

Review

Vitamin C – An Adjunctive Therapy for Respiratory Infection, Sepsis and COVID-19

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Abstract: There are limited proven therapies for COVID-19. Vitamin C's antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and immunomodulating effects make it a potential therapeutic candidate, both for the prevention and amelioration of COVID-19 infection, and as an adjunctive therapy in the critical care of COVID-19. This literature review focuses on vitamin C deficiency in respiratory infections, including COVID-19, and the mechanisms of action in infectious disease, including support of the stress response, its role in preventing and treating colds and pneumonia, and its role in treating sepsis and COVID-19. The evidence to date indicates that oral vitamin C (2-8 g/d) may reduce the incidence and duration of respiratory infections and intravenous vitamin C (2-24 g/d) has been shown to reduce mortality, intensive care unit (ICU) and hospital stays, and time on mechanical ventilation for severe respiratory infections. Further trials are urgently warranted. Given the favourable safety profile and low cost of vitamin C, and the frequency of vitamin C deficiency in respiratory infections it may be worthwhile testing patients' vitamin C status and treating accordingly with intravenous use within ICUs and orally in hospitalised and infected persons.

Keywords: COVID-19; SARS-CoV-2; coronavirus; vitamin C; ascorbate; colds; pneumonia; sepsis; immunonutrition; supplementation

1. Introduction

Vitamin C, ascorbic acid, is an essential water-soluble nutrient. It is synthesised in plants from fructose and in almost all animals from glucose. It is not synthesized by primates, most bats, guinea pigs, and a small number of birds and fish since the final enzyme, gulonolactone oxidase (GULO), required for ascorbic acid synthesis is missing due to gene mutations that occurred prior to the evolution of Homo sapiens [1]. All these species are therefore dependent on vitamin C in their food. Primates are dependent on an adequate supply provided by fruits and vegetation intake ranging from 4.5 g/d for gorillas [2] to 600 mg/d for smaller monkeys (7.5 kg – a tenth of human size) [3].

The EU Average Requirement of 90 mg/d for men and 80 mg/d for women is to maintain a normal plasma level of 50 µmol/l [4], which is the mean plasma level in UK adults [5]. This is sufficient to prevent scurvy but may be inadequate when a person is under viral exposure and physiological stress. The Swiss Society of Nutrition recommend everyone supplement with 200 mg 'to fill the nutrient gap for the general population and especially for the adults age 65 and older.

This supplement is targeted to strengthen the immune system.' [6]. The Linus Pauling Institute recommends 400 mg for older adults (>50 years old) [7].

Pharmacokinetic studies in healthy volunteers support a 200 mg daily dose to produce a plasma level of circa 70 to 90 $\mu\text{mol/l}$ [8, 9]. Complete plasma saturation occurs between 1 g daily and 3 g every four hours, being the highest tolerated oral dose, giving a predicted peak plasma concentration of circa 220 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ [10]. The same dose given intravenously raises plasma vitamin C levels approximately ten-fold. Higher intakes of vitamin C are likely to be needed during viral infections with 2-3 g maintaining normal plasma levels between 60 and 80 $\mu\text{mol/l}$ [11, 12]. Whether higher plasma levels have additional benefit is yet to be determined but would be consistent with the results of clinical trials discussed in this review.

2. Vitamin C Deficiency in Pneumonia, Sepsis and COVID-19

Human plasma vitamin C levels decline rapidly under conditions of physiological stress including infection, trauma, and surgery, not uncommonly resulting in overt vitamin C deficiency in hospitalised patients, defined as a plasma level of vitamin C $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ [13-18]. Two studies in hospitals in Paris reported that 17 to 44% of patients had vitamin C plasma levels less than $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ [14, 15]. In a Canadian university hospital, it was found that 19% of patients had vitamin C plasma levels $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ [16]. In a study of surgical patients in Australia, it was found that 21% had vitamin C plasma levels $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ [17]. A survey of elderly Scottish patients hospitalized as a consequence of acute respiratory infections reported that 35% of patients had vitamin C plasma levels $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ [18]. The UK's National Diet and Nutrition Survey, based on a cross section of the UK population, reports that 4% of 65+ year olds and 40% of those institutionalized in care homes have vitamin C levels $\leq 11 \text{nmol/l}$ [5, 19], indicating how older people with low vitamin C status may be especially susceptible to critical infection.

The vitamin C-deficiency disease scurvy has long been associated with pneumonia which led to the view that vitamin C may influence susceptibility to respiratory infections [20]. In other words, people deficient in vitamin C may be more susceptible to severe respiratory infections such as pneumonia. A prospective study of 19,357 men and women followed over 20 years found that people in the top quartiles of baseline plasma vitamin C concentrations had a 30% lower risk of pneumonia [21]. Furthermore, meta-analