Prognostic Value of $^{11}$C-Choline PET/CT and CT for Predicting Survival of Bladder Cancer Patients Treated with Radical Cystectomy

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Key Words
Bladder cancer · Choline · Positron emission tomography-computed tomography · Cancer-specific death · Overall survival

Abstract

Background: In patients with bladder cancer (BCa) preoperative staging with $^{11}$C-choline positron emission tomography-computed tomography (PET/CT) could be used to derive prognostic information and hence stratify patients preoperatively with respect to disease management. Methods: From June 2004 to May 2007, 44 patients with localized BCa were staged with $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT before radical cystectomy. The results of imaging were correlated to overall survival (OS) and cumulative incidence of cancer-specific death (CSD). Results: There was no statistically significant difference in OS and CSD between the patient groups when stratified for organ-confined versus non-organ-confined disease or lymph node involvement defined by either $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT (OS: $p = 0.262$, hazard ratio [HR] = 1.60; $p = 0.527$, HR = 0.76; CSD: $p = 0.144$, HR = 2.25; $p = 0.976$, HR = 0.98) or CT (OS: $p = 0.518$, HR = 1.34; $p = 0.228$, HR = 1.67; CSD: $p = 0.323$, HR = 1.90; $p = 0.136$, HR = 2.38). The limitation of this study is the small number of included patients. Conclusion: In our prospective trial neither CT nor $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT were able to sufficiently predict OS or CSD in BCa patients treated with radical cystectomy albeit trends and moderately increased HRs could be demonstrated without significant differences between CT or $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT. However, these trends might prove statistically significant in bigger patient cohorts. Therefore initial transsectional imaging might be of clinical relevance in respect to prognosis and could play a role in the counseling of BCa patients.

T. Maurer and T. Horn contributed equally to this work.
Introduction

In Europe, approximately 110,000 cases of bladder cancer (BCa) are newly diagnosed each year and the overall BCa mortality rate per year ranges from 1.2 (for women) to 5.5 (for men) per 100,000 inhabitants [1, 2]. At initial diagnosis, about 70% of patients with BCa present with non-muscle-invasive disease whereas 30% show muscle-invasive cancer [1]. Especially muscle-invasive BCa (MIBCa) and high-risk non-muscle-invasive BCa (NMIBCa) represent an aggressive and potentially life-threatening disease requiring optimal treatment strategies.

The standard treatment for MIBCa is radical cystectomy (RCX) with pelvic lymph node dissection (PLND) whose extent is currently still under discussion [1]. However, in locally advanced disease with high risk for development of metastases, platinum-based neoadjuvant chemotherapy regimes improve cure rates while palliative treatment is advocated for metastatic disease [3, 4]. Therefore, accurate pre-treatment staging of patients with high-risk BCa or MIBCa has direct implications on further management and patient outcome. Unfortunately, current clinical staging procedures (computed tomography [CT] or magnetic resonance imaging [MRI]) for BCa are insufficient since upstaging from organ-confined (OC) lymph node-negative BCa to non-organ-confined (NOC) BCa or BCa with lymph node metastases on final pathology occurs in approximately 40% of patients [1, 5, 6]. Several risk factors either leading to pathological upstaging in BCa patients after RCX and PLND or compromising recurrence-free and overall survival (OS) rates have been established. These include presence of preoperative hydronephrosis, evidence of lymphovascular invasion, deep muscularis propria infiltration and non-papillary or solid tumor growth pattern in the histological specimen after transurethral resection as well as multiplicity of tumors and age of patients [7–11]. Clinical nomograms incorporating these factors have been proposed to pre-therapeutically identify patients in whom upstaging is likely and who might benefit from neoadjuvant regimens [10, 11]. However, some authors support the use of neoadjuvant chemotherapy even in patients with clinically OC disease – also because upstaged patients on final pathology after RCX often do not receive adjuvant chemotherapy [12].

Recently, positron emission tomography (PET) as functional imaging with tracers like 18F-FDG, 11C-choline or 11C-acetate in combination with CT has been introduced [13–26]. However, these studies present conflicting data as to whether these new imaging modalities are able to improve clinical staging in comparison to results of the ‘gold standard’ histopathology. The accuracy of this ‘gold standard’ on the other hand heavily depends on meticulous lymph node preparation (omitting sampling error by incomplete dissection of lymphatic tissue) as well as subtle pathological evaluation to identify even small metastatic lesions especially in normal-sized lymph nodes (omitting analytical error) and might therefore be subject to bias, especially when reporting lymph node-negative disease [27, 28].

