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BIOMARKERS IN EARLY DETECTION OF CHRONIC KIDNEY DISEASE - DIAGNOSTIC PERFORMANCE AND CLINICAL UTILITY

Abdurashidov Akhorjon Akhmatjon ugli
Assistant of Fergana Medical Institute of Public Health

Abstract
Chronic kidney disease remains underdiagnosed in early stages when intervention proves most effective. This study examines novel biomarkers including neutrophil gelatinase-associated lipocalin, kidney injury molecule-1, and cystatin C for detecting early renal dysfunction. Analysis of diagnostic performance demonstrates superior sensitivity compared to traditional creatinine-based assessment, with NGAL showing 87.4% sensitivity at stage 1 disease. These biomarkers enable detection 6-12 months earlier than conventional methods, offering substantial clinical benefit for intervention timing and disease management.

Keywords: nephrology, creatinine, cystatin, NGAL, KIM-1, albuminuria, glomerular, proteinuria, diagnosis, sensitivity, specificity, nephropathy, urinalysis, pathophysiology

Introduction

Chronic kidney disease affects approximately 13.4% of the global population, yet most patients receive diagnosis only after substantial irreversible damage has occurred. Traditional diagnostic approaches rely heavily on serum creatinine and estimated glomerular filtration rate calculations, which demonstrate poor sensitivity during early disease stages. Creatinine levels typically remain within normal ranges until kidney function declines by 50% or more, creating a critical diagnostic gap during the period when therapeutic intervention achieves maximum benefit. Novel biomarkers promise earlier detection by identifying specific pathophysiological changes that precede measurable functional decline. This analysis examines the diagnostic performance of emerging biomarkers in early chronic kidney disease, evaluating their clinical utility for improving detection timelines and patient outcomes.

Literature Review

Recent investigations have identified several promising biomarkers that detect kidney injury earlier than traditional markers. Bolshakova and colleagues demonstrated that neutrophil gelatinase-associated lipocalin elevates within hours of tubular injury, preceding creatinine changes by several days in acute settings. Karimov's work with Uzbek diabetic populations showed cystatin C providing superior early detection compared to creatinine-based estimation, particularly in patients with preserved muscle mass where creatinine measurements prove unreliable. Research by Nurmatova established that kidney injury molecule-1 concentrations correlate strongly with tubulointerstitial damage severity, even when glomerular filtration rate remains normal. Smirnov's comprehensive review of tubular biomarkers highlighted their potential for identifying specific injury patterns and

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disease etiologies. Despite this progress, Abdullayev noted significant gaps in establishing standardized reference ranges and optimal diagnostic thresholds for diverse populations, limiting widespread clinical implementation.

Methodology

This analytical study examined diagnostic performance characteristics of five biomarkers for detecting early chronic kidney disease: neutrophil gelatinase-associated lipocalin, kidney injury molecule-1, cystatin C, beta-2-microglobulin, and urinary albumin-creatinine ratio. The analysis incorporated data from 847 patients across three clinical centers, including 312 individuals with biopsy-confirmed early stage disease (glomerular filtration rate 60-89 mL/min/1.73m² with structural abnormalities) and 535 healthy controls matched for age and baseline characteristics. Biomarker measurements utilized standardized protocols across all sites. Serum cystatin C underwent nephelometric analysis with the Siemens BN ProSpec system, establishing reference range of 0.53-0.95 mg/L. Plasma NGAL measurement employed the Architect platform with chemiluminescent microparticle immunoassay technology, detecting concentrations between 20-400 ng/mL. Urinary KIM-1 quantification used enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay with Quantikine Human TIM-1 kits, normalizing results to urinary creatinine concentration. Beta-2-microglobulin assessment utilized immunoturbidimetric methods on Cobas systems, with serum reference values of 1.0-2.4 mg/L. Albumin-creatinine ratio calculations followed standard morning spot urine collection protocols. Sample collection occurred under controlled conditions with participants fasting for eight hours prior to blood draws. Morning first-void urine specimens underwent processing within two hours of collection, with samples centrifuged at 3000 rpm for ten minutes and supernatant stored at minus 80 degrees Celsius until batch analysis. All measurements underwent duplicate testing with coefficient of variation maintained below 8% for acceptance Diagnostic performance evaluation employed receiver operating characteristic curve analysis to determine optimal cutoff values maximizing sensitivity while maintaining specificity above 80%. The analysis calculated area under the curve values with 95% confidence intervals, along with positive and negative predictive values at various prevalence rates. Sensitivity analysis examined biomarker performance across different patient subgroups including diabetic nephropathy, hypertensive nephrosclerosis, and glomerular diseases. Logistic regression models assessed whether combining multiple biomarkers improved diagnostic accuracy compared to individual marker performance. Statistical analysis utilized SPSS version 27.0 software with significance threshold set at p less than 0.05. Non-parametric testing compared biomarker distributions between disease and control groups, while Spearman correlation examined relationships between biomarkers and traditional kidney function measures. The methodology incorporated stratification by baseline estimated glomerular filtration rate to evaluate performance at different disease stages, with particular focus on patients with rates between 60-89 mL/min/1.73m² where traditional markers show limited sensitivity.

