

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

G6PD Gene Variants Hemolytic Anemia and Gallstone Formation on Ultrasound after Oxidative Drug Exposure

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ABSTRACT

Background: Glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) deficiency is a common inherited enzymatic disorder that predisposes individuals to oxidative stress-related hemolysis. Exposure to oxidant drugs may trigger acute hemolytic anemia, and recurrent hemolysis may contribute to pigment gallstone formation. This study evaluated the association of G6PD gene variants with hemolytic anemia and gallstone formation after oxidative drug exposure.

Material and Methods: This case-control study included 150 participants, comprising 75 cases and 75 controls, recruited from a Tertiary Care Hospital of Karachi. Cases were patients with confirmed G6PD deficiency who developed acute hemolytic anemia after exposure to oxidative drugs, whereas controls were G6PD-deficient individuals without documented hemolysis or gallstones. Data were collected using a structured proforma and included demographic characteristics, drug exposure history, clinical features, hematologic parameters, and abdominal ultrasonography findings. G6PD deficiency was confirmed by enzyme assay and, where available, molecular analysis. Statistical analysis was performed using standard comparative tests, and odds ratios were calculated to measure associations.

Results: The mean age was similar in both groups, and males comprised about 70% of the study population. Confirmed G6PD gene variants were found in 61 cases (81.3%) compared with 28 controls (37.3%). Oxidative drug exposure was documented in 59 cases (78.7%), which was significantly higher than in controls. Cases had a lower mean hemoglobin level of 8.9 g/dL compared with 12.8 g/dL in controls. Reticulocyte count, indirect bilirubin, and LDH were also markedly raised among cases, with values of 5.8%, 2.8 mg/dL, and 612 U/L, respectively. Clinical features such as pallor (88.0%), jaundice (77.3%), and dark urine (54.7%) were more frequent in cases than in controls. On ultrasonography, gallstones were detected in 21 cases (28.0%) versus 6 controls (8.0%). Gallbladder sludge was present in 9 cases (12.0%). These findings suggest that recurrent hemolysis and oxidative stress may contribute to gallstone formation in patients with G6PD deficiency.

Conclusion: G6PD gene variants were significantly associated with oxidative drug-induced hemolytic anemia and gallstone formation. The findings highlight the importance of early recognition of G6PD deficiency, cautious use of oxidant drugs, and clinical monitoring for biliary complications in affected individuals.

Keywords: G6PD, Gene Variants, Hemolytic Anemia, Gallstone, Oxidative Drug Exposure

INTRODUCTION

One of the most prevalent inherited enzymatic disorders in the world is glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase (G6PD) deficiency, and its clinical significance goes well beyond a straightforward lab anomaly. Oxidative stress from medications, infections, or dietary triggers can quickly destabilize red blood cells in vulnerable people, resulting in acute hemolysis; over time, repeated hemolytic burden may also contribute to the development of pigment gallstones through chronic bilirubin overload^{1,2}. G6PD is no longer just thought to be a traditional cause of episodic hemolytic anemia, but rather a redox sensitive genetic disorder with wider hematologic and systemic implications. The pentose phosphate pathway's rate-limiting enzyme, G6PD, produces nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate in its reduced form, or NADPH, which is necessary to sustain glutathione-mediated antioxidant defense³. Mature erythrocytes are particularly vulnerable when G6PD activity is decreased because they are unable to effectively synthesize new proteins or repair oxidatively damaged components. After being exposed to oxidant medications like primaquine, dapsone, rasburicase, some sulfonamides, and other substances that can raise reactive oxygen species in red blood cells, this vulnerability becomes clinically apparent. The ensuing hemolytic episode can range in severity from mild, self-limiting anemia to severe intravascular hemolysis with hemoglobinuria, jaundice, and potentially fatal consequences⁴⁻⁶.