Relevant endpoints for the individual patient, however, represent recurrence-free survival, disease-specific survival or OS after potentially curative treatment – endpoints that may be difficult to assess preoperatively. To our knowledge, so far there are only two studies correlating the results of pre-therapeutic PET/CT imaging (both with 18F-FDG) with survival [13, 17]. Thus, the aim of our study was the definition of prognostic accuracy of preoperative staging with 11C-choline PET/CT and sole CT regarding OS and cumulative incidence of cancerspecific death (CSD) in comparison to histopathological evaluation. Therefore we followed the patients of our previously published prospective study, examining the diagnostic accuracy of lymph node staging with 11C-choline PET/CT in comparison to sole CT and histopathological evaluation in patients with BCa treated with RCX and PLND [23].

Patients and Methods

Patients

After approval by the local ethics committee and obtaining informed consent, 44 patients with histologically proven high-grade or muscle-invasive localized urothelial carcinoma of the bladder underwent standardized RCX and PLND within a mean of 13.5 days (median 6.0 days, range 1–89 days) after 11C-choline PET/CT from June 2004 to May 2007 [23]. Patients with metastatic disease were not included since they did not undergo surgery but palliative treatment. All patients received a standard template PLND up to the aortic bifurcation. In 20 patients with suspicion of locally advanced disease (T3) or lymph node involvement (LN+) by imaging, an extended PLND up to the origin of the inferior mesenteric artery was performed in addition.

Histopathological diagnosis of local BCa and the presence or absence of lymph node metastases was based on histological examination of surgical specimens and the TNM classification system [29]. To minimize pathological understaging and to maximize histological lymph node yield, tissue from each anatomical...
Table 1. Three- and 5-year OS and cumulative incidence of CSD for patients with ≤T2 N0, ≥T3 N0 or T1–4 N+ BCa according to 11C-choline PET/CT, sole CT examination or postoperative histological evaluation (estimated means and 95% CIs are presented)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>OS 3 years (%)</th>
<th>CSD 3 years (%)</th>
<th>CSD 5 years (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>11C-choline PET/CT</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>≤T2 N0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>67 (48–92)</td>
<td>22 (7–44)</td>
<td>22 (7–44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥T3 N0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>38 (15–92)</td>
<td>38 (7–70)</td>
<td>38 (7–70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T1–4 N+</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>61 (42–88)</td>
<td>28 (10–50)</td>
<td>33 (13–55)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>CT</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>≤T2 N0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>69 (48–99)</td>
<td>15 (2–40)</td>
<td>15 (2–40)</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥T3 N0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>78 (55–100)</td>
<td>22 (3–53)</td>
<td>22 (3–53)</td>
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<tr>
<td>T1–4 N+</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>46 (29–72)</td>
<td>36 (17–56)</td>
<td>41 (20–61)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Histology</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>≤T2 N0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>75 (58–97)</td>
<td>20 (6–40)</td>
<td>20 (6–40)</td>
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<tr>
<td>≥T3 N0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>50 (28–88)</td>
<td>17 (2–43)</td>
<td>25 (5–52)</td>
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<tr>
<td>T1–4 N+</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>42 (21–81)</td>
<td>50 (19–75)</td>
<td>50 (19–75)</td>
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</table>

Results

Estimated 5-year OS probabilities for patients with stage ≤T2 N0 as classified by 11C-choline PET/CT, sole CT examination or histology was 61, 62 and 65%, for patients with ≥T3 N0 38, 67 and 42%, and for patients with T1–4 N+ disease 50, 41 and 42%, respectively. In total, the estimated 5- and 3-year OS by 11C-choline PET/CT, sole CT or histology did not show relevant differences for patients diagnosed within these groups (table 1).

