measure of relative risk, we used the standardized incidence ratio (SIR), which is the ratio of observed cancer cases among patients with GCA to that of the expected number of cases among background population. The expected number of cancer cases were calculated by multiplying the 5-year age-, sex-, and 1-year calendar-period specific number of person years by sex, period and age specific incidence rate of cancer in Skåne for every cancer category and for cancer in general. The Fisher exact

test was used in order to calculate the 95% confidence intervals (95% CI). In patients who have developed multiple malignancies after the onset of GCA we took into account only the first malignancy in each organ system. The time of cancer occurrence in relation to the date of GCA diagnosis (and the corresponding index date for controls) was studied and compared by cross tabulation using the Pearson Chi-square test in order to compare the four time periods.

Ethics

The study was done in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The Regional Ethical Review Board in Lund (Sweden) approved the study (Dnr 2010-517). No informed consent was obtained, as this was not required by the Ethical Review Board.

Results

Patients

A total of 840 patients had a positive TAB during the period 1997-2010 in the Skåne region. We were not able to localize records of 10 patients, hence a total of 830 patients (616 women, 74%) were included in the analysis. The table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the patients.

Observed malignancies

Among the patients in the GCA cohort, 238 (164 female, 69%) developed altogether 321 malignancies during the observation time (58 patients had more than one cancer diagnosis). The mean age at cancer diagnosis was 67.1 years (SD 14.9). 131 patients were diagnosed with malignancy prior to GCA diagnosis, 25 patients

with malignancy both prior and subsequent to GCA diagnosis and 82 patients with malignancy subsequent to GCA diagnosis only (Supplementary Data Table A and B). Accordingly, 107 patients (13%) developed a total of 118 malignancies after the onset of GCA (Figure 1). The most common malignancy diagnosed after the onset of GCA was skin cancer (excluding basic cell carcinoma; 34%), followed by cancer in the lower gastrointestinal tract (15%), prostate cancer (11%) and leukemia (8%). Incidence rates of each cancer type after diagnosis of biopsy-proven GCA are given in Table 2. Nineteen patients (10 females) were diagnosed with more than one cancer, 14 (7 females) with two and 5 (3 females) with three cancer diagnoses or more. Only the first cancer per organ system was included in our analysis.

Standardized incidence ratio

The expected number of cancers among the GCA patients, based on data from the background Swedish population, was 121. Accordingly, the overall risk for cancer was not increased among patients with biopsy-proven GCA (SIR 0.98; 95% CI 0.81-1.17). However, there was an increased risk for leukemia with SIR of 2.31 (95% CI 1.10 – 4.40). The risk of breast cancer was lower among patients with GCA compared to background population with SIR of 0.33 (95% CI 0.12 – 0.72). Similarly, there was a lower risk for cancer of the upper gastrointestinal tract (GIT); SIR of 0.16 (95% CI 0.004 – 0.90). Table 3 shows the SIR for observed cancer in 830 patients with biopsy-proven GCA. There was not a single case of cancer of the liver, gallbladder, pancreas or peritoneum, compared to 4 expected cases.

Site-specific malignancies

9 cases were diagnosed with upper GI tract cancer; but only 1 case (11%) out of those 9 was diagnosed after the onset of GCA. By contrast, 9 of the 12 (75%) myeloid leukemia cases developed subsequent to the onset of GCA. All the 9 patients diagnosed with leukemia had a myeloid leukemia, 5 of them an acute myeloid leukemia (AML) one and 4 of them a myeloid leukemia which was classified as unspecified (WHO classification: 4 patients diagnosed with AML with recurrent genetic abnormalities, 2 with AML with myelodysplasia related changes and 3 with AML not otherwise categorized). 3 patients developed their leukemia during the first 2 years after the GCA diagnosis (2 during the first year). All the patients who developed a myeloid leukemia died within 2 years after the leukemia was diagnosed. Of the 34 cases of breast cancer, only 6 (18%) cases developed after the GCA diagnosis (Table 2 and Supplementary Data Table C). Supplementary figure A illustrates the frequency and differences in the 10 most common types of cancer before and after the GCA diagnosis.

Temporal concurrence of GCA and cancer

Of all malignancies diagnosed in controls, 9.2% occurred within 2 years before the index date. The corresponding figure for cases was 5.5%. For the time period within 2 years after index date, 7.5% of malignancies in controls were diagnosed compared to 13.1% for patients with GCA, supplementary figure B. The distribution of malignancies across time periods was significantly different in GCA cases and controls ($p=0.009$).

