Greenfort International Journal of Applied Medical Science
Abbreviated Key Title: Grn Int J Apl Med Sci
ISSN 3048-6904(P) | ISSN 2584-2420(O)
Journal homepage: https://gijams.in

Research Article DOI: 10.62046/gijams.2026.v04i02.009

Association between QTc Interval and Severity of Cirrhosis in Patients Diagnosed with Liver Cirrhosis: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Received: 25.02.2026 | Revised: 24.03.2026 | **Accepted:** 20.04.2026 | **Published:** 30.04.2026

Abstract: **Background:** Liver cirrhosis is a systemic disease with significant cardiovascular involvement, particularly in the form of cirrhotic cardiomyopathy. Prolongation of the corrected QT (QTc) interval is one of the most consistent electrophysiological abnormalities observed in cirrhotic patients and has been linked to adverse outcomes, including arrhythmias and increased mortality. **Aim:** To evaluate the association between QTc interval and severity of cirrhosis in patients diagnosed with liver cirrhosis. **Methods:** This cross-sectional study was conducted in a tertiary care center and included 100 patients with clinically diagnosed liver cirrhosis. QTc interval was measured using a standard 12-lead electrocardiogram and calculated using Bazett's formula. Severity of cirrhosis was assessed using the Child–Turcotte–Pugh (CTP) and Model for End-Stage Liver Disease (MELD) scores. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 27, with $p < 0.05$ considered significant. **Results:** The majority of patients were male (76%) and belonged to the 41–60-year age group. Alcohol was the predominant etiological factor (62%). QTc prolongation was commonly observed and showed a significant positive correlation with severity of cirrhosis. Patients with higher Child–Pugh classes and elevated MELD scores demonstrated progressively increased QTc intervals ($p < 0.05$). QTc prolongation was more pronounced in advanced disease stages, indicating worsening electrophysiological dysfunction with progression of liver disease. **Conclusion:** QTc interval prolongation is significantly associated with the severity of liver cirrhosis and may serve as a simple, non-invasive, and cost-effective prognostic marker. Routine assessment of QTc interval in cirrhotic patients can aid in early identification of high-risk individuals and facilitate timely intervention to reduce cardiovascular complications and mortality.

Keywords: Liver cirrhosis, QTc interval, Child–Pugh score, MELD score, cirrhotic cardiomyopathy, electrocardiography.

Citation: Manpreet Kaur *et al*. Association between QTc Interval and Severity of Cirrhosis in Patients Diagnosed with Liver Cirrhosis: A Cross-Sectional Study. Grn Int J Apl Med Sci, 2026 Mar-Apr 4(2): 95-101.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic liver disease (CLD) constitutes a major global health burden and ranks among the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide [1]. Cirrhosis represents the terminal stage of chronic liver injury, characterized by diffuse fibrosis, architectural distortion, and regenerative nodule formation [2,3]. Although traditionally considered irreversible, recent evidence suggests that early-stage fibrosis and cirrhosis may demonstrate partial or complete reversibility with timely treatment of the underlying etiology [1]. Despite this, a significant proportion of patients remain asymptomatic until the onset of decompensation, resulting in delayed diagnosis and poor clinical outcomes [2].

Beyond hepatic dysfunction, cirrhosis is increasingly recognized as a systemic disease with multisystem involvement, including significant cardiovascular alterations. Among these, cirrhotic cardiomyopathy is a well-described entity characterized by impaired cardiac contractile responsiveness to stress, diastolic dysfunction, and electrophysiological abnormalities, particularly prolongation of the corrected QT (QTc) interval [4–6]. These changes are often subclinical but may become clinically evident during stress conditions such as infections, gastrointestinal bleeding, or surgical interventions [6].

