

NANTES UNIVERSITÉ

FACULTÉ DE MÉDECINE

Année : 2022

N°

THÈSE

pour le

DIPLÔME D'ÉTAT DE DOCTEUR EN MÉDECINE

GASTRO-ENTÉROLOGIE ET HÉPATOLOGIE

par

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née le 04/06/1994 à Roubaix

Présentée et soutenue publiquement le 16/09/2022

**Incidence and factors associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection in French patients
with inflammatory bowel disease: the MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study.**

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REMERCIEMENTS

A Monsieur le Président du Jury,

Monsieur le Professeur Arnaud BOURREILLE

Merci de me faire l'honneur de présider mon jury de thèse.

Merci d'avoir développé mon sens clinique lors de mes stages réalisés avec vous, merci pour votre pédagogie et votre enseignement, merci d'avoir accepté que je mène à bien ce projet. Un grand merci pour votre disponibilité durant ces deux années.

A Madame la Directrice de Thèse,

Madame le Docteur Catherine LE BERRE

Je ne pourrais jamais assez te remercier pour tout ce que tu m'as apporté, merci de m'avoir fait confiance sur ce projet et de m'avoir aiguillé depuis ces deux grosses années très enrichissantes pour moi.

Je garde un très bon souvenir d'avoir travaillé avec toi, j'ai eu beaucoup de chance de t'avoir comme chef une année entière, et j'espère que l'on aura encore beaucoup d'autres occasions de travailler ensemble. Tu es une très belle personne.

Aux Membres du Jury,

Monsieur le Professeur David BOUTOILLE,

Monsieur le Professeur Regis JOSIEN,

Un grand merci d'avoir accepté de participer à mon jury de thèse.

Merci d'apporter votre expertise dans mon travail et votre regard de spécialiste. J'espère que cela aura été également enrichissant pour vous de lire ce projet, et qu'il amènera à d'autres collaborations intéressantes.

Madame le Docteur Caroline TRANG-POISSON,

Merci de t'être rendue disponible aujourd'hui, j'ai beaucoup de chance de t'avoir dans mon jury. J'ai adoré travailler avec toi principalement lors de mon premier semestre où tu m'as beaucoup appris ; merci de m'avoir fait confiance sur la prise en charge de tes patients. J'espère pouvoir encore profiter de tes connaissances dans les MICI en tant que Docteur.

A tous mes formateurs,

Dans le service d'hépto-gastro-entérologie du CHU de Nantes : au Docteur GOURNAY, au Professeur Tamara MATYSIAK-BUDNIK, au Professeur Stanislas BRULEY DES VARANNES, au Professeur Emmanuel CORON, au Docteur Isabelle ARCHAMBEAUD, au Docteur Estelle CAUCHIN, au Docteur Mathurin FLAMANT, au Docteur Adam JIRKA, au Docteur Marc LE RHUN, au Docteur Nicolas MUSQUER, au Docteur Solange PECOUT, au Docteur Céline TAKOUDJU, et au Docteur Yann TOUCHEFEU ; merci pour votre pédagogie apportée durant tout mon internat. Merci à toute l'équipe soignante.

A mes anciens chefs de cliniques, au Docteur Miloud AZAFARNE, au Docteur Marion DOUILLARD, au Dr Alix LOT, au Dr Lucille QUENEHERVE, au Dr Matthieu PERON, au Dr Maeva SALIMON, merci de m'avoir épaulée durant ces soirées/week-ends de garde...

A mes anciens co-internes, au Docteur Lucie DUVAL, au Docteur Elise ESNAUD, au Docteur Hannah GONDRAN, au Docteur Quentin MICHAUX, au Docteur Lause MOISSET, au Docteur Orianne PLANADE, au Docteur Marine VERDIER, au plaisir de travailler avec vous.

Au service d'hépatogastro-entérologie de Cholet, au Docteur You-Heng LAM, au Docteur Frédérique ALABERT, au Docteur Julien BAUDON, au Docteur Thomas BROUSSIER, au Docteur Mehdi KAASSIS, merci de votre patience lors de mes débuts de formation en endoscopie ...

Au service d'hépatogastro-entérologie de Saint-Nazaire, au Docteur Ayman ABDULHAI, au Docteur Emmanuelle GRAF, au Docteur Andrée NGOWTUE, au Docteur Philippe GUERZIDER, et à toute l'équipe soignante ; merci d'avoir fait de ce dernier semestre un endroit qui me plaît et où je suis ravie d'y retourner.

Au service d'oncologie à l'ICO Gauducheau, au Docteur Hélène SENELLART et au Professeur Jean-Luc RAOUL, merci de m'avoir soutenue dans la rédaction du case report qui a été très enrichissant pour moi. Au Docteur Emmanuel RIO en radiothérapie, merci de m'avoir apporté vos connaissances de spécialiste sur les pathologies digestives oncologiques.

A l'équipe d'Hôpital de Jour UMA hépatogastro-entérologie, au CRB de Nantes, au service de virologie et d'immunologie, merci pour votre disponibilité et votre implication dans l'étude.

A mes co-internes de promo : La Delg Vicky et notre bon vieux Sam, les vrais y savent ... ; à ma copine Pierrine, à Briot, Raph, Juliette, Astrid, Geoffrey, Nico, Nour, Alex, Clément. A Tanguy Perennec le fameux, Axel, Laurette la soeurette, et Max Imus

A ma famille,

A mes parents,

Merci de m'avoir soutenue et d'avoir été derrière moi dans toutes les épreuves, de m'avoir fait confiance lors de ma seconde 6^{ème} année, c'est grâce à vous si je peux être chef de gastro aujourd'hui... Je vous en suis amplement reconnaissante.

A mes frères Vic et Loulou,

Merci de m'avoir supportée pendant toutes ces années d'études, et dans tous mes états, à refaire on y réfléchira plutôt deux fois qu'une ...

A mes grands-parents, à ma Graga, où j'aurais adoré te voir dans l'Assemblée, mais je sais que tu n'es pas loin.

A Anne Sophie et Benoît pour leur soutien à Steene, Sabine pour ton aide précieuse en Anglais, J-C, Marie et Got, Marie Maud et les couz.

A mes amis,

Aux filles, Amélie, Bert, Chip, Chipette et Mayon, merci de m'avoir gardée comme copine depuis nos 11 ans, il faut dire qu'avec Marge la bizarre ce n'est pas facile tous les jour ... Et ce n'est pas prêt de se terminer !!

A mes colocs, Man, Cam, Bennett et Max, Lise et Tom, merci pour tous ces moments de rigolade passés ensemble et ce soutien quotidien.

Aux Lillois(e)s,

Dédicace spéciale à Loulou la meilleure, Anne, Etoile, Hono et Marion, Jeannus, Lison et Charlotte ; Ari, Bobo, Clément, Fourdi, Lesta, Martin, Mitch, Val mich mich et Val Ret et toute l'équipe, merci pour tous ces souvenirs ensemble, et de m'apporter des moments de joie lors de mes virées sur Lille.

Aux Nantais(e)s, Aude, Coline et Arthur, Adé et Tanguy, Marion et Gaby, Jerem Lucas et Léo, Aurore, Chloé, Hassan, Princy, Roro, Silvestre, Bertille Margaud, Geogeo et Océane la team Cholettaise, merci les copains d'avoir fait de Nantes une ville où je m'y sens bien. Hâte de continuer l'aventure avec vous.

A Dush, je pense que tu es bien la première personne à qui je dois dire MERCI ; à nous, et ce n'est qu'un début !

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There were numerically more COVID-19 positive patients who still worked at their place of work (32.6% vs 20.0%), but the difference was not statistically significant ($p=0.359$), knowing that the outset of the study took place during the first lockdown period in France. The number of people living at home, including those who continued their professional activities, as well as the number of children under 15 years of age did not differ between both groups. Interestingly, COVID+ patients lived significantly more frequently in a flat compared to COVID– patients who lived more frequently in a house ($p=0.021$)	24
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ABBREVIATIONS

AU Arbitrary Unit

AUC Area under the curve

BMI Body mass index

CD Crohn's Disease

CI Confidence interval

COPD Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

CPP Comité de Protection des Personnes

CRB Centre de Ressources Biologiques

CRP C-reactive protein

CT scan Computed-tomography scan

ECCO European Crohn's and Colitis Organisation

EDTA Ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid

GETAID Groupe d'Etude Thérapeutique des Affections Inflammatoires du Tube Digestif

HBI Harvey Bradshaw Index

HR Hazard ratio

IBD Inflammatory Bowel Disease

IV Intravenous

OR Odds ratio

PBMC Peripheral blood mononuclear cells

PCR Polymerase Chain Reaction

RR Relative risk

TMB Tetramethylbenzidine

UC Ulcerative Colitis

MANUSCRIPT

Incidence and factors associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection in French patients with inflammatory bowel disease: the MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study.

Lelong M. (Nantes), Nancey S. (Lyon Sud), Bouguen G. (Rennes), Allez M. (Saint-Louis), Serrero M. (Marseille), Caillio L. (Nîmes), Viennot S. (Caen), Blanc P. (Montpellier), Laharie D. (Bordeaux), Olivier R. (Poitiers), Peyrin-Biroulet L. (Nancy), Dib N. (Angers), de Maissin A. (La Roche-sur-Yon), Montuclard C. (Valence), Trang-Poisson C. (Nantes), Gallot G. (Nantes), Bressollette-Bodin C. (Nantes), Berthome M. (Nantes), Burel M. (Nantes), Josien R. (Nantes), Rimbert M. (Nantes), Vavasseur F. (Nantes), Bourreille A. (Nantes), Le Berre C. (Nantes)

Disclosures: The authors declare no competing interests related to this work.

Funding:

Fonds de dotation CHU Nantes.

AOI analyse secondaire 2020 (CHU Nantes).

Fondation SantéDige 2020.

Fonds métropolitain d'appui aux innovations en santé liées au COVID-19 (Nantes Métropole).

GETAID.

Introduction

Inflammatory bowel diseases (IBD), encompassing Crohn's disease (CD) and ulcerative colitis (UC), are both characterized by chronic inflammation of the digestive tract due to dysregulation of the intestinal immune system. Although IBD do not significantly increase the risk of mortality (1), both CD and UC have been linked to an increased risk of death from infections, for multiple reasons, including chronic inflammation, undernutrition, and the therapies used that all have immunosuppressive properties, with the exception of 5-aminosalicylates (2–4). Nowadays, more than 50% of patients are treated with immunosuppressants and/or biological therapies (5, 6). The risk of viral infections, in particular herpes viruses (7), is increased with thiopurines, which is less demonstrated with respiratory viruses such as the Influenzae virus (8). When using biologics, the risk of bacterial and opportunistic infections is greater, but this risk mainly concerns anti-tumor necrosis factor (TNF) agents, while ustekinumab and vedolizumab probably have a more favorable safety profile (9–11). The infection by SARS-CoV-2 has raised questions about the management of patients with IBD. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in December 2019, many studies have focused on the clinical factors associated with the risk of complications or death in general, such as older patients, particularly males, or those with co-morbidities including pulmonary, renal, cardiac, cerebrovascular or metabolic diseases (12–14). The link between drug-induced immunosuppression and severe COVID-19 is less clear (15, 16). Several studies have reported a lower prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in the IBD population, with a trend towards more frequent hospitalizations without increasing the risk of severe COVID-19 infection and admission in intensive care unit (17– 21). Data in patients with IBD also tend to show a protective effect of anti-TNF agents (22–24), but there is still some uncertainty on the subject (25). Few studies studied the impact of trough levels on the risk of COVID-19. Data from the British CLARITY IBD study showed that the type of biologic agent did not impact the rates of

PCR-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection, but seroprevalence rates were lower in infliximab- and adalimumab- than vedolizumab-treated patients. Interestingly, undetectable anti-TNF levels were associated with higher viral seropositivity rates, supporting a causal relationship. However, confounding factors, such as combination therapy with an immunosuppressant, have not been analyzed yet (26, 27). Moreover, nowadays, vaccine safety and efficacy is a key question in the context of patients who have biological therapy, especially when seeing the rate of COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy in IBD patients (28, 29). Serologic response is good after vaccination in patients with IBD (30, 31), although lower with anti-TNF agents than with other treatments including vedolizumab (32). Real-world data have also proven the safety of COVID-19 vaccines in IBD patients (33, 34). Nevertheless, it is important to be able to provide patients with data regarding the risk of being infected by SARS CoV-2 and the factors associated with this risk, especially when treated with biologics, outside any vaccination context. The prospective MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study aimed at bringing more precision to these fundamental questions on a population of French patients with IBD being treated with intravenous infliximab or vedolizumab at day hospital before the start of the vaccination campaign. The objectives of this study were (i) to evaluate the prevalence of COVID-19 in a French cohort of patients with IBD treated with infliximab or vedolizumab during the first pandemic wave; (ii) to identify clinical and socio-demographic factors associated with the risk of COVID-19; (iii) to analyze the impact of biologics (with or without combination therapy with immunosuppressants) and their trough levels on the risk of being infected by SARS-CoV-2.

Methods

Study design and setting

The MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study was a prospective multicenter study with an associated biological collection, starting during the first pandemic wave in France. This study was led in cooperation with the Groupe d'Etude Thérapeutique des Affections Inflammatoires du Tube Digestif (GETAID), of which all the 15 participating centers are members and are used to conduct collaborative research projects, allowing the rapid constitution of this large cohort. The inclusion period started in March 2020 and lasted until June 2020 – the first two months of the study corresponding to the first lockdown period in France. Patients were recruited consecutively in the day hospital of each center. The follow-up period ended in January 2021 before the start of the vaccination campaign in France.

Ethics

This study was a non-interventional trial approved by the Comité de Protection des Personnes (CPP) Ile-de-France VI (institutional review board) on 30 March 2020 under the number 20.03.27.48341. The blood samples were integrated into the collection of human biological samples attached to the « Hépato-Gastro-Entérologie » research program declared on 5 September 2011 under the number DC-2011-1399 and in the following amending declarations (DC2012-1555; DC-2013-1832; DC2014-2206 and DC-2017-2987 currently pending) at the Ministry of Research and having obtained a favorable decision from the CPP Ouest IV on 7 April 2015. The consent form for this biological collection was validated by the CPP Ouest IV on 8 October 2020.

Study population

All patients with an established diagnosis of IBD (CD, UC or IBD-unclassified), aged over 18, treated with either intravenous (IV) infliximab or vedolizumab, could be included. No patient under subcutaneous biologic therapy was included in this study in order to have a homogeneous population of patients during this lockdown period – all included patients had to leave home and come to day hospital to receive their treatment. Non-inclusion criteria included patients under legal protection (guardianship, curatorship) or under safeguard of justice, insufficient command of French language, and contra-indications to infliximab or vedolizumab at baseline. At baseline, patient information was given orally and in writing, then the physician collected patient's oral non-opposition. Patients were followed-up for a period of 6 months at a rhythm depending on the interval between infliximab or vedolizumab infusions.

Questionnaire administration and data collection procedures

Clinical data were collected by the physician at baseline, including gender, type of IBD (CD, UC or IBD-unclassified), age at baseline, disease duration, body mass index (BMI) at baseline, smoking status, disease location and behavior according to the Montreal classification, history of perianal disease, presence of extra-intestinal manifestations, presence of comorbidities, history of intestinal resection, ongoing disease-related treatments, previous treatments used, disease activity index (Harvey Bradshaw Index [HBI] for CD, Mayo clinical sub-score for UC), and level of C-reactive protein (CRP) if available. At baseline, patients filled-in a questionnaire regarding their lifestyle during the lockdown period, including type of professional activity (continuation of their usual activity, teleworking or stopping work), their family environment (number of people living at home, including those who continued their professional activities, as well as the number of children under 15 years of age), their type of accommodation (house or flat), their area of residence (city center, suburban area, rural area), and their means of

transport to come to the day hospital (private car, public transport, other including taxi). At each visit, patients filled-in another questionnaire on the occurrence of an intercurrent event due to their IBD, especially the need of corticosteroids between two infusions (self-medication was not excluded). An active disease during the follow-up period was defined by treatment intensification (addition of at least one medication, shortening of the interval between infusions, increase in the dose of infliximab infusion), change of biological therapy, steroids intake, hospitalization(s) or emergency consultation(s) with their general practitioner or gastroenterologist. At each of their visit at day hospital, patients were also questioned about the occurrence of symptoms that could suggest COVID-19 during the interval since the last infusion (fever, cough, anosmia, myalgias, dyspnea, aches and pains, or other), and if so the performance of diagnostic tests (rapid antigen test, Polymerase Chain Reaction [PCR] test via nasal swab, or computed tomography [CT] scan). It should be noted that the occurrence of symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 did not systematically result in testing in all patients. SARS-CoV-2 infection was considered as confirmed by a positive rapid antigen test and/or positive PCR test and/or a CT scan with characteristic lung involvement.

Blood sample collection procedures

After having obtained the subject's written consent, blood samples were collected at each visit immediately before drug administration. A dry blood tube of 10 mL was collected at each visit for all patients included, then prepared at 4°C and divided into 3 aliquots of serum of 1 mL frozen at – 80°C. These aliquots were used for SARS-CoV-2 antibody assays and dosage of infliximab or vedolizumab trough levels. Residual blood samples collected during the study were kept for new scientific interest. In 9 centers, 3 additional blood ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid (EDTA) tubes of 10 mL were collected at each visit, then prepared at room temperature

for isolating peripheral blood mononuclear cells (PBMC) and frozen either at -80°C or at -130°C depending on the future immunological analyzes.

All samples from all centers were transferred to Nantes University Hospital using a specific frozen carrier, then integrated into the collection of human biological samples MICI-SARS-CoV-2 located in the Centre de Ressources Biologiques (CRB, BRIF: BB0033-00040) of Nantes University Hospital

Biological analysis

At the end of the follow-up, SARS-CoV-2 antibody assays were performed for all patients. For patients who were seropositive at the time of their last infusion, SARS-CoV-2 antibodies were assessed at each of their visit in order to determine the timing of seroconversion. SARS-CoV-2 antibodies were detected using the Elecsys® Anti-SARS-CoV-2 S kit (Roche Diagnostics), an immunoassay for the qualitative detection of total antibodies (including IgG) directed against the spike protein receptor binding domain. In comparison with other similar tests, such as Abbott® or Siemens®, the Elecsys® kit has a good sensitivity and can detect more than 90% of positive samples 14 days after the onset of symptoms. It has also been showed to be well correlated to neutralizing antibodies results, with an area under the curve (AUC) between 0.959 and 0.987 in Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve analysis (35). Residual drug levels were determined using the commercial Promonitor® kits (Progenika Biopharma, Spain) supplied by GRIFOLS France SARL (Paris, France). They were performed at the time of seroconversion for seropositive patients, and at the end of follow-up for matched controls, in order to have comparable tubes already thawed once, then refrozen. The Promonitor® ELISA tests are of the type “capture” for the measurement of infliximab, “sandwich” for the measurement of vedolizumab, “bridging” for the measurement of anti-drug antibodies. An enzymatic reaction using a chromogen (Tetramethylbenzidine [TMB]) then allows the

quantification of the number of complexes (anti-infliximab/ infliximab, anti-vedolizumab/vedolizumab) by evaluating the intensity of the colorimetric reaction spectrophotometrically and using a calibration curve. The signal obtained is proportional to the amount of infliximab, vedolizumab or anti-drug antibodies in the patient sample. The concentration measurement ranges are as follows: 0.3 to 14.4 µg/mL for infliximab trough levels, 3.5 to 54.8 mg/mL for vedolizumab trough levels, 5 to 1440 Arbitrary Unit (AU)/mL for anti-infliximab antibodies, and 27 to 300 AU/mL for anti-vedolizumab antibodies.

Statistical analysis

Statistics were performed using SAS 9.4 software.

Descriptive statistics

Continuous variables are described using means and standard deviations and were tested using Student t-test for continuous variables. Categorical variables are described as raw counts and percentages and were tested using Chi-squared test (or Fisher's exact test if statistically inappropriate). Missing values are systematically presented.

Analysis of factors associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection

Due to the small number of patients tested positive for COVID19 in the study population (confirmed either by positive rapid antigen test/PCR test/CT-scan during follow-up or by positive serology at the end of follow-up), a 1:1 case-control matching was performed according to several variables representing potential confounding factors in the risk of being infected by SARS-CoV-2 (age, gender, BMI, type of IBD, disease activity, use of an associated immunosuppressant). Matching by center could not be performed because there were too few patients per center for matching in addition to the other variables. In this case-control sub-study,

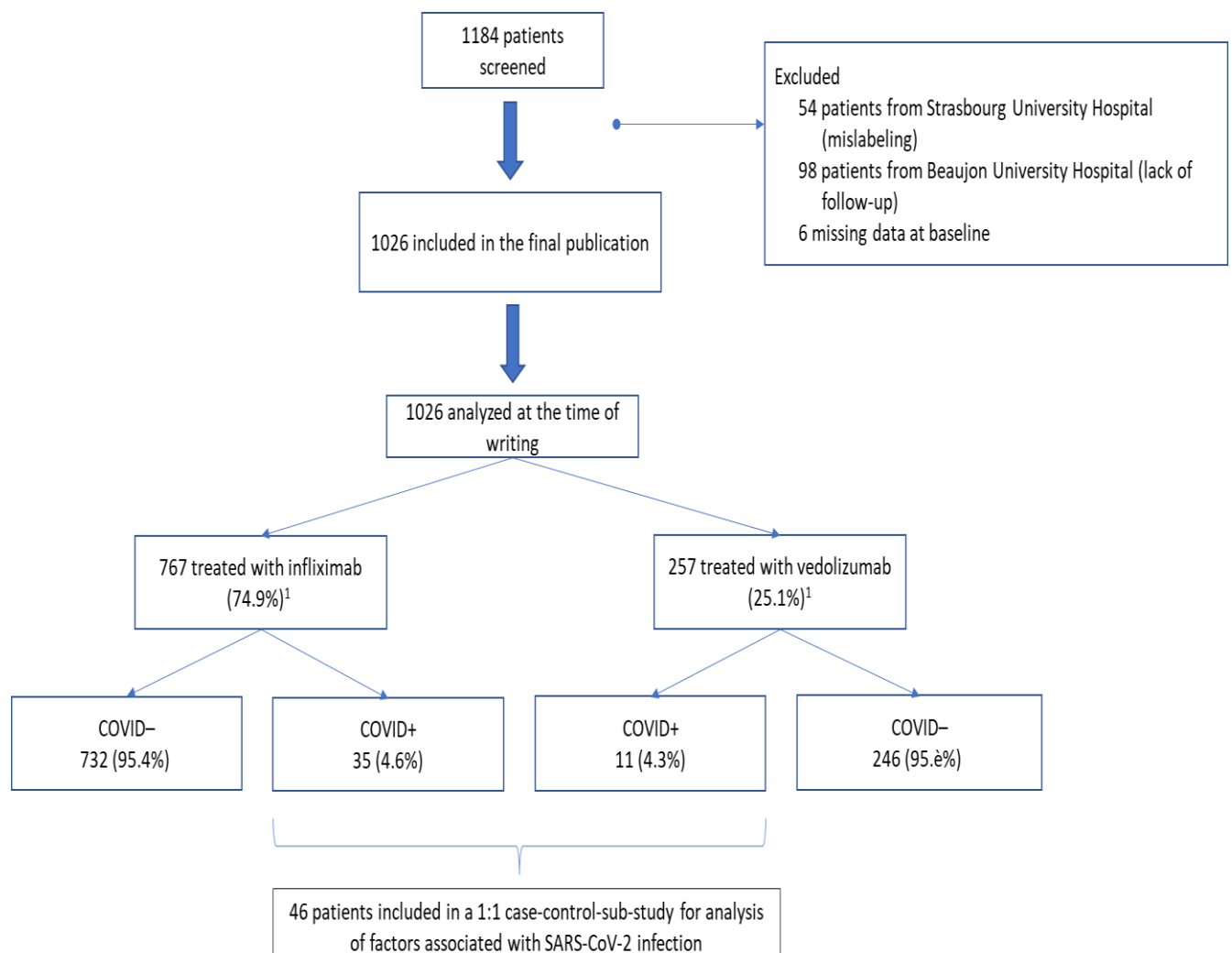
variables are described according to the COVID+/COVID- groups and in aggregate. Quantitative variables at baseline were compared between groups using a Student's t test for paired data or a Mann-Whitney-Wilcoxon rank test for paired data. Binary categorical variables at baseline were compared between groups using a MacNemar test (for matched data). If more than two modalities, an exact symmetry test was performed to account for data matching. Variables measured at several visits (longitudinal follow-up) were analyzed using a mixed logistic model that took into account intra-patient correlation and matching by putting matching in random effect. In the model, the group, time (visit) effect and group*time interaction were analyzed.

Results

In total, 1184 patients were included in 17 centers. Patients from 2 centers had to be excluded due to lack of follow-up or mislabeling, and 6 patients were excluded due to missing data at baseline. Thus, serologies were performed on 1026 patients (Figure 1).

Figure 2. Flow chart of the study.

¹: 2 missing data;



Baseline characteristics

Clinical characteristics of the study population at baseline are described in Table 1. More than 60.0% of patients had at least one extra-intestinal manifestation; the most frequent were rheumatologic manifestations, present in more than 11.2% of patients, particularly ankylosing spondylitis for 6.1% of them, and skin manifestations for 6.9%, especially psoriasis in 3.1% of cases. Digestive comorbidities including associated liver disease, primary sclerosing cholangitis or pancreatic disorders were present in 5.0% of cases. Regarding comorbidities that have been described to increase the risk of severe SARS-CoV-2 infection in the general population, 14.8% of patients were considered as obese, 5.4% had a pulmonary disease including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or asthma, 5.2% suffered from a vascular disease including hypertension, 2.3% had diabetes, 1.7% had a cardiac disease, 1.5% had cancer, 1.3% suffered from another autoimmune disease, and 0.9% had kidney failure. Socio-demographic data of the study population at baseline are described in Table 2.

Table 1. Clinical characteristics of the study population at baseline (n=1026).

	Total (n=1026)
Type of IBD, n (%)	
• CD	650 (63.35)
• UC	357 (34.8)
• IBD-unclassified	19 (1.85)
Gender, n (%)	
• Male	531 (51.75)
• Female	495 (48.25)
Age at baseline, mean (SD)	41.7 (15.4)
Disease duration ¹ , mean (SD)	13.2 (9.3)
Active smoking ² , n (%)	207 (21.45)
BMI (kg/m ²) ³ , mean (SD)	25 (5.1)
• $30 \leq \text{BMI} < 35$, n (%)	109 (10.6)
• $35 \leq \text{BMI} < 40$, n (%)	32 (3.1)
• $\text{BMI} > 40$, n (%)	14 (1.4)
Disease location in CD ⁴ , n (%)	
• Ileal (L1)	152 (24.2)
• Colonic (L2)	141 (22.4)
• Ileocolonic (L3)	336 (53.4)
• Upper disease (L4)	62 (9.9)
• Perianal disease ⁵	253 (39.9)
Disease location in UC ⁶ , n (%)	
• Proctitis (E1)	45 (13.2)
• Left-sided colitis (E2)	128 (37.4)
• Pancolitis (E3)	169 (49.4)
Disease behavior in CD ⁷ , n (%)	
• Inflammatory (B1)	309 (52.1)
• Stricturing (B2)	140 (23.6)
• Penetrating (B3)	144 (24.3)
Treatment at baseline, n (%)	
• Infliximab ⁸	767 (74.9)
○ Monotherapy	567 (73.9)
○ Combination with thiopurines ⁹	150 (19.6)
○ Combination with methotrexate ¹⁰	49 (6.4)
• Vedolizumab ¹¹	257 (25.1)
○ Monotherapy	221 (85.3)
○ Combination with thiopurines	26 (10.6)
○ Combination with methotrexate ¹²	8 (3.1)
• Corticosteroids ¹³	53 (5.2)

Previous treatment ¹⁴ , n (%)	
• None	159 (15.8)
• Immunosuppressant	295 (29.3)
• Other biologic agent	174 (17.3)
• Combination therapy (all biotherapy included)	380 (37.7)
History of intestinal resection ¹⁵ , n (%)	251 (24.7)
Clinical scores	
• Harvey Bradshaw index ¹⁶ , mean (SD)	1.6 (2.8)
○ < 4, n (%)	498 (81.8)
○ 4-12, n (%)	103 (16.9)
○ > 12, n (%)	8 (1.3)
• Mayo clinical sub-score ¹⁷ , mean (SD)	1.2 (1.9)
○ < 2, n (%)	239 (71.5)
○ 2-5, n (%)	77 (23.1)
○ > 5, n (%)	18 (5.4)
C-reactive protein level, mean (SD) ¹⁸	3.4 (8.6)
• > 5 mg/L, n (%)	215 (22.6)

Abbreviations: CD, Crohn's disease; IBD, Inflammatory bowel disease; SD, Standard deviation; UC, Ulcerative colitis.

Missing data: ¹13; ²61; ³9; ⁴21; ⁵16; ⁶15; ⁷57; ⁸2; ⁹1; ¹⁰1; ¹¹2; ¹²2; ¹³10; ¹⁴18; ¹⁵1; ¹⁶41; ¹⁷23; ¹⁸32.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics of the study population at baseline (n=1026).

