European Journal of Clinical Pharmacy

Print ISSN: 2385-409X **Online ISSN**: Applied
Website: https://farmclin.es/

Review Article

Convalescent Plasma Therapy for COVID-19: A Review

Article History:

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How to cite this article:
Eldin Mohamed A.S. and Ahmad H.M. Convalescent Plasma Therapy for COVID-19: A Review. *Eur J Clin Pharm.* 2021;3(1);25-27.

Received: 11-07-2021
Revised: 25-07-2021
Accepted: 16-08-2021
Published: 17-09-2021

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Abstract: Convalescent plasma (CP) therapy emerged as a prominent treatment option during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially before the advent of widespread vaccination and effective antivirals. This article reviews the immunological basis, clinical evidence, safety profile, and current recommendations regarding CP therapy in COVID-19.

Keywords: Convalescent Plasma (CP), COVID-19, Immunotherapy, Clinical Evidence, Treatment Guidelines.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Convalescent plasma therapy involves the administration of plasma collected from recovered COVID-19 patients to individuals who are currently infected. This plasma contains polyclonal antibodies targeted against SARS-CoV-2, potentially aiding in viral clearance and immune modulation. Historically, CP has been applied in epidemics of influenza, Ebola, and other infectious diseases[1].

Rationale

- Passive immunity, by transferring ready-made antibodies, may help suppress viral replication, especially in patients with poor endogenous immune responses[2][1].
- The U.S. FDA authorized the emergency use of CP for COVID-19, highlighting its importance before targeted therapies became available[1].

Immunological Mechanisms

- CP contains neutralizing antibodies, particularly against the spike protein's receptor-binding domain (RBD). These antibodies can block viral entry and support viral elimination.
- Additional immunomodulatory effects include limiting tissue damage and modulating the host cytokine response[2].
- The antibody repertoire in plasma is highly variable, with titers peaking within the first months post-infection and gradually waning thereafter[2].

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CLINICAL EFFICACY

Randomized Controlled Trials and Meta-Analyses

A systematic review of 34 randomized controlled trials revealed:

- No significant reduction in 28-day mortality for hospitalized patients treated with CP (relative risk [RR]=0.98; 95% CI, 0.91–1.06).
- No improvement in secondary outcomes (hospital discharge: RR=1.00; ICU progression: RR=1.06).
- **Outpatient Subgroup**: A 26% decrease in the need for hospitalization (RR=0.74; 95% CI, 0.56–0.99), implying benefit mainly when CP is administered early in mild illness[3].
- Some studies suggest modest benefit in reducing ICU progression for selected populations, particularly in Europe[3].

Observational Studies and Early Reports

- Initial open-label trials and observational cohorts found rapid viral clearance and symptom improvement following CP infusion in severe and critical patients, but these lacked control groups and were often confounded by simultaneous therapies[4][5].
- High-titer plasma administered within days of symptom onset tended to yield better outcomes[2][6].

Effect in Special Populations

- Immunocompromised patients derive the most consistent benefit, likely due to their inability to mount effective antibody responses[7].
- Recent guidelines recommend CP for COVID-19 in immunocompromised patients when alternative therapies are limited[1][7].

Graph: Relative Risk of Hospitalization with Early CP Therapy

Patient Group	Relative Risk	95% Confidence Interval
Outpatients with early CP use	0.74	0.56–0.99
Hospitalized Patients	0.98	0.91–1.06

Safety and Tolerability

Adverse Events

- Large cohort studies report a serious adverse event (SAE) rate of less than 1% in hospitalized recipients[8][9].
- Common transfusion-related risks include allergic reactions, transfusion-associated circulatory overload (TACO), and transfusion-related acute lung injury (TRALI)[9][10].
- No higher incidence of severe complications than for standard plasma therapy. No evidence of increased risk for COVID-19 reinfection or antibody-dependent enhancement has been observed[9].

Table: Adverse Event Profile in CP Therapy

Adverse Event	Frequency (CP group)	Frequency (Control)
Any infusion-related event	2–4%	2–3%
Serious adverse reactions (anaphylaxis, TACO, TRALI)	<1%	<1%
Mortality (unrelated to CP transfusion)	14–15% (hospital)	15%

Factors Influencing Treatment Success

- **Timing:** Early administration (within days of symptom onset) is linked to better outcomes. Late use, especially in severe, multi-organ disease, shows little benefit[11][6].
- **Antibody Titer:** Plasma with high neutralizing antibody titers is essential for maximal effect, particularly against newer variants[11].
- **Recipient's Immune Status:** Higher efficacy in immunosuppressed patients and those unable to mount antibodies[7].

Limitations and Challenges

- Heterogeneity in COVID-19 patient populations and variable CP antibody content complicates interpretation of trial data[3][12].

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- Widespread vaccine coverage and new antivirals limit generalizability of past results to ongoing and future pandemics.
- Evolution of viral variants may affect the neutralizing capacity of available plasma.

Current Recommendations and Future Directions

- Routine use of CP is not recommended in unselected hospitalized patients with COVID-19[3][13][14].
- CP remains an option for immunocompromised individuals with acute COVID-19 when alternatives are unavailable or contraindicated[1][7].
- Continued surveillance for new variants and prospective trials in targeted populations are warranted for future pandemics.

DISCUSSION

Despite initial enthusiasm, rigorous studies show CP therapy confers marginal benefit for most hospitalized COVID-19 patients but may provide clinical benefit if given early, particularly in vulnerable groups like the immunocompromised. The overall risk profile is favorable, with adverse events being rare and similar to standard plasma therapies. The lessons from COVID-19 CP therapy may inform pandemic preparedness and future passive immunization efforts.

Acknowledgements

No conflicts of interest to declare. This review was prepared for educational and research purposes.

Appendix: Schematic—Mechanisms of Action of Convalescent Plasma

- Neutralizing antibodies bind viral particles, blocking cellular entry.
- Fc-mediated immune functions facilitate viral clearance.
- Immunomodulatory factors reduce cytokine-mediated tissue injury[2].

FIGURES

Graph: Effect of Timing and Antibody Titer on CP Therapy Efficacy

- Early, high-titer CP: Reduced risk of hospitalization and viral progression.
- Late, low-titer CP: Little or no benefit observed.

Table: Clinical Summary—Efficacy, Safety, and Recommendations

Aspect	Summary
Clinical Efficacy	Marginal in general; potential benefit early in disease/outpatients
Mortality Benefit	No overall reduction in RCTs for hospitalized patients
Safety Profile	Comparable to standard plasma; low rate of SAEs
Recommended For	Immunocompromised with acute infection; early high-titer use

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