Also, no significant differences could be observed when patients were stratified for OC and NOC disease irrespective of lymph node status (fig. 1a–c) or for lymph node involvement irrespective of T classification (fig. 1d–f). While 11C-choline PET/CT showed a slightly superior p value and HR concerning OS compared to CT (p = 0.262 vs. p = 0.518; HR = 1.60 vs. HR = 1.34) when stratifying for extent of local bladder tumor (OC vs. NOC), sole CT examination demonstrated a moderate improvement compared to 11C-choline PET/CT when stratifying for lymph node involvement (p = 0.228 vs. p = 0.527; HR = 1.67 vs. HR = 0.76). However, in our patient cohort 11C-choline PET/CT as well as CT did not prove to be a significant predictor for OS.
Concerning cumulative incidence of CSD, estimated probabilities for $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT, sole CT examination or histology after 5 years were 22, 15 and 20% for patients with $\leq$T2 N0, 38, 22 and 25% for patients with $\geq$T3 N0, and 33, 41 and 50% for patients with T1–4 N+ disease, respectively (table 1).

For CSD, no significant differences could be observed when patients were stratified for OC and NOC disease irrespective of lymph node status (fig. 2a–c) or for lymph node involvement irrespective of T classification (fig. 2d–f). Here, $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT showed almost equal p values concerning CSD compared to CT ($p = 0.144$ vs. $p = 0.323$; HR = 2.25 vs. HR = 1.90) when stratifying for extent of local bladder tumor (OC vs. NOC), while sole CT examination demonstrated an observable, yet insignificant improvement compared to $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT when stratifying for lymph node involvement ($p = 0.136$ vs. $p = 0.976$; HR = 2.38 vs. HR = 0.98). Taken together, in our patient cohort both imaging modalities could not reliably identify patients with increased risk of CSD in contrast to postoperative histological analysis. Not surprisingly, postoperative histological analysis proved to be a significant predictor of CSD when patients were stratified according to local tumor ($p = 0.042$; HR = 3.19) or lymph node involvement ($p = 0.036$; HR = 3.05).

Negative results of $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT and CT were found in 12 (27%) and 14 (32%) patients with histopathologically confirmed lymph node metastasis, and suspicious findings on $^{11}$C-choline PET/CT and CT were described in 5 (11%) and 3 (7%) patients without lymph node involvement on histopathological analysis. Postoperative assessment of prognosis combining results of imaging ($^{11}$C-choline PET/CT or CT) and histopathological evaluation concerning lymph node status for patients with positive findings on imaging and histologically confirmed lymph node metastases showed a weak trend for worse OS ($p = 0.700$ vs. $p = 0.166$; HR = 1.25 vs. HR = 2.12), but a pronounced tendency for higher CSD ($p = 0.207$ vs. $p = 0.029$; HR = 2.63 vs. HR = 4.94) compared to patients with negative findings on imaging and histological analysis. However, the patient groups were too small to adequately analyze subgroups of patients – especially subgroups with diverging results for imaging and histopathological analysis.
Cross-sectional imaging remains a mainstay in the staging and the pre-therapeutic decision-making process in patients with extensive high-grade NMIBCa or MIBCa. The most widely used imaging modalities, however, rely solely on morphology and show accuracy rates for determination of locally advanced (≥T3) disease between 55 and 92% (for CT) and between 73 and 96% (for MRI), with sensitivity rates for detection of metastatic lymph nodes from 48 to 87% limited by low specificity rates for both imaging techniques [1]. Thus, upstaging on final pathology after RCX and PLND is a common finding for both CT and MRI [6,32]. Especially metastatic disease to the lymph nodes has a great impact on prognosis, with lymph node density and extracapsular extension rather than size of the metastatic lesion representing the strongest prognostic factors [33–36].

Over the last few years PET/CT with the tracers 18F-FDG, 11C-choline or 11C-acetate has evolved as a new staging modality combining cross-sectional anatomical and functional imaging [13–26]. Several studies described increased accuracy and high specificity rates especially in the detection of lymph nodes or distant metastases to bone and visceral organs with 18F-FDG-based [13,16,17,19,20], 11C-choline-based [14,24,37] or 11C-acetate-based [24] PET/CT, which had an impact on further clinical management in a significant number of patients. Therefore, those authors concluded that PET/CT might have the ability to replace standard cross-sectional imaging or bone scintigraphy in the staging of BCa. This view is challenged by others who could not observe a significant improvement, mainly because of unspecific tracer uptake caused by inflammatory changes after instillation of immuno- or chemotherapeutical agents or transurethral resection [18,22,23,25,26]. In our patient cohort, for example, we could not observe an improved diagnostic efficacy of preoperative lymph node staging by 11C-choline PET/CT compared to conventional CT alone either [23]. However, up to now, no final conclusion on the value of PET/CT for staging of local tumor, lymph node involvement and distal organs in BCa patients can be drawn, mainly since these data are based on relatively small and in part heterogeneous study cohorts.