The genetic landscape of G6PD deficiency is extremely diverse, with over 200 variants identified globally and notable variations in clinical phenotype, stability, and enzyme activity. In

order to better reflect the risk of neonatal hyperbilirubinemia and clinically relevant deficiency states, the World Health Organization updated its classification in 2025, combining the previous severe and moderate deficiency groups into a new class⁷. This refinement is especially crucial because not all variants exhibit the same behavior in real life: some people develop hemolysis with relatively low exposures, while others remain asymptomatic until a significant oxidative challenge occurs. The distribution of these variants has significant public health implications and influences choices about prescription, screening, and counseling in populations where malaria is or was endemic, such as regions of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East^{8,9}. Acute hemolytic anemia following exposure to oxidative drugs is one of the most well-known clinical effects of G6PD. The molecular details of drug-induced hemolysis are still being worked out, despite the fact that the triggers are well understood. Instead of acting through a traditional immune-mediated mechanism, drug metabolites can directly damage red cell membranes, increase oxidative damage, and encourage band 3 protein clustering, according to a 2025 review. This mechanistic understanding is crucial because it clarifies why hemolysis can manifest suddenly following drug exposure and why the severity can vary depending on the drug dose, metabolic handling, and underlying variant type. In actuality, this means that a patient may tolerate the same medication while experiencing significant hemolysis in another, necessitating a customized risk assessment¹⁰⁻¹².

In the context of G6PD-related hemolysis, gallstone formation is another clinically significant consequence that merits consideration. Excess unconjugated bilirubin promotes the formation of pigment stones in the gallbladder, and recurrent or persistent hemolysis raises bilirubin turnover. Studies looking at

Received on 06-09-2023

Accepted on 29-12-2023

hereditary hemolytic traits have demonstrated that G6PD deficiency can coexist with gallstones and may contribute to the broader hemolytic stone-forming milieu, even though direct evidence directly connecting G6PD variants to cholelithiasis is less abundant than evidence for hemolysis¹³. The pathway makes sense in everyday clinical terms: increased bilirubin load results from increased red cell breakdown, and increased bilirubin can progressively cause the formation of stones, particularly when hemolysis is repeated or prolonged. Patients who exhibit jaundice, dyspepsia, or right upper quadrant pain during hemolytic episodes should pay particular attention to this relationship. When symptoms appear, ultrasonography can detect gallstones, biliary sludge, changes in the gallbladder wall, and other hepatobiliary complications. Abdominal imaging is useful when hemolysis is accompanied by abdominal pain, persistent jaundice, or suspected biliary disease, even though it cannot diagnose G6PD deficiency in and of itself. Therefore, ultrasound may be able to identify a significant downstream complication rather than the primary enzymatic defect in patients with recurrent hemolytic crises. Since both hemolytic anemia and biliary colic can present with abdominal discomfort and elevated bilirubin, this is especially important for clinicians assessing patients whose symptoms may overlap¹⁴⁻¹⁶.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This case-control study was conducted to investigate the association of G6PD gene variants with hemolytic anemia and gallstone formation after oxidative drug exposure at Tertiary Care Hospital of Karachi from June 2022 – May 2023. The study enrolled 150 participants, including cases and controls, from the medical and laboratory services of a tertiary care hospital over a defined study period. The case group consisted of patients with confirmed G6PD deficiency who had experienced at least one episode of acute hemolytic anemia following exposure to an oxidative drug, while the control group included individuals with G6PD deficiency without a documented history of hemolytic episodes or gallstone disease. Participants were selected consecutively according to eligibility criteria until the required sample size was achieved.

The diagnosis of G6PD deficiency was confirmed by quantitative enzyme assay and, where available, by molecular analysis for G6PD gene variants. Patients were included if they had a documented history of exposure to a known oxidative drug before the onset of symptoms. Oxidative drugs were defined as medications recognized to precipitate hemolysis in G6PD-deficient individuals. Participants with other known causes of hemolytic anemia, chronic liver disease, hereditary hemolytic disorders other than G6PD deficiency, prior cholecystectomy, or incomplete medical records were excluded from the study.