Discussion

In this large population-based cohort of patients with biopsy-proven GCA, there was no increased overall risk of malignancies after the onset of GCA. However, the risk of leukemia was significantly higher among patients with GCA compared to the background Swedish population. On the other hand, our study showed lower risk of upper gastrointestinal malignancies and breast cancer compared to the risk among background population.

Our findings regarding the overall risk for cancer were comparable to what have been shown in previous studies from Australia, Minnesota, Norway and Spain(18, 19, 23, 24). Those studies also included only patients with biopsy-proven GCA, although they included fewer GCA cases and the study from Norway(23) included both patients with GCA and polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR).

The association between malignancies and systemic vasculitis has been studied previously. For ANCA associated vasculitis (AAV), such associations were variable. While Rahmatulla et al. showed an increase in non-melanoma skin cancer (NMSC) but no other cancer(25), other studies showed much higher cancer risk among patients with AAV(16, 26). Differences in the pathophysiology, the magnitude of inflammation, the multiple organs that are affected by AAV and the different treatment options (e.g. Cyclophosphamide for AAV) may explain the differences in risk for cancer in patients GCA in comparison with AAV.

A novel finding in our study is the lower risk for breast cancer as well as upper GI tract cancer among patients with GCA. Breast cancer is the second most common cancer in the world and, by far the most frequent cancer among women (27). It is difficult to conclude whether the decreased risk for breast cancer depends on the reduced prevalence of traditional risk factors for breast cancer or whether other

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mechanisms, such as circulating cytokines, chemokines, the immunosuppressive treatment and specific immunological cellular response might contribute to the reduced risk. In several studies, a lower body mass index (BMI) has been associated with a higher risk of developing giant cell arteritis (28-31). A low BMI may reflect a reduced estrogen exposure during the postmenopausal period(32). Furthermore, early menopause and long-term breastfeeding have been reported to be independent risk factors for developing GCA, suggesting that longer periods with reduced exposure to female sex hormones correlate with a higher risk for GCA(31). Additionally, interleukin-6 (IL-6), which is important in the pathogenesis of GCA, has been found to inhibit lipid biosynthesis by adipocytes, increasing the rate of lipid catabolism (33, 34). Thus, traditional risk factors for breast cancer such as obesity (35)and late menopause (36) seems to be less prominent in patients with GCA.

To our knowledge, there have been no previous reports on associations between GCA and upper GI tract cancer. In our cohort only one patient developed upper GI tract cancer (oral cavity-lip) while the expected number in the background population was six cases. Obesity and excess of adipose tissue have been described as risk factors for some GI cancers such as esophageal and gastric cancer (37-39). A possible complex interplay between adipokines (leptin and adiponectin) with inflammatory cytokines and cancer cells have been implicated as one of the many mechanisms that contribute to the pathogenesis of GI tract cancer (40). Furthermore, hyperglycemia and diabetes have been described as risk factors for GI cancer(37, 38, 40). Given the reported negative association between BMI and GCA (28, 30) and the reduced prevalence of diabetes at GCA onset (41), limited exposure to metabolic risk factors may explain the reduced rate of GI tract cancer in patients with GCA.

In accordance with the observations in this study, autoimmune diseases have

been associated with an increased risk for hematological malignancies (11), including myelodysplastic syndromes (42) and myeloid malignancies (43). Anderson et al showed in a population-based case-control study of hematopoietic malignancies that the odds ratio (OR) for developing a myeloid malignancy was 1.61 (1.14 – 2.27) for patients with GCA and 1.73 (1.43 – 2.09) for those with PMR (44). Furthermore, another study performed in Swedish population, showed an increased risk for leukemia and particular for acute myeloid leukemia in patients with PMR and GCA (45).

GCA and other inflammatory disorders could be linked to leukemia development through an effect of inflammation on hematopoietic stem cells (HSC). HSC are a rare subset of bone marrow cells that usually exist in a quiescent state, only entering the cell cycle to replenish the blood compartment, thereby limiting the potential for errors in replication. There is now growing evidence that prolonged or excessive exposure to inflammatory cytokines can lead to continued Hematopoietic Stem Cells (HSC) cycling and eventual HSC loss. This promotes bone marrow failure, and can precipitate pre-leukemic states or leukemia through the acquisition of genetic and epigenetic changes in HSCs(46).