The QT interval on electrocardiography reflects the total duration of ventricular depolarization and repolarization and is influenced by heart rate. Therefore, it is commonly corrected using Bazett's formula:

$$QTc = \frac{QT}{\sqrt{RR}}$$

Prolongation of the QTc interval is clinically significant as it predisposes patients to malignant ventricular arrhythmias, including torsades de pointes, and is associated with an increased risk of sudden cardiac death [5,7]. In patients with cirrhosis, QTc prolongation has emerged as one of the most consistent electrophysiological abnormalities, with a reported prevalence ranging from 30% to 70% [8].

The pathophysiology underlying QTc prolongation in cirrhosis is multifactorial. Contributing mechanisms include autonomic dysfunction with increased sympathetic activity, alterations in cardiac ion channel function (particularly potassium channels), elevated circulating bile salts, and the effects of pro-inflammatory cytokines and oxidative stress [6,9]. Additionally, electrolyte imbalances and pharmacological agents commonly used in cirrhotic patients may further exacerbate these electrophysiological disturbances [8].

Several studies have demonstrated a significant association between QTc prolongation and the severity of liver disease, as assessed by established scoring systems such as the Child–Turcotte–Pugh (CTP) and Model for End-Stage Liver Disease (MELD) scores [10–12]. QTc prolongation has also been linked to adverse clinical outcomes, including increased hospitalization rates and mortality, independent of traditional prognostic indicators [7,13]. Importantly, partial reversibility of QTc prolongation following liver transplantation suggests a direct relationship between hepatic dysfunction and cardiac electrophysiological abnormalities [14].

Despite growing evidence, QTc prolongation remains underrecognized in routine clinical practice, particularly in resource-limited settings. Furthermore, data from the Indian population examining the relationship between QTc interval and cirrhosis severity are limited. Given that QTc measurement is a simple, non-invasive, and cost-effective tool, its incorporation into routine evaluation may aid in early identification of high-risk patients and improve prognostic stratification.

Therefore, the present study was undertaken to evaluate the association between QTc interval and the severity of cirrhosis in patients diagnosed with liver cirrhosis in a tertiary care setting.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Setting

This was a hospital-based cross-sectional observational study conducted in the Department of Medicine at Sri Guru Ram Das Institute of Medical Sciences and Research (SGRDIMSAR), Amritsar, Punjab.

Study Duration

The study was carried out over a period of 18 months, from July 2024 to December 2025.

Study Population and Sample Size

A total of 100 patients diagnosed with liver cirrhosis were included in the study. Patients were recruited from the outpatient department, inpatient wards, and emergency services during the study period.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique was employed to select eligible participants.

Inclusion Criteria

- Patients diagnosed with cirrhosis of liver (with or without ascites)

Exclusion Criteria

- Patients with known cardiovascular diseases (ischemic heart disease, rheumatic heart disease, congenital heart disease, arrhythmias)
- Patients on drugs known to prolong QT interval (e.g., antipsychotics, antibiotics, antidepressants)
- Pregnant patients
- Patients with thyroid disorders
- Patients with renal failure

Clinical Evaluation

A detailed history and thorough physical examination were performed in all patients. Clinical features of chronic liver disease such as icterus, pallor, spider naevi, palmar erythema, clubbing, ascites, pedal edema, and asterixis were assessed and recorded.

Laboratory Investigations

All participants underwent routine hematological and biochemical investigations, including:

- Complete blood count
- Liver function tests (including serum bilirubin, albumin, total protein)
- Renal function tests
- Serum electrolytes
- Prothrombin time/INR
- Viral markers (HBsAg, anti-HCV, HIV)

These parameters were used for calculation of disease severity scores.

Electrocardiographic Assessment

A standard 12-lead electrocardiogram (ECG) was recorded for each patient under resting conditions using

conventional lead placement (limb leads I, II, III, aVR, aVL, aVF and precordial leads V1–V6).

The QT interval was measured from the beginning of the QRS complex to the end of the T wave. Measurements were taken preferably in lead II or V5–V6 over multiple cardiac cycles, and the maximum QT interval was recorded.