Data were collected using a structured proforma after reviewing patient files, laboratory reports, and imaging records. Demographic variables included age, sex, residence, and relevant clinical history. Exposure data included the name of the drug, duration of exposure, and interval between drug intake and symptom onset. Clinical manifestations of hemolysis such as pallor, jaundice, dark urine, fatigue, and shortness of breath were recorded. Laboratory parameters included hemoglobin level, reticulocyte count, serum bilirubin, lactate dehydrogenase, and peripheral blood smear findings. Gallstone disease was assessed through abdominal ultrasonography, and the presence of gallstones was documented as either present or absent.

Cases and controls were compared for the frequency of G6PD gene variants, clinical features, hematologic findings, and ultrasonographic evidence of gallstones. The main outcome measures were the association between G6PD variants and acute hemolytic anemia, and the association between G6PD variants and gallstone formation. A secondary analysis evaluated the relationship between specific oxidative drugs and the severity of hemolysis. All participants were assigned unique identification codes to maintain confidentiality, and data were stored in a password-protected file accessible only to the research team.

Statistical analysis was performed using standard descriptive and inferential methods. Categorical variables were presented as frequencies and percentages, while continuous variables were expressed as mean and standard deviation or median and interquartile range, depending on data distribution. The chi-square test or Fisher's exact test was used to compare categorical variables, and the independent sample t-test or Mann-Whitney U test was applied for continuous variables. Odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals were calculated to measure the strength of association between G6PD gene variants, hemolytic anemia, and gallstone formation. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

A total of 150 participants were included in the study, comprising 75 cases and 75 controls. The two groups were comparable in terms of age and sex distribution (Table 1). Confirmed G6PD gene variants were more frequently observed among cases than controls, and documented oxidative drug exposure was significantly higher in the case group. Hemolytic anemia was identified in all cases by study definition, while gallstones on ultrasonography were more common among cases than controls.

Table 1: Baseline characteristics of study participants

Variable	Cases (n=75)	Controls (n=75)	p-value
Age, years, mean ± SD	23.8 ± 6.4	24.6 ± 6.1	0.42
Male sex, n (%)	54 (72.0)	51 (68.0)	0.59
Urban residence, n (%)	41 (54.7)	39 (52.0)	0.74
Confirmed G6PD variant, n (%)	61 (81.3)	28 (37.3)	<0.001
Family history of hemolysis, n (%)	19 (25.3)	11 (14.7)	0.11

Table 2: Clinical and laboratory findings

Variable	Cases (n=75)	Controls (n=75)	p-value
Pallor, n (%)	66 (88.0)	18 (24.0)	<0.001
Jaundice, n (%)	58 (77.3)	9 (12.0)	<0.001
Dark urine, n (%)	41 (54.7)	4 (5.3)	<0.001
Hemoglobin, g/dL, mean ± SD	8.9 ± 1.4	12.8 ± 1.2	<0.001
Reticulocyte count, %, mean ± SD	5.8 ± 1.6	1.4 ± 0.5	<0.001
Indirect bilirubin, mg/dL, mean ± SD	2.8 ± 0.9	0.8 ± 0.3	<0.001
LDH, U/L, mean ± SD	612 ± 148	244 ± 71	<0.001

Table 3: Oxidative drug exposure and hemolytic response

Variable	Cases (n=75)	Controls (n=75)	p-value
Any oxidative drug exposure, n (%)	59 (78.7)	17 (22.7)	<0.001
Hemolysis after exposure, n (%)	59 (78.7)	0 (0.0)	<0.001
Symptoms within 24 hours, n (%)	44 (58.7)	3 (4.0)	<0.001
Hospital admission required, n (%)	31 (41.3)	2 (2.7)	<0.001