In this study, we observed a temporal relationship between the date of GCA diagnosis and the diagnosis of cancer. When the cases were compared to the randomly selected controls from the background population, a higher proportion of patients with GCA were diagnosed with malignancies within two years after their date of diagnosis. However, this was a secondary objective and our study was not designed in order to address this question. A possible explanation for this co-occurrence would be the effect of the inflammatory activity as a risk factor for development or progression of cancer (47). Alternatively, this pattern may be due to surveillance of

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patients who were carefully monitored after initiation of therapy for GCA. We do not believe that the treatment given to patients with GCA contributes to an increased risk for cancer because cytotoxic drugs, which are known to increase the risk for developing cancer(16, 26, 48), are not commonly recommended for treating GCA. The present data do not support routine screening for cancer after the diagnosis of GCA. More studies and observations on the temporal relation between GCA and cancer are needed.

Strengths of our study include the population-based setting and the large sample size. This is the largest study that has investigated the relation between cancer and GCA. In addition, the diagnosis of GCA was confirmed by biopsy, limiting the risk of incorrect classification. The use of validated cancer register also adds to the strengths of this study(49).

Limitations include the lack of data on traditional cancer risk factors such as smoking and exposure to other carcinogens. Furthermore, the small number of observed cancer cases in some categories limited the precision of the estimates of site-specific cancer rates and contributed to the wide confidence intervals. Given the large number of analyses of site-specific cancers, we cannot exclude that the associations were due to chance. Finally, the study included only patients with biopsy-proven GCA, and the results cannot be generalized to those with biopsy-negative GCA and those with isolated large vessel GCA.

In conclusion, our study demonstrated a similar risk for malignancy in patients with GCA compared to the background population. However, there was an increased risk for leukemia and a decreased risk for breast cancer and upper gastrointestinal tract cancer. Potential explanations include effects of chronic inflammation and exposures that predispose to GCA and should be further studied.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Figure legends:

Figure 1. Flowchart illustrating the patients from a population-based cohort in southern Sweden who developed cancer before and after the GCA diagnosis.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of 830 patients with biopsy-proven giant cell arteritis (GCA) by presence of malignant disease, ever

Variable	All	No malignancy	Malignancy (any time)
Number of patients	830	592	238
Female sex, % (n)	74.2 (616)	76.4 (452)	68.9 (164)
Mean age at diagnosis of GCA (SD)	75.3 (8.1)	75.1 (8.1)	75.8 (8.1)
Mean age at first diagnosis of cancer ever (SD)	NA	NA	67.1 (14.9)
Mean age at first diagnosis of cancer after GCA (SD)	NA	NA	79.1 (7.8)
Mean age at last follow-up (SD)	82.6 (7.8)	82.5 (7.8)	82.8 (8)
Death	399	262	137

SD: Standard deviation

NA: Not applicable

Table 2. Malignancies subsequent to GCA diagnosis in descending order

Cancer Categories	Frequency	Percent
Skin cancer (without BC)	45	33,8
Lower Gastrointestinal tract	20	15
Prostate	15	11,3
Leukemia	10	7,5
Female reproductive system	9	6,8
Respiratory system	8	6
Breast cancer	6	4,5
Urinary tract	6	4,5
Unspecified type	5	3,8
Lymphoma	3	2,3
Kidneys and renal pelvis	2	1,5
Multiple Myeloma	2	1,5
Upper Gastrointestinal tract	1	0,8
Myelofibrosis	1	0,8
Total	133	100

BC: Basal Cell

Table 3. Observed and expected cases of cancer after the onset of GCA in a cohort of 830 patients with with GCA in Southern Sweden diagnosed between 1997 and 2010.