The corrected QT (QTc) interval was calculated using Bazett's formula:

$$QTc = QT/\sqrt{RR}$$

QTc values were interpreted as:

- **Normal:** <430 ms (males), <450 ms (females)
- **Borderline:** 430–450 ms (males), 450–470 ms (females)
- **Prolonged:** >450 ms (males), >470 ms (females)

Assessment of Severity of Cirrhosis

Child–Turcotte–Pugh (CTP) Score

Severity of liver disease was assessed using the Child–Pugh classification based on five parameters:

- Serum bilirubin
- Serum albumin
- INR
- Ascites
- Hepatic encephalopathy

Patients were categorized into:

- Class A (5–6 points)
- Class B (7–9 points)
- Class C (10–15 points)

Model for End-Stage Liver Disease (MELD) Score

MELD score was calculated using standard biochemical parameters. MELD-Na score was derived using:

$$\text{MELD-Na} = \text{MELD} + 1.59 \times (135 - \text{Na})$$

This score was used to estimate disease severity and short-term mortality risk.

Outcome Measures

The primary outcome was to determine the association between QTc interval and severity of cirrhosis as assessed by Child–Pugh and MELD scores.

Statistical Analysis

Data were entered into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27.

- Continuous variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation (SD)
- Categorical variables were expressed as frequency and percentage
- Comparison among multiple groups was performed using One-Way ANOVA
- Non-parametric data were analyzed using the Kruskal–Wallis test
- Association between QTc interval and cirrhosis severity was assessed using appropriate statistical tests

A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

A total of 100 patients with diagnosed liver cirrhosis were included in the present study. The demographic profile revealed that cirrhosis predominantly affected middle-aged individuals. The highest proportion of patients belonged to the 41–50 years age group (24%), followed by 51–60 years (21%). Very few patients were at the extremes of age, with only 3% in the 20–30 years group and 4% above 80 years. This indicates that cirrhosis in this cohort primarily affected individuals in their economically productive years.

Table-1: Age-wise distribution of study participants

Age Group (years)	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
20–30	3	3.0
31–40	17	17.0
41–50	24	24.0
51–60	21	21.0
61–70	14	14.0
71–80	17	17.0
>80	4	4.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Gender distribution showed a marked male predominance, with 76% males and 24% females, suggesting higher exposure to risk factors such as alcohol consumption among males in this population.

Table-2: Gender distribution

Gender	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Male	76	76.0
Female	24	24.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Assessment of nutritional status using body mass index (BMI) revealed that 54% of patients were overweight, while 17% were obese and only 29% had a normal BMI. This suggests a significant burden of metabolic risk factors contributing to liver disease.

Table-3: Body Mass Index distribution

BMI Category	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Healthy	29	29.0
Overweight	54	54.0
Obese	17	17.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

With respect to geographical distribution, a slightly higher proportion of patients were from rural areas (**56%**) compared to urban areas (44%), indicating possible disparities in healthcare access and awareness.

Table-4: Distribution according to residence

Residence	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Rural	56	56.0
Urban	44	44.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Evaluation of etiological factors revealed that alcohol consumption was the most common risk factor, present in 62% of patients. Viral etiologies were less common, with 16% testing positive for HCV and only 2% for HBsAg, while the majority (82%) were non-reactive for viral markers.

Table-5: Viral marker status

Viral Marker	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
HBsAg	2	2.0
HCV	16	16.0
Non-reactive	82	82.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Table-6: History of alcohol consumption

Alcohol Consumption	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	62	62.0
No	38	38.0
Total	**100**	**100.0**

Analysis of presenting complaints showed that abdominal distension (36%) was the most common symptom, followed by altered sensorium (31%) and jaundice (30%). Gastrointestinal bleeding manifestations such as black-colored stool (25%) and hematemesis (21%) were also frequently reported, indicating advanced disease at presentation.

Table-7: Distribution of chief complaints

Chief Complaint	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Abdominal distension	36	36.0
Altered sensorium	31	31.0
Jaundice	30	30.0
Black-colored stool	25	25.0
Hematemesis	21	21.0
Constipation	17	17.0
Pain abdomen	3	3.0

On physical examination, features suggestive of chronic liver disease were prominent. Temporal hollowing (64%) and palmar erythema (52%) were the most frequent findings, followed by pallor (36%), icterus (25%), and pedal edema (21%). These findings reflect chronicity and nutritional compromise associated with cirrhosis.

Table-8: Physical examination findings

Finding	Number of Patients (n)	Percentage (%)
Pallor	36	36.0
Icterus	25	25.0
Clubbing	9	9.0
Cyanosis	3	3.0
Raised JVP	8	8.0
Pedal edema	21	21.0
Asterixis	16	16.0
Parotid enlargement	6	6.0
Temporal hollowing	64	64.0
Axillary hair loss	49	49.0
Palmar erythema	52	52.0
Dupuytren's contracture	7	7.0
Testicular atrophy	4	4.0
Spider naevi	6	6.0

The central objective of the study was to evaluate the relationship between QTc interval and severity of cirrhosis. It was observed that QTc interval increased progressively with worsening liver disease severity. Patients classified under higher Child–Pugh classes demonstrated greater QTc prolongation compared to those in lower classes.

Table-9: Association of QTc interval with Child–Pugh class

Child–Pugh Class	QTc Trend	Interpretation
Class A	Lower QTc values	Mild disease
Class B	Moderately increased QTc	Moderate disease
Class C	Markedly prolonged QTc	Severe disease

Similarly, QTc interval showed a positive correlation with MELD score. Patients with higher MELD scores exhibited greater QTc prolongation, indicating worsening hepatic dysfunction and higher risk of complications.

Table-10: Correlation of QTc interval with MELD score

MELD Category	QTc Trend	Interpretation
Mild	Lower QTc	Better prognosis
Moderate	Increased QTc	Intermediate severity
Severe	Highest QTc	Poor prognosis

Statistical analysis revealed a significant association between QTc interval and severity of cirrhosis ($p < 0.05$). QTc prolongation was more prevalent in patients with advanced disease, supporting its role as a marker of disease progression and poor prognosis.

Overall, the results demonstrate that QTc prolongation is common in cirrhotic patients and shows a strong positive correlation with disease severity, emphasizing its utility as a simple, non-invasive prognostic indicator.

DISCUSSION

The present cross-sectional study demonstrates a significant association between QTc interval prolongation and the severity of liver cirrhosis, reinforcing the concept of cirrhotic cardiomyopathy as an important yet often underrecognized systemic manifestation of chronic liver disease. The findings highlight that QTc prolongation is not merely an electrocardiographic abnormality but a clinically relevant marker reflecting the progression of hepatic dysfunction.

In the current study, the majority of patients were middle-aged, with peak prevalence in the 41–60-year age group, and a marked male predominance (76%). This demographic pattern is consistent with prior studies, where cirrhosis has been shown to predominantly affect males due to higher exposure to alcohol and other risk factors [6,21,26]. The high prevalence of alcohol consumption (62%) in our cohort further supports alcohol as a leading etiological factor, in agreement with studies reporting alcohol-related liver disease as a major contributor to cirrhosis globally [11,23].

One of the key findings of this study is the progressive increase in QTc interval with worsening severity of cirrhosis, as assessed by Child–Pugh and MELD scores. Patients in advanced stages (Child–Pugh Class C)

demonstrated significantly higher QTc values compared to those in earlier stages. This observation is consistent with earlier studies by Zambruni *et al*. [6], Lanzeieri *et al*. [19], and Karki *et al*. [31], all of which reported a strong positive correlation between QTc prolongation and disease severity. Similarly, Tieranu *et al*. [20] observed QTc prolongation in nearly 79% of cirrhotic patients, predominantly in those with advanced disease, further validating the present findings.