	Total (n=1026)
Professional status ¹ , n (%)	
• Inactive (unemployed, retired, or sick leave)	605 (60)
• Active	403 (40)
○ Teleworking	202 (20)
○ Face-to-face	201 (19.9)
Family home, mean (SD)	
• Number of people living at home ²	2.8 (1.4)
○ Number of people continuing their professional activities ³	1.2 (1.3)
• Number of children under 15 ⁴	0.8 (1.0)
Type of accommodation ⁵ , n (%)	
• Single family house	605 (59.8)
• Flat	405 (40.1)
Area of residence ⁶ , n (%)	
• City center	329 (32.9)
• Suburban area	286 (28.6)
• Rural area	386 (38.6)
Means of transport to come to the day hospital ⁷ , n (%)	
• Private car	791 (78.6)
• Public transport	95 (9.4)
• Other, including taxi	121 (12)

Abbreviations: SD, Standard deviation.

Missing data: ¹18; ²31; ³43; ⁴36; ⁵15; ⁶25; ⁷19.

Evolution of disease activity during follow-up

Over the 6 months of follow-up, 556 patients (54.2%) had an active disease defined by an HBI score >4 ($n=159$, 15.5%) or Mayo clinical sub-score >2 ($n=105$, 10.2%), and/or treatment intensification (addition of at least one medication or increase in the dose [$n=341$ (33.2%)], shortening of the interval between infusions [$n=161$, 15.7%], increase in the dose of infliximab infusion [$n=75$, 7.3%]), and/or change of biological therapy ($n=19$, 1.85%). Among them, 103 patients (10%) had received corticosteroids at least occasionally (self-medication was not excluded), 314 (30.6%) had visited their general practitioner, 37 patients (3.6%) had been hospitalized, and 33 patients (3.2%) had visited the emergency room for any reason during follow-up. The pandemic did not influence the adherence to intravenous biologics in this cohort because all patients kept their appointments in day hospital without any postponement.

SARS-CoV-2 outcomes during follow-up

All visits considered together, 420 patients (40.9%) reported the occurrence of symptoms suggestive of COVID-19 during the interval between two infusions. Although not specific, aches and pain were the most reported symptoms for 388 patients (37.8%).

Cough was reported during follow-up by 225 patients (21.9%), dyspnea in 194 patients (18.9%). Anosmia was described in 120 patients (11.7%), and fever in 109 patients (10.6%). Of note, 150 patients (14.6%) reported other symptoms, notably digestive symptoms (diarrhea, abdominal pain). Over the 6 months of follow-up, 342 patients (33.3%) had been tested for SARS-CoV-2 infection, of whom 85 (24.9%) had been tested several times (twice or more). Most patients tested reported cough and dyspnea. The majority of patients ($n=322$, 94.2%) was tested by PCR test; rapid antigen test was performed in 19 patients (5.6%), of whom 2 also had a PCR test (10.5%); CT-scan was performed in 13 patients (3.8%), of whom 10 also had a PCR test (76.2%). Of the 342 tests, only 18 were positive (1 positive rapid antigen test, 17 positive

PCR tests, no positive CT-scan). In those cases, the infusion of biologic was postponed by 14 days from the date of the positive test. There was no severe case of COVID-19. Only one patient had been hospitalized without requiring an admission in intensive care unit.

SARS-CoV-2 seroprevalence

Table 3 summarizes the outcomes linked to SARS-CoV-2 infection in the study population. At the end of follow-up, 38 patients (3.7%) had anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies, of whom 28 (73.7%) never had a positive PCR test (25 had not been tested, 3 had been tested negative). Among the 3 patients who were tested negative by PCR with a positive serology at the end of follow-up, 2 of them were tested by PCR approximately at the same time as the serology was performed, but they had low levels of antibodies; the third patient had a negative PCR test 3 months before the detection of anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies which was strongly positive, probably reflecting a later contamination. Among the 18 patients who had been tested positive by nasal swab for SARS-CoV-2 during the follow-up, only 10 (55.6%) were seropositive at the end of follow-up. Considering both positive nasal tests and serologies together, 46 patients had been infected by SARS-CoV-2 during their follow-up in the first wave of the pandemic, i.e. 4.5% of the study cohort. None of these patients had any long-term sequelae of COVID-19.

Table 3. SARS-CoV-2 outcomes in the study population (n=1026).

	Serology + (n=38)	Serology – (n=988)
Antigen or PCR test + (n=18)	10 patients	8 patients
Antigen or PCR test – or not performed (n=1008)	28 patients ¹	980 patients

¹25 patients had not been tested, 3 had been tested negative during the follow-up.

Influence of clinical and socio-demographic factors on the risk of being infected by SARS-CoV-2 (Table 4)

For the analysis of factors associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection in the study population, COVID+ patients were included in a matched 1:1 case-control sub-study (Table 4). All 46 patients who had had a SARS-CoV-2 infection in our cohort (confirmed either by positive rapid antigen test, PCR test, and/or anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies at the end of follow-up), were included in this case-control sub-study for analyzing clinical, socio-demographic and biological factors associated with COVID19 in this population (Figure 1). Figure 2 illustrates the number of inclusions per group per center in this sub-study.

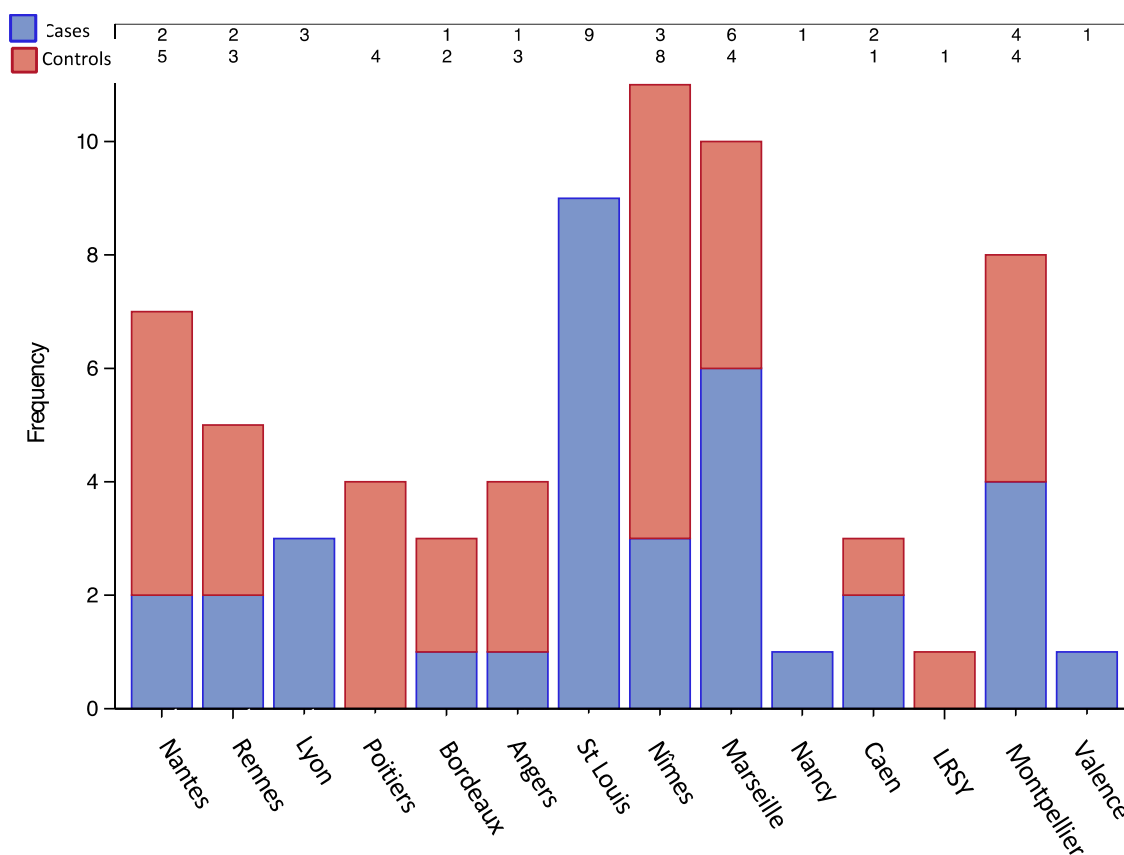


Figure 2. Number of inclusions per group per center in the matched 1:1 case-control sub-study

Table 4. Analysis of clinical and socio-demographic factors at baseline associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection in a matched 1:1 case-control sub-study (n=92).

	COVID+ (n=46)	COVID– (n=46)	p-value
Clinical factors			
Type of IBD, n (%)			
• CD	26 (56.5)	28 (60.9)	0.783*
• UC	18 (39.1)	15 (32.6)	
• IBD-unclassified	2 (4.4)	3 (6.5)	
Gender, n (%)			
• Male	30 (65.2)	30 (65.2)	1.00*
• Female	16 (34.8)	16 (34.8)	
Age at baseline, mean (SD)	42.7 (16.1)	44.7 (17.0)	0.577*
Disease duration, mean (SD)	14.7 (9.6)	12.4 (8.0)	0.213
Active smoking, n (%)	8 ¹ (19.1)	6 ² (14.3)	0.209
BMI (kg/m ²), mean (SD)	25.6 (4.7)	25.1 (4.9)	0.639*
• BMI > 30, n (%)	8 (17.4)	8 (17.4)	1.000
Disease location in CD, n (%)			
• Ileal (L1)	3 (11.5)	8 (28.6)	0.074
• Colonic (L2)	3 (11.5)	7 (25.0)	
• Ileocolonic (L3)	20 (76.9)	13 (46.4)	
Disease location in UC, n (%)			
• Proctitis (E1)	1 (5.6)	2 ³ (14.3)	0.582
• Left-sided colitis (E2)	7 (38.9)	4 ³ (28.6)	
• Pancolitis (E3)	10 (55.6)	8 ³ (57.1)	
Perianal disease in CD, n (%)	12 (46.2)	15 ⁴ (55.6)	0.335
Disease behavior in CD, n (%)			
• Inflammatory (B1)	11 ⁵ (45.8)	17 ⁶ (63)	0.411
• Stricturing (B2)	7 ⁵ (29.2)	4 ⁶ (14.8)	
• Penetrating (B3)	6 ⁵ (25)	6 ⁶ (22.2)	
Biological therapy at baseline, n (%)			
• Infliximab	35 (77.1)	38 (82.6)	0.440
• Vedolizumab	11 (23.9)	8 (17.4)	
Combination therapy at baseline, n (%)	9 (19.6)	3 (6.5)	0.063*
• Thiopurines	7 (15.2)	2 (4.4)	0.158
• Methotrexate	2 (4.4)	1 (2.2)	1.000
Corticosteroids at baseline, n (%)	1 (2.2)	1 (2.2)	1.000
Clinical scores			
• Harvey Bradshaw index, mean (SD)	1.1 ⁷ (1.9)	1.8 ⁸ (3.1)	0.321
○ < 4, n (%)	21 ⁷ (84.0)	19 ⁸ (79.2)	

○ 4-12, n (%)	4 ⁷ (16.0)	4 ⁸ (16.7)	0.847
○ > 12, n (%)	0 ⁷ (0.0)	1 ⁸ (4.2)	
• Mayo clinical sub-score, mean (SD)	1.2 (1.8)	0.6 ⁹ (1.4)	0.334
○ < 2, n (%)	12 (66.7)	12 ⁹ (85.7)	
○ 2-5, n (%)	5 (27.8)	2 ⁹ (14.3)	0.564
○ > 5, n (%)	1 (5.6)	0 ⁹ (0.0)	
C-reactive protein level, mean (SD)	3.3 (6.1)	2.0 ¹⁰ (3.9)	0.237
• > 5 mg/L, n (%)	11 (23.9)	8 ¹⁰ (18.2)	0.527
Socio-demographic factors			
Professional status, n (%)			
• Inactive (unemployed, retired, or sick leave)	24 (52.2)	30 ¹¹ (66.7)	
• Active	22 (47.8)	15 ¹¹ (43.3)	0.359
○ Teleworking	7 (15.2)	6 ¹¹ (13.3)	
○ Face-to-face	15 (32.6)	9 ¹¹ (20.0)	
Family home, mean (SD)			
• Number of people living at home	3.1 (1.8)	2.5 ¹² (1.2)	0.060
○ Number of people continuing their professional activities	1.5 ¹³ (1.5)	1.2 ¹⁴ (1.5)	0.297
• Number of children under 15	0.6 ¹⁵ (0.9)	0.6 ¹⁶ (0.9)	0.910
Type of accommodation, n (%)			
• Single family house	19 (41.3)	36 ¹⁷ (80.0)	< 0.005
• Flat	27 (58.7)	9 ¹⁷ (20.0)	
Area of residence, n (%)			
• City center	17 ¹⁸ (37.8)	11 ¹⁹ (24.4)	0.021
• Suburban area	15 ¹⁸ (33.3)	8 ¹⁹ (17.8)	
• Rural area	13 ¹⁸ (28.9)	26 ¹⁹ (57.8)	
Means of transport to come to the day hospital, n (%)			
• Private car	11 ²⁰ (31.4)	19 ²¹ (55.8)	
• Public transport or other, including taxi	27 ²⁰ (60)	37 ²¹ (82.2)	0.020

Abbreviations: CD, Crohn's disease; NA, Not applicable; SD, Standard deviation.

*Matching factors for the case-control analysis.

Missing data: ¹⁴; ² 3; ³¹; ⁴¹; ⁵²; ⁶¹; ⁷¹; ⁸⁴; ⁹¹; ¹¹¹; ¹⁰²; ¹¹¹; ¹²¹; ¹³¹; ¹⁴¹; ¹⁵¹; ¹⁶¹; ¹⁷¹; ¹⁸¹; ¹⁹¹; ²⁰¹; ²¹¹.

Clinical factors

At baseline, none of the clinical factors that were analyzed was associated with an increased risk of being infected by SARS-CoV-2. There was no difference regarding the type of biological therapy received at baseline. Patients tested positive for COVID-19 tended to be more treated in combination therapy with an immunosuppressant, but this was not statistically significant ($p=0.063$). Only one (2.2%) of the positive patients was taking corticosteroids at baseline. Regarding comorbidities, diabetes tended to be more frequent in patients with IBD tested positive for COVID-19 (8.7% vs 2.2%) but the difference was not significant ($p=0.361$), as was the case for vascular diseases including hypertension (6.5% vs 2.2%, $p=0.617$). There was no significant difference between both groups in the proportion of patients suffering from a pulmonary disease including COPD or asthma (10.9% in COVID+ patients vs 8.7% in COVID- patients, $p=1.000$). None of the patients tested positive for COVID-19 suffered from a cardiac disease, kidney failure or cancer. During follow-up, there was no statistically significant difference between both groups over time in terms of steroids intake ($p=0.850$), thiopurine intake ($p=0.686$), or all immunosuppressants combined ($p=0.482$). The number of patients under infliximab or vedolizumab did not differ between positive and negative patients over the 6 months of follow-up ($p=0.719$). The mean dose of infliximab ($p=0.666$) and the interval between two infusions of infliximab ($p=0.853$) or vedolizumab ($p=0.716$) did not significantly differ over time between both groups. Regarding disease activity during the follow-up period, there was no significant difference between both groups over time in terms of Mayo clinical sub-score ($p=0.499$), HBI ($p=0.471$), CRP ($p=0.358$), or the occurrence of a disease relapse defined by the physician ($p=0.804$).