Results

Biomarker analysis revealed substantial differences between early disease patients and healthy controls, with all five markers demonstrating statistically significant elevation in the disease cohort. Plasma NGAL concentrations averaged 156.3 ng/mL in early stage patients compared to 48.7 ng/mL

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in controls, representing 3.2-fold elevation. The optimal diagnostic threshold of 89 ng/mL yielded sensitivity of 87.4% and specificity of 82.1%, with area under curve of 0.912. Among disease subtypes, diabetic nephropathy patients showed highest NGAL elevations at 178.4 ng/mL, while hypertensive nephrosclerosis averaged 142.6 ng/mL.

Urinary KIM-1 measurements demonstrated marked increases in early disease, with median values of 3.84 ng/mg creatinine versus 0.97 ng/mg in controls. Receiver operating characteristic analysis identified optimal cutoff of 2.15 ng/mg creatinine, achieving sensitivity of 79.8% and specificity of 84.6%. KIM-1 showed particularly strong performance in tubulointerstitial disease, reaching sensitivity of 91.2% in this subgroup. The marker correlated moderately with estimated glomerular filtration rate (r equals minus 0.58), but showed stronger correlation with interstitial fibrosis severity on biopsy specimens (r equals 0.73).

Cystatin C analysis revealed mean serum concentration of 1.34 mg/L in early disease patients compared to 0.81 mg/L in controls. At the optimal threshold of 1.08 mg/L, cystatin C achieved sensitivity of 83.7% and specificity of 79.4%. Performance proved superior to creatinine-based estimation in patients with reduced muscle mass, where cystatin C correctly identified 94.1% of cases versus 67.3% for creatinine. The marker showed consistent performance across body mass index categories, maintaining sensitivity above 80% in all weight groups. Beta-2-microglobulin measurements showed serum levels of 3.12 mg/L in disease patients versus 1.68 mg/L in controls. However, diagnostic performance proved less robust than other biomarkers, with sensitivity of only 71.4% at specificity of 75.8%. The marker demonstrated high variability in inflammatory conditions, with false positive rate increasing to 38.7% in patients with concurrent infections or autoimmune disorders.

Albumin-creatinine ratio assessment revealed microalbuminuria (30-300 mg/g) in 68.2% of early disease patients, with mean ratio of 87.4 mg/g compared to 8.3 mg/g in controls. Diagnostic sensitivity reached 68.2% at specificity of 89.1% using the conventional 30 mg/g threshold. Lowering the threshold to 15 mg/g improved sensitivity to 79.6% but reduced specificity to 76.3%. Combined biomarker analysis using logistic regression models incorporating NGAL, KIM-1, and cystatin C achieved area under curve of 0.941, significantly superior to any single marker. This combination yielded sensitivity of 91.7% with specificity of 85.3%, correctly classifying 89.1% of all patients. The model proved particularly effective in diabetic patients, where accuracy reached 93.4%.

Temporal analysis examined biomarker elevation timing relative to traditional markers. In patients with serial measurements, NGAL increases became detectable average 8.7 months before creatinine rises exceeded normal range. KIM-1 elevation preceded creatinine changes by 7.2 months, while cystatin C showed earlier detection by 6.4 months. Among patients with initially normal creatinine who subsequently developed elevated levels within 24 months, 84.7% demonstrated biomarker elevation at baseline assessment. Subgroup analysis by disease etiology revealed distinct biomarker patterns. Diabetic nephropathy showed highest NGAL and albumin-creatinine ratio elevations but modest KIM-1 increases. Glomerular diseases demonstrated marked albuminuria with variable tubular marker elevation. Hypertensive nephrosclerosis showed moderate elevation across all markers without distinctive pattern. These findings suggest potential utility for differentiating disease mechanisms, though validation requires larger cohorts.

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Discussion

These findings demonstrate substantial diagnostic advantage of novel biomarkers compared to traditional assessment methods for early chronic kidney disease detection. The ability to identify kidney damage 6-12 months before creatinine elevation provides a crucial window for therapeutic intervention when disease modification remains feasible. Current clinical practice typically initiates treatment only after substantial functional decline has occurred, missing opportunities to slow progression during early stages when kidneys retain greater capacity for recovery and adaptation. The superior performance of NGAL merits particular attention, as this marker reflects tubular injury with remarkable sensitivity. The 3.2-fold elevation observed in early disease patients, coupled with 87.4% sensitivity, substantially exceeds the diagnostic capability of creatinine measurement at similar disease stages. NGAL elevation occurs rapidly following tubular cell damage, as injured cells upregulate lipocalin production and release it into circulation and urine. This immediate response contrasts with creatinine accumulation, which requires substantial nephron loss before exceeding normal ranges due to compensatory mechanisms and wide individual variation in baseline levels. Cystatin C offers complementary advantages by providing more stable glomerular filtration assessment unaffected by muscle mass variations. Traditional creatinine-based estimation systematically underestimates disease severity in elderly patients and those with reduced muscle mass, populations at highest kidney disease risk. The 94.1% sensitivity achieved by cystatin C in low muscle mass patients addresses a critical gap in current diagnostic approaches, potentially preventing delayed diagnosis in vulnerable populations. However, the higher cost of cystatin C measurement compared to creatinine creates implementation barriers in resource-limited settings. KIM-1 provides unique insight into tubulointerstitial pathology, the compartment most strongly correlating with long-term prognosis. The strong correlation between KIM-1 levels and interstitial fibrosis severity (r equals 0.73) suggests potential utility beyond simple disease detection, possibly enabling non-invasive fibrosis assessment to guide treatment intensity. Current clinical practice lacks reliable non-invasive methods for evaluating interstitial damage, often necessitating kidney biopsy with associated procedural risks. A validated biomarker reflecting fibrosis severity could transform disease monitoring and therapeutic decision-making.

The combined biomarker approach yielded diagnostic accuracy of 89.1%, suggesting that panel-based testing captures disease complexity more effectively than individual markers. Different kidney compartments sustain injury through distinct mechanisms, and comprehensive assessment requires evaluating multiple pathophysiological processes. The improved performance in diabetic nephropathy patients, reaching 93.4% accuracy, likely reflects the multi-compartment injury pattern characteristic of diabetic kidney disease affecting glomerular, tubular, and vascular structures simultaneously.

Novel biomarkers demonstrate superior sensitivity for early chronic kidney disease detection compared to traditional creatinine-based assessment, identifying injury 6-12 months earlier than conventional methods. Combined biomarker panels achieve diagnostic accuracy exceeding 89%, providing substantial clinical benefit for timely intervention initiation. Implementation requires addressing standardization challenges and conducting cost-effectiveness analyses to optimize healthcare resource allocation.

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