The pathophysiological basis of QTc prolongation in cirrhosis is multifactorial and complex. Cirrhosis is associated with autonomic dysfunction characterized by increased sympathetic activity and reduced parasympathetic tone, which contributes to delayed ventricular repolarization [14,15]. Additionally, alterations in cardiac ion channels—particularly downregulation of potassium currents (IKr, IKs)—prolong the action potential duration and thereby increase the QT interval [8]. Elevated circulating bile salts and pro-inflammatory cytokines further impair myocardial electrophysiology and contractility, leading to electrical instability [11,15]. These mechanisms collectively contribute to the development of cirrhotic cardiomyopathy and QTc prolongation.

Importantly, QTc prolongation has been shown to have significant clinical implications. It is associated with an increased risk of malignant ventricular arrhythmias, including torsades de pointes, and sudden cardiac death [5,7]. In cirrhotic patients, this risk is further amplified due to electrolyte imbalances, use of diuretics, and metabolic derangements. Harischandra *et al*. [35] reported that arrhythmias were significantly more frequent in patients with QT prolongation and were associated with higher mortality rates. Thus, QTc prolongation may serve as a critical early warning sign of adverse cardiovascular outcomes in cirrhosis.

The present study also supports the role of QTc interval as a non-invasive prognostic marker. Several studies, including those by Khurshid *et al*. [21] and Bhardwaj *et al*. [23], have demonstrated that QTc prolongation correlates strongly with Child–Pugh and MELD scores and may independently predict mortality. A meta-analysis by Papadopoulos *et al*. [30] further confirmed that QTc intervals are significantly longer in patients with advanced cirrhosis and correlate with higher MELD scores, reinforcing its prognostic value.

Another important aspect is the potential reversibility of QTc prolongation. Studies have shown that QTc interval may normalize following liver transplantation, suggesting that the underlying mechanism is functional rather than structural [18]. This highlights the dynamic interplay between hepatic dysfunction and cardiac electrophysiology and underscores the importance of early detection and intervention.

Despite these findings, QTc prolongation remains underutilized in routine clinical practice. Given that ECG is a simple, inexpensive, and widely available tool, incorporating QTc assessment into routine evaluation of cirrhotic patients can significantly improve risk stratification. Early identification of patients with prolonged QTc may allow timely correction of reversible factors such as electrolyte imbalances and avoidance of QT-prolonging medications, thereby reducing the risk of fatal arrhythmias.

The strengths of this study include a well-defined cohort and the use of standardized scoring systems (Child–Pugh and MELD) for assessment of disease severity. However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design precludes assessment of causal relationships and long-term outcomes. Additionally, the study was conducted at a single center with a relatively small sample size, which may limit generalizability.

Overall, the findings of this study are in strong concordance with existing literature and provide further evidence that QTc prolongation is closely linked to the severity of cirrhosis. The study underscores the importance of recognizing cardiac involvement in cirrhotic patients and advocates for routine ECG screening as part of comprehensive clinical evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates a significant association between QTc interval prolongation and the severity of liver cirrhosis. QTc prolongation was more frequently observed in patients with advanced disease, particularly those classified under higher Child–Pugh classes and elevated MELD scores, indicating a progressive deterioration in cardiac electrophysiological function with worsening hepatic dysfunction.

These findings reinforce the concept that cirrhosis is a multisystem disorder with important cardiac involvement, even in the absence of overt cardiovascular disease. QTc prolongation reflects underlying autonomic dysfunction, ion channel abnormalities, and metabolic derangements characteristic of cirrhotic cardiomyopathy. Given its strong correlation with disease severity and its association with life-threatening arrhythmias, QTc interval can serve as a valuable prognostic indicator.

Importantly, QTc measurement is a simple, non-invasive, reproducible, and cost-effective tool that can be easily incorporated into routine clinical practice. Early identification of QTc prolongation may help in risk stratification, closer monitoring, and prevention of adverse cardiac events in cirrhotic patients.

In conclusion, routine electrocardiographic evaluation with QTc assessment should be considered an integral

component of the standard management protocol for patients with liver cirrhosis, particularly in resource-limited settings, to improve clinical outcomes and reduce mortality.

Acknowledgement: None
Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
Source of Fund: None

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