Category	Observed	Expected	SIR	95% CI
Upper GI tract	1	6.14	0.16	0.00-0.91
Lower GI tract	18	18.14	0.99	0.59-1.57
Liver, Gallbladder, Pancreas, Peritoneum	0	4.01	NA	NA
Respiratory	8	10.43	0.76	0.33-1.51
Breast	6	18.13	0.33	0.12-0.72
Female Reproductive system	8	7.31	1.09	0.47-2.16
Prostate	15	11.52	1.30	0.73-2.15
Male Reproductive system	0	0.17	NA	NA
Kidneys	2	2.07	0.96	0.12-3.49
Urinary tract without kidneys	6	7.08	0.84	0.31-1.85
Skin	34	24.93	1.36	0.94-1.91
Eyes	0	0.18	NA	NA
CNS	1	1.3	0.76	0.02-4.29
Endocrine system	0	1.7	NA	NA
Sarcomas	0	0.75	NA	NA
Unspecified	4	4.95	0.80	0.22-2.07
Lymphoma	3	4.32	0.69	0.14-2.03
Multiple Myeloma	2	1.7	1.17	0.14-4.25
Leukemia	9	3.89	2.31	1.06-4.39
Myelofibrosis	1	0.47	2.12	0.05-11,85
Total	118	120.8	0.98	0.81-1.17

SIR: Standardized incidence ratio, CI: confidence intervall, NA: not applicle

Figure 1.

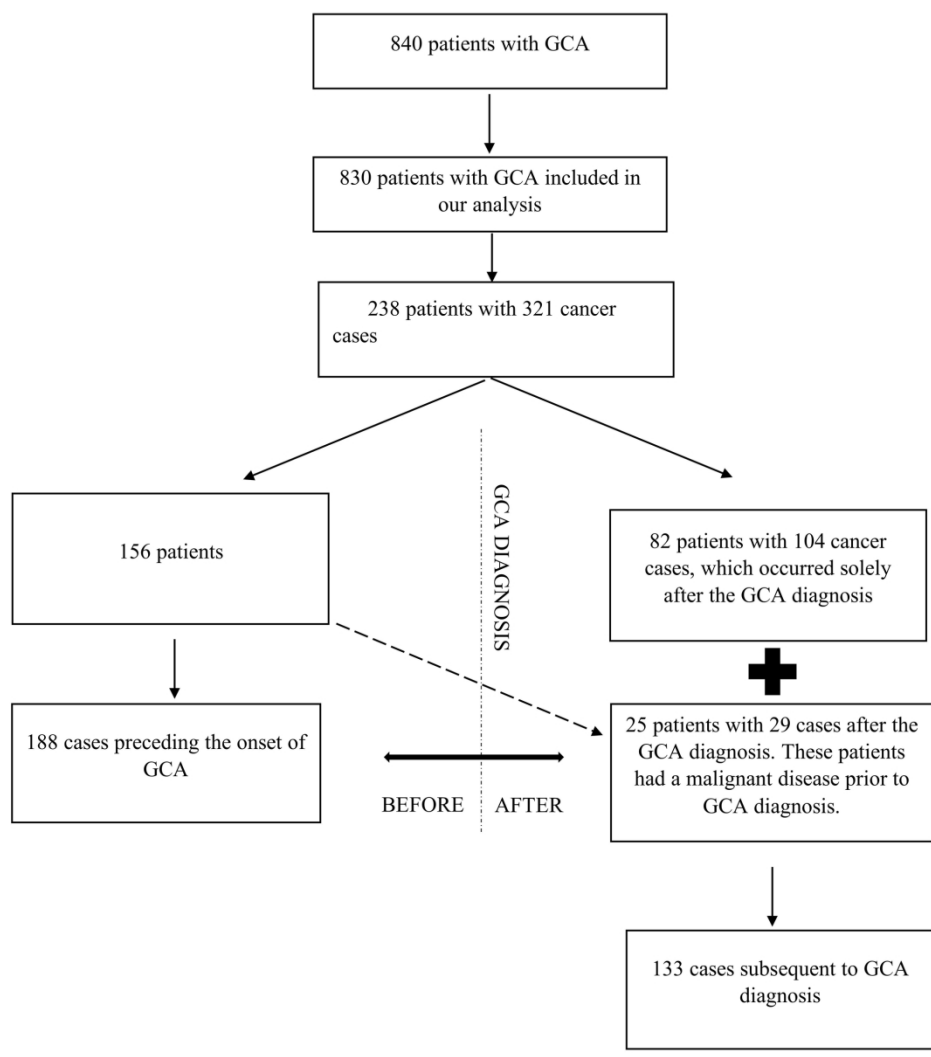


Figure 1. Flowchart illustrating the patients from a population-based cohort in southern Sweden who developed cancer before and after the GCA diagnosis.

192x235mm (300 x 300 DPI)