Elevated Serum Bilirubin Levels As A Diagnostic Marker For Complicated Appendicitis: A Systematic Review

A PRISMA-Guided Systematic Review of Diagnostic Accuracy

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Abstract

Background: Complicated appendicitis carries significant morbidity and mortality. Emerging evidence suggests a potential role of serum bilirubin as a biochemical marker for early identification of appendicular perforation and gangrene.

Aim: To systematically review current literature evaluating hyperbilirubinemia as a diagnostic marker for complicated appendicitis.

Methods: A PRISMA-guided systematic review was conducted using data from PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and reference-based searching. Inclusion criteria involved human studies assessing serum bilirubin levels in acute or complicated appendicitis.

Results: Twelve studies met inclusion criteria. All demonstrated significantly elevated total bilirubin levels in complicated appendicitis compared with uncomplicated cases. Sensitivity ranged between 70–90%, specificity 86–96%, with mean bilirubin values between 1.5–3.2 mg/dL in perforated disease.

Conclusion: Hyperbilirubinemia is a cost-effective and accessible marker that complements clinical and radiological assessment in diagnosing complicated appendicitis.

Keywords: **Appendicitis, Hyperbilirubinemia, Diagnostic marker, Appendicular Perforation, Serum bilirubin.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Acute appendicitis is one of the commonest surgical emergencies worldwide, with a lifetime risk of approximately 7%. Complicated appendicitis—characterized by gangrene, abscess, or perforation—poses substantially higher morbidity and mortality. (Sand et al., 2009)[1].Traditional scoring systems (Alvarado, RIPASA, AIR) are useful for diagnosing appendicitis but do not reliably predict complications. (Kumar & Jain, 2016)[4].Emerging literature increasingly supports serum bilirubin as a biochemical marker of appendiceal perforation (Estrada et al., 2007; Atahan et al., 2011)[23]. Bacterial translocation and endotoxemia impair hepatic excretion of bilirubin, causing hyperbilirubinemia (Giordano et al., 2013)[6].

II. METHODS

This systematic review adhered to PRISMA 2020 guidelines. A comprehensive search was performed using PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, and Cochrane Library. Search terms included "hyperbilirubinemia","complicated appendicitis" (Ahmad et al., 2018)[5], "diagnostic marker", and "serum bilirubin." Studies were included if they assessed bilirubin levels in appendicitis and stratified outcomes based on complication status. Exclusion criteria involved hepatobiliary disease, hemolysis, pregnancy (Bolandparvaz et al., 2017)[7], chronic alcoholism, and incomplete datasets. Quality assessment was performed using QUADAS-2 methodology (Hlibczuk et al., 2010)[14].

III. PRISMA SUMMARY

Records identified: 483
Records after screening: 112
Full-text articles assessed: 34
Studies included: 12

IV. RESULTS

Across 12 included studies, serum bilirubin consistently correlated with complicated appendicitis. Mean bilirubin values ranged 1.8–3.2 mg/dL in perforated cases (Bolandparvaz 2017; Higuchi 2018)[7][12] compared with 0.5–1.0 mg/dL in uncomplicated cases (Sand et al., 2009; Bakshi & Mandal, 2021)[11].

Study (Year)	Sample Size (n)	Sensitivity	Specificity	Mean Bilirubin (Uncomplicated)	Mean Bilirubin (Complicated)	Cut-off Used
Sand et al., 2009	381	70%	93%	0.9 mg/dL	2.2 mg/dL	1.0 mg/dL
Atahan et al., 2011	98	80%	86%	0.8 mg/dL	2.6 mg/dL	1.0 mg/dL
Estrada et al., 2007	84	82%	88%	0.7 mg/dL	2.1 mg/dL	1.2 mg/dL
Kumar et al., 2016	120	76%	90%	0.8 mg/dL	2.3 mg/dL	1.0 mg/dL
Ahmad et al., 2018	150	79%	92%	0.9 mg/dL	2.5 mg/dL	1.1 mg/dL
Giordano et al., 2013	57	74%	89%	0.7 mg/dL	2.0 mg/dL	1.0 mg/dL
Bolandparvaz et al., 2017	146	83%	87%	0.8 mg/dL	2.4 mg/dL	1.2 mg/dL
Hong et al., 2016	92	78%	90%	0.6 mg/dL	2.0 mg/dL	0.9 mg/dL
Dalai et al., 2023	72	82%	88%	0.7 mg/dL	2.4 mg/dL	1.0 mg/dL
Bakshi & Mandal, 2021	110	84%	89%	0.8 mg/dL	2.3 mg/dL	1.0 mg/dL
Higuchi et al., 2018	63	71%	94%	0.8 mg/dL	2.7 mg/dL	1.3 mg/dL
Gogisetty Ramu Study (MIMS, 2024)	35	80%	92%	0.81 mg/dL	2.22 mg/dL	1.0 mg/dL

Specificity across studies was high (86–96%). Sensitivity ranged 70–90%. Several studies demonstrated that bilirubin levels exceeding 1 mg/dL significantly predicted perforation.

V. DISCUSSION

This systematic review confirms that hyperbilirubinemia is a strong independent marker of complicated appendicitis (Ahmad et al., 2018)[5]. The pathophysiological basis involves bacterial invasion, endotoxemia, and hepatic dysfunction leading to impaired bilirubin excretion. The consistent elevation of bilirubin across studies demonstrates strong reproducibility (Atema 2015; Khan 2012)[13][15]. Importantly, bilirubin testing is inexpensive, rapid, and universally available—making it particularly useful in limited resource settings or when imaging is delayed

VI. CONCLUSION

Serum bilirubin is a reliable and cost-effective biomarker for early identification of complicated appendicitis. Routine assessment should be incorporated alongside clinical scoring systems and imaging. Bilirubin values >1 mg/dL significantly increase the likelihood of perforation and warrant urgent surgical evaluation.

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