Socio-demographic factors

There were numerically more COVID-19 positive patients who still worked at their place of work (32.6% vs 20.0%), but the difference was not statistically significant ($p=0.359$), knowing that the outset of the study took place during the first lockdown period in France. The number of people living at home, including those who continued their professional activities, as well as the number of children under 15 years of age did not differ between both groups. Interestingly, COVID+ patients lived significantly more frequently in a flat compared to COVID– patients who lived more frequently in a house ($p=0.021$)

Influence of trough levels on the risk of being infected by SARS-CoV-2

Neither infliximab nor vedolizumab trough levels significantly differed between COVID+ and COVID– patients (Table 5). Among the patients tested positive for COVID-19, 22 patients (61.1%) receiving infliximab had a residual drug level above the minimal trough concentration of 3 µg/mL defined by the BRIDGe consensus (36), versus 29 patients (74.4%) in the control group ($p=0.900$). Regarding vedolizumab, although the minimal trough concentration is less consensual, 3 patients (30.0%) had a residual drug level above 15 µg/mL, versus 3 (42.9%) in the control group ($p=0.698$).

Table 5. Analysis of residual trough levels associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection in a matched 1:1 case-control sub-study (n=92).

	COVID+ (n=36)	COVID– (n=39)	p-value
Residual infliximab concentration (µg/mL)			
Min-Max	0.0-14.4	0.0-14.4	
Mean (SD)	5.5 (5.0)	5.8 (4.2)	0.618
Median [Q1;Q3]	3.5 [1.8;8]	5.3 [2.4;9.4]	
	COVID+ (n=10)	COVID– (n=7)	p-value
Residual vedolizumab concentration (µg/mL)			
Min-Max	3.5-27.0	4.2-16.0	
Mean (SD)	9.8 (8.5)	10.3 (4.3)	0.250
Median [Q1 ;Q3]	5.8 [3.5 ;14.9]	10.0 [7.9 ;13.9]	

Abbreviations : Q, Quartile ; SD, Standard deviation.

Discussion

Based on a large cohort of French patients with IBD treated with either infliximab or vedolizumab during the first pandemic wave of COVID-19, we showed that the prevalence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in patients with IBD treated with intravenous biologics at day hospital was the same (4.5%) as the one in the general population at the same period (4.5%) (37), before the start of the vaccination campaign in France (January 2021). In our cohort, there was no difference between patients treated with infliximab and those treated with vedolizumab in the risk of being infected by SARS-CoV-2. Neither infliximab nor vedolizumab trough levels significantly differed between COVID+ and COVID−patients with IBD. Patients tested positive for COVID-19 tended to be more treated in combination therapy with an immunosuppressant. Diabetes tended to be more frequent in patients with IBD tested positive, as was the case for hypertension, but none of these clinical factors was significantly associated with an increased risk of COVID-19. Interestingly, demographic factors seemed to be more influent in the risk of getting infected by SARS-CoV-2, notably the use of public transport and the way of living (flat in urban areas). Recent data suggest that pre-existing auto-immune disease is associated with increased severity of COVID-19, but IBD was not the most frequent auto-immune disease in the dataset and the same study showed a protective effect of anti-TNF therapy, which is the most frequently used in patients with IBD (38). Conversely, the BELCOMID study described a benign course of COVID-19 infection in a cohort of more than 2000 patients with immune mediated inflammatory diseases (IMID) of whom more than 60% had IBD (39). The MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study provides physicians with data on this specific population of patients with IBD theoretically immunocompromised by their biological therapy before the start of the vaccination campaign.

The main strength of the MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study lies in its prospective and multicenter design with a large number of patients included over a short period of time, making it highly representative of the population of interest and very homogenous – all patients having been included during the first pandemic wave in France. Our results are broadly similar with data published in the literature. European data from the first wave of the pandemic were also in favor of a low incidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in patients with IBD, with slightly more hospitalizations but no severe infection (17, 18). In a study led in 24 Italian IBD centers in a region particularly affected during the first wave of the pandemic in Europe with more than 140,000 cases in March 2020 and more than 18,000 deaths, only 79 positive patients were reported, with 6 deaths (7%), in which anti-TNF was not a risk factor (odds ratio [OR] 0.4; 95% CI 0.04-3.78; $p=0.42$) (40). The trend is the same for non-digestive conditions in which anti-TNF drugs are frequently used, especially rheumatologic diseases. In an observational multicenter cohort retrospective study including patients suffering from rheumatologic diseases, only 600 cases of COVID-19 were reported in more than 40 countries. Nearly half of them were hospitalized due to the more frequent use of corticosteroids (32% in this population), with twice the risk of hospitalization under treatment (OR 2.05; 95% CI 1.06-3.96); conversely, biologics such as anti-TNF were at lower risk of hospitalization in this study (OR 0.40; 95% CI 0.19- 0.81) (41). Regarding the association of the occurrence of COVID-19 with socio-demographic factors, a single-center prospective Italian study including 386 patients with IBD also demonstrated that the prevalence of anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies was determined neither by the ongoing IBD-specific treatment nor disease-related characteristics. Only a close contact with SARS-CoV-2 positive individuals and the use of non-FFP2 masks were independently associated with a higher likelihood of seropositivity amongst patients with IBD, supporting the data of our study in which sanitary barrier measures look more important than clinical IBD characteristics (42).

The main limitation of the MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study is the low percentage of positive patients, probably limiting the statistical power of the results. This may be partly explained by the fact that the study was led during the first lockdown period in France, as we demonstrated a statistically significant difference between positive and negative patients on means of transport or accommodation, resulting in a decrease in the number of positive cases in the cohort. The low seroprevalence at the end of the follow-up may also be due to a decrease in antibody levels in patients treated with infliximab, which may also explain the discordance in patients who had a positive PCR test during the follow-up but no anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies at the end of follow-up. Indeed, in this study, anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibodies were only assessed at the end of the follow-up for all patients, and in patients who were seropositive at the time of their last infusion, anti-SARS-CoV-2 antibody assays were retrospectively performed at each of their visit in order to determine the time of seroconversion. Thus, we may have underestimated the number of pauci-symptomatic infections if they were contracted early during the follow-up, particularly for patients treated with anti-TNF, that can attenuate seroprevalence as suggested in some studies (43, 44), even though another study recently showed that patients with IBD previously infected with COVID-19 have similar quantitative antibody response as healthy controls previously infected with COVID-19 (45). The parallel can be drawn with the response to the vaccination because the antibody levels after vaccination have been shown to be lower with anti-TNF agents than with other treatments, studied in this prospective casecontrol study (483 cases for 121 controls) between May and November 2021, in which the antibody level measured between 53 and 92 days after the second vaccination dose was lower under infliximab (geometric mean ratio 0.12, 95% CI 0.08-0.17; $p < 0.0001$), compared to thiopurines (0.89, 0.64-1.24; $p = 0.50$), ustekinumab (0.69, 0.41-1.19; $p = 0.18$), or vedolizumab (1.16, 0.74-1.83; $p = 0.51$) (32)

These attenuated serological responses still exist after a third dose of an mRNA-based vaccine in infliximab- but not in vedolizumab-treated patients, as demonstrated recently in an analysis of the CLARITY IBD study (46). It is important to note that the center effect could not be taken into account in our study because of the small number of COVID+ patients, thus we were not able to demonstrate higher seropositivity rates in regions in the east of France where the prevalence of SARSCoV-2 infection was higher in the general population during the first wave of the pandemic in France. The biological collection that was created during this study, with multiples serum samples per patient stored in optimal conditions, will be used for further immunological analyses to try to address some of these pending issues.

Conclusion

The prevalence rate of SARS-CoV-2 infection in this French IBD population treated with intravenous infliximab or vedolizumab was the same as the one in the general population before the start of the vaccination campaign, with no severe case of COVID-19 and no long-term sequelae. We demonstrated that the risk of COVID-19 is related neither to the use of treatment, including in combination therapy, nor to the activity of the disease. Importantly, residual drug levels do not seem to influence the risk of infection. Conversely, infections were more frequent when using public transport or living in flats in urban areas. Sanitary barrier measures are therefore fundamental for these patients, as much or more important than vaccination coverage. Thus, simple measures such as regular hand washing and wearing a face mask in enclosed spaces remain the best way to protect against the virus. These real-world data on the risk of COVID-19 in IBD patients treated with intravenous biologics outside any vaccination context are important for physicians who are confronted daily with patients reluctant to be vaccinated. Indeed, although the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccination in IBD patients is now well established (34), a significant proportion of patients, especially the youngest (28), still wonder on the risk-benefit ratio of being vaccinated, perhaps with good reason given the low prevalence of COVID-19 in this cohort of IBD patients established before any vaccination, and the lower risk of severe form of COVID-19 in young patients than in the elderly (12). Thus, these data from the MICI-SARS-COV-2 study will enable physicians to emphasize the importance of maintaining sanitary barrier measures to these vaccine-refractory patients

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the GETAID for the financial and practical support provided for this study. We thank GRIFOLS INTERNATIONAL SA for having provided the kits for the dosage of infliximab and vedolizumab trough levels.

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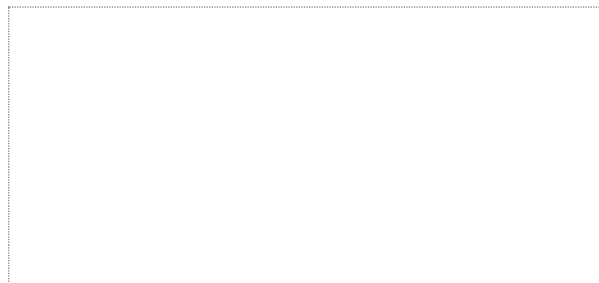
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Vu, le Président du Jury,

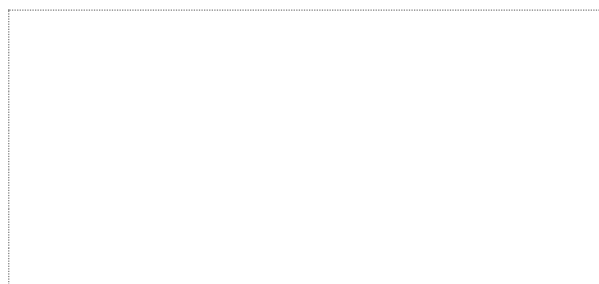
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Professeur Arnaud BOURREILLE

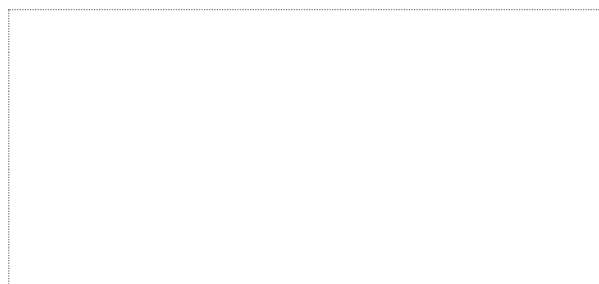
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Docteur Catherine LE BERRE

Vu, le Doyen de la Faculté,



Professeur Pascale JOLLIET

Titre de Thèse : Incidence and factors associated with SARS-CoV-2 infection in French patients with inflammatory bowel disease: the MICI-SARS-CoV-2 study.

Contexte : Les patients atteints de maladies inflammatoires chroniques intestinales (MICI), maladie de Crohn (MC) ou rectocolite hémorragique (RCH), traités par immunosuppresseur et/ou biothérapie pourraient avoir une modification de leur réponse immunitaire vis-à-vis de l'infection à SARS-CoV-2. L'objectif de l'étude MICI-SARS-CoV-2 était d'évaluer, pendant la première vague pandémique en France, l'incidence de COVID-19 dans une population de patients atteints de MICI traités par infliximab ou vedolizumab intraveineux (IV), et d'identifier les facteurs cliniques, socio-démographiques et biologiques associés au risque d'infection.

Méthodes : Tous les patients atteints de RCH ou MC traités par infliximab ou vedolizumab IV entre mars et juin 2020 dans 15 centres français ont été inclus et suivis pendant 6 mois. A chacune de leur hospitalisation de jour, les patients rapportaient la survenue ou non de symptômes évocateurs d'une infection COVID, et la réalisation éventuelle de tests diagnostiques. Leur sérum a été prélevé à chaque visite pour dosage des taux résiduels de biothérapie et des sérologies en fin de suivi.

Résultats : Au total, 1026 patients ont été inclus, dont 767 sous infliximab (74,9 %) et 257 sous vedolizumab (25,1 %), 22,7 % d'entre eux en combothérapie. Parmi eux, 403 patients (40%) ont gardé une activité professionnelle pendant le suivi, et 78,6 % se rendaient en voiture personnelle à l'hôpital de jour pour leur perfusion. Sur les 6 mois de suivi, 420 patients (40,9 %) ont eu des symptômes évocateurs d'une infection COVID, 342 ont été testés (33,3 %), dont 18 se sont révélés positifs (tests antigéniques ou PCR). En fin de suivi, 38 patients (3,7 %) avaient une sérologie positive. Au total, 46 patients ont fait une infection à SARS-CoV-2 documentée par sérologie et/ou test nasopharyngé, soit une prévalence de 4,5 %, similaire à la prévalence de l'infection à SARS-CoV-2 dans la population générale à la même période (4,5 %). Une sous-étude cas-témoin appariée 1:1 n'a pas montré de différence significative entre patients COVID+ et COVID- pour les caractéristiques cliniques, contrairement aux facteurs socio-démographiques, les patients infectés se déplaçant plus volontiers en transport collectif ($p = 0,020$) et résidant dans des appartements en zone urbaine ($p < 0,005$). Les taux résiduels des biothérapies ne différaient pas significativement entre les deux groupes, pour l'Infliximab comme pour le vedolizumab.

Conclusion : Les biothérapies IV associées ou non à la prise d'un immunosuppresseur n'augmentent pas le risque d'infection à SARS-CoV-2 chez les patients atteints de MICI, et leurs taux résiduels n'ont pas d'influence. En revanche, l'utilisation d'un transport collectif et le type de logement (appartement en zone urbaine) semblent plus importants, démontrant que le respect des mesures barrières chez ces patients reste primordial pour prévenir la transmission du virus.

MOTS-CLES : MALADIE DE CROHN ; RECTOCOLITE HEMORRAGIQUE ; COVID-19 ; INFLIXIMAB ; VEDOLIZUMAB ; SEROLOGIE ; TAUX RESIDUELS.