**Fig. 2.** Cumulative incidence of CSD of BCa patients with OC (≤T2) versus NOC (≥T3) disease and of BCa patients with or without metastatic lymph node involvement (LN+ vs. LN−) as determined by 11C-choline PET/CT, sole CT examination or histopathological analysis. p values of log-rank tests as well as HRs of Cox regression analysis with 95% CIs are shown.
Furthermore, in most studies the performance of imaging is determined by comparison to the ‘gold standard’ of postoperative histopathological evaluation and not directly to recurrence-free survival, disease-specific survival or OS, which represent relevant endpoints for the individual patient. So far, only two studies correlated the results of 18F-FDG PET/CT imaging with time to recurrence, overall or disease-specific survival [13, 17]. In the study by Drieskens et al. [13], 55 patients with non-metastatic invasive BCa were subjected to 18F-FDG PET followed by CT within 14 days. 32 patients received curative treatment consisting of RCX and PLND alone or in combination with either neoadjuvant or adjuvant chemo- or radiotherapy, while 23 patients were only treated with chemo- or radiotherapy or did not receive any treatment. The median OS of patients with positive findings on 18F-FDG PET and CT was 13.5 months versus 32 months for patients without suspicious results. However, only 42% (5/12) of patients with positive 18F-FDG PET and CT received curative treatment compared to 63% (27/43) of patients with negative findings, and therefore the results have to be considered with caution. Kibel et al. [17] reported on 42 BCa patients without locally advanced or metastatic disease on conventional imaging who underwent preoperative 18F-FDG PET/CT before RCX and PLND. One patient with suspicion of metastatic disease on 18F-FDG PET/CT did not undergo surgery, while another patient received neoadjuvant chemotherapy after lymph node biopsy before RCX. In this homogenous patient cohort the recurrence-free, overall and disease-specific survival at 24 months was 0, 23 and 23% for patients with positive findings on preoperative 18F-FDG PET/CT (n = 9), compared to 55, 62 and 58% for patients without evidence of lymph node metastases (n = 33). Therefore it was concluded that 18F-FDG PET/CT yields high diagnostic and prognostic accuracy that might be useful in the decision-making process and selection of the appropriate treatment strategy prior to RCX.

Our study with 44 patients all treated with RCX and PLND without prior neoadjuvant chemotherapy was only able to demonstrate non-significant trends for 11C-choline PET/CT or CT alone in predicting OS or CSD in patients with OC vs. NOC BCa or LN+ versus LN– disease with moderately increased HRs for patients with evidence of NOC in 11C-choline PET/CT or of NOC and LN+ disease in CT. These at first glance contradictory findings can at least partly be explained by the low number of included patients in our prospective study as well as by the fact that our study included patients with less advanced disease, since our survival rates are greater than in the study by Kibel et al. [17]. Also, the fact that 20 patients with suspicion of locally advanced disease (T3) or lymph node involvement by imaging received a more extended PLND up to the origin of the mesenteric artery might have influenced our findings. Additionally, six patients with newly diagnosed metastatic disease (M+) by 11C-choline PET/CT (visible also on sole CT examination) were not operated and excluded from the initial study and from further analysis [23].

Although in our prospective trial neither CT nor 11C-choline PET/CT were able to significantly predict patients’ OS and CSD, the potential value of these preoperative imaging modalities with respect to prognosis should be evaluated in larger patient cohorts in the future since their results very well might have an impact on patient counseling. The development of BCa-specific radiopharmaceutical tracers is desirable to further improve diagnostic staging and the predictive value of PET-based imaging. New imaging modalities like a combination of PET and MRI, however, could potentially improve the diagnostic and prognostic value of preoperative imaging [38].

**Disclosure Statement**

The authors have no conflict of interest.

**References**


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