

Ablative and non-surgical therapies for early and very early hepatocellular carcinoma: a systematic review and network meta-analysis

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Disclosure of interests

Full disclosure of interests: Completed ICMJE forms for all authors, including all related interests, are available in the toolkit on the NIHR Journals Library report publication page at <https://doi.org/10.3310/GK5221>.

Primary conflicts of interest: None.

Rider on responsibility for report: The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR HTA Programme. Any errors are the responsibility of the authors.

Published December 2023

DOI: 10.3310/GK5221

Plain language summary

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Health Technology Assessment 2023; Vol. 27: No. 29

DOI: 10.3310/GK5221

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

Plain language summary

Hepatocellular carcinoma is the most common type of primary liver cancer. There are a range of different treatments available for patients with early hepatocellular carcinoma. We looked for clinical trials in patients with small tumours (up to 3 cm) that compared different treatments. We brought together and analysed the results of these trials to see which treatments were most effective in terms of survival, progression, side effects and quality of life.

Overall, the evidence has limitations; many trials had few patients and were of poor quality. Most were from China or Japan, where the common causes of liver disease and treatments available differ from those in the United Kingdom. The results of our analyses were very uncertain so we cannot be sure which treatment is the best overall.

We did find that three treatments – radiofrequency ablation, microwave ablation and surgery – were generally more effective than percutaneous ethanol injection and percutaneous acid injection. There was not enough evidence to be certain which treatment was better when radiofrequency ablation was compared with laser ablation, microwave ablation, proton beam therapy or surgery. We found only poor-quality, non-randomised trials on high-intensity focused ultrasound, cryoablation and irreversible electroporation. There was very little evidence on treatments that combined radiofrequency ablation with other therapies. We found no studies that compared electrochemotherapy, histotripsy, stereotactic ablative radiotherapy or wider radiotherapy techniques with other treatments. Only two studies reported data on quality of life or patient satisfaction.

We discussed the findings with patients and clinical experts. Stereotactic ablative radiotherapy was highlighted as a treatment that requires further research; however, it is only appropriate for certain subgroups of patients. Feasibility studies could inform future clinical trials by exploring issues such as whether patients are willing to take part in a trial or find the treatments acceptable.

Health Technology Assessment

ISSN 1366-5278 (Print)

ISSN 2046-4924 (Online)

Impact factor: 3.6

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HTA programme as project number NIHR131224. The contractual start date was in January 2021. The draft report began editorial review in February 2022 and was accepted for publication in August 2022. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HTA editors and publisher have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

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