Hepatitis E: Are Rheumatoid Patients at Risk?

To the Editor:

Hepatitis E virus (HEV) is a major cause of acute hepatitis in developing countries, but remains infrequent in industrialized countries despite a growing number of cases. It is a zoonosis related to domestic and wild animals. In epidemic conditions HEV is transmitted mainly by drinking fecal-contaminated water, but it can also be transmitted person to person, or mother to fetus, and even through contaminated transfusions. Sporadic hepatitis E seems to be the most common manifestation in industrialized countries. In France, genotype 3 is the most common. HEV infection is usually self-limited, symptomatic or asymptomatic, with rare or non reported. To our knowledge only 1 case report of hepatitis E has been published in a patient with malignant non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, and no case of hepatitis E during treatment with RTX are rare or are not reported. To our patient, according to the low severity of the case and the inverse correlation between severity of disease and incubation period, we can estimate that the period of contamination was probably in the second half of May 2011. In areas of low endemicity, clinical presentations can be icteric hepatitis, anicteric nonspecific illness, and often unexplained liver enzyme anomalies.

As is often the case in sporadic appearance of disease, we were unable to confirm the source of transmission. A substantial body of data indicates that HEV infection is a porcine zoonosis, as pigs and wild boars are commonly infected. The source and route of autochthonous HEV infection are not clearly established, but recent recovery of HEV RNA genotype 3 in traditional pig liver sausages (figatelli) purchased in supermarkets, with statistically significant genetic links with sequences recovered from patients, strongly supports the hypothesis of HEV infection through ingestion of figatelli. Our patient was living in Corsica, where consumption of figatelli is common and this kind of transmission is a possibility.

Although rare, the possibility of hepatitis E viral infection must be kept in mind in treated patients with RA when there is an unexplained increase in liver enzymes.

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