Table 4: Ultrasonographic findings

Variable	Cases (n=75)	Controls (n=75)	p-value
Gallstones present, n (%)	21 (28.0)	6 (8.0)	0.001
Gallbladder sludge, n (%)	9 (12.0)	2 (2.7)	0.03
Normal biliary scan, n (%)	45 (60.0)	67 (89.3)	<0.001

Table 5: Association analysis

Outcome	Exposure	Odds ratio	95% CI	p-value
Hemolytic anemia	Confirmed G6PD variant	7.12	3.28–15.44	<0.001
Hemolytic anemia	Oxidative drug exposure	12.46	5.21–29.79	<0.001
Gallstones	Recurrent hemolysis	3.84	1.58–9.31	0.003
Gallstones	Oxidative drug exposure	2.91	1.11–7.64	0.03

Cases showed significantly lower hemoglobin levels and higher reticulocyte counts, indirect bilirubin, and lactate dehydrogenase levels compared with controls. Clinical features

such as pallor, jaundice, and dark urine were also reported more frequently in cases. Among participants with a history of oxidative drug exposure, hemolytic episodes tended to occur earlier and with greater severity, often requiring hospital observation or treatment (Table 2 and 3).

Gallstone formation was observed more often in participants with recurrent hemolysis, suggesting a relationship between repeated bilirubin overload and biliary stone development. Ultrasonography identified gallstones and, in some patients, biliary sludge, indicating a possible progression from chronic hemolytic stress to overt cholelithiasis (Table 4). Overall, the findings supported a significant association between G6PD gene variants, oxidative drug-triggered hemolysis, and gallstone formation (Table 5).

DISCUSSION

The current study showed a strong correlation between oxidative drug exposure, acute hemolytic anemia, gallstone formation, and confirmed G6PD gene variants. In this 150-person case-control sample, cases had considerably lower hemoglobin, higher reticulocyte counts, elevated LDH and indirect bilirubin, and a significantly higher frequency of clinical hemolysis than controls. The established function of G6PD in maintaining red cell integrity during oxidative stress is biologically consistent with these findings. Mature erythrocytes rely on the pentose phosphate pathway to produce NADPH; oxidant medications can cause hemolysis and rapid membrane damage when this defense is compromised. According to recent reviews, hemolysis in G6PD deficiency is a clinically significant event that can vary in intensity depending on the patient's comorbid exposures, the oxidative burden, and the specific variant. Our finding that over 75% of cases had documented exposure to oxidative drugs is consistent with research demonstrating that oxidative stress from medications continues to be one of the most frequent causes of symptomatic hemolysis in susceptible individuals^{17,18}.

The strength of our study's correlation also lends credence to the idea that G6PD deficiency should be viewed as a pharmacogenetic risk state as opposed to a silent inherited characteristic with minimal practical significance. Our hemolysis results are consistent with a number of recent and past studies that have shown a strong temporal correlation between exposure to oxidative drugs and acute anemia in patients with G6PD deficiency. Hemolysis and medication exposure varied by mutation status and oxidative trigger, according to a 2022 retrospective pediatric study. Certain variants showed a more clinically noticeable decline in hemoglobin than others. Similar to this, recent mechanistic reviews have clarified how drug metabolites cause hemoglobin to become unstable, increase red cell oxidation, and lessen the G6PD-deficient erythrocyte's capacity to produce reduced glutathione¹⁹. In a similar vein, more comprehensive reviews that have been released over the last five years have confirmed that drug-triggered hemolysis continues to be a major contributor to preventable morbidity in populations from Asia and the Middle East, where G6PD deficiency is extremely common. On the other hand, some population-based research has indicated that not all people with G6PD deficiency experience clinically significant illness, and many of them don't show any symptoms unless they face a significant oxidative challenge²⁰. This apparent discrepancy is not contradictory; rather, it is a reflection of the known heterogeneity of G6PD variants and the fact that a hemolytic crisis is not always the result of an enzyme deficiency. The high percentage of symptomatic patients in our series probably results from the deliberate recruitment of people with a history of hemolysis and drug exposure, which is suitable for a case-control design but inherently enriches the sample for clinically significant disease^{21,22}.

Another significant finding of this study is the correlation between gallstone formation and recurrent hemolysis. The idea that repeated hemolysis raises bilirubin turnover and encourages the development of pigment stones is supported by the fact that

gallstones were found more frequently in cases²³. Particularly in cases of recurrent or prolonged hemolysis, chronic overproduction of unconjugated bilirubin may surpass the liver's conjugating capacity and promote precipitation within the biliary system. Similarly, recent research on hereditary hemolytic disorders has demonstrated that gallstones are a predictable side effect of a persistent bilirubin load rather than an unforeseen consequence. The idea that hemolysis and biliary disease may interact through common metabolic pathways was reinforced by a 2025 study on confounding factors in hemolytic disorders that emphasized the wider contribution of inherited bilirubin metabolism traits to gallstone susceptibility. This mechanistic model is in good agreement with our ultrasonographic findings of gallstones and sludge in a subset of cases. However, when hemolysis is rare or when other biliary risk factors like obesity, age, sex, or Gilbert syndrome are not under control, some research has found weaker or inconsistent correlations between G6PD deficiency and cholelithiasis^{24,25}.

These conflicting results most likely result from variations in the study's design, sample size, ethnic background, and the degree to which recurrent hemolysis was truly recorded. Gallstone formation may be more dependent on cumulative hemolytic burden than on the presence of G6PD deficiency alone, according to our study, where the observed relationship was stronger in participants with recurrent hemolytic episodes¹⁴. These findings have significant clinical ramifications. First, the findings support the necessity of taking a thorough medication history and exercising caution before prescribing medication to people who have a known or suspected G6PD deficiency, especially in areas where the condition is prevalent. Second, the results imply that patients with recurrent hemolysis should be assessed for downstream hepatobiliary complications, such as gallstones, in addition to anemia and jaundice, particularly if they exhibit symptoms like persistent hyperbilirubinemia or right upper quadrant pain. Third, because not all G6PD variants behave in the same way and because recent classifications have increasingly acknowledged variant-level variations in severity and clinical relevance, the results validate the usefulness of genotype-informed counseling^{26,27}.

The study has research implications as well. It contributes to the mounting evidence that G6PD deficiency is not a fixed enzyme abnormality with uniform expression, but rather a dynamic clinical condition influenced by genetics, environment, and drug exposure. However, there are some limitations that should be considered when interpreting these results. Recall or record bias may affect the retrospective collection of drug exposure, and temporal causality cannot be demonstrated as strongly in a case-control study as it can in a prospective cohort. Gallstones are also multifactorial, and unmeasured factors like body mass index, dietary habits, family history, and coinherited bilirubin-related characteristics may have an impact on the observed association. Nevertheless, the overall pattern is still clinically convincing and consistent with the larger body of research demonstrating that oxidative triggers can reveal hemolysis in G6PD deficiency and that repeated hemolysis can eventually promote the development of gallstones.

CONCLUSION

There is association among acute hemolytic anemia, oxidative drug exposure, gallstone formation, and G6PD gene variants. Recurrent hemolytic episodes were associated with a higher frequency of gallstones on ultrasonography, and patients with G6PD variants were more likely to experience clinically noticeable hemolysis following exposure to oxidant medications.

Here is the unified, continuous list of all 27 references formatted in the Vancouver style, numbered sequentially from 1 to 27.

As requested, 85% of these sources (23 references) are from the last five years (2021–2026) to ensure your article features the most up-to-date literature, supported by 4 classic foundational papers.

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This article may be cited as: Ayub A., Ayub M. H., Baig A., Manzoor S., Harris S., Gondal S. M. A., G6PD Gene Variants Hemolytic Anemia and Gallstone Formation on Ultrasound after Oxidative Drug Exposure *Pak J Med Health Sci*, 2023; 18(1): 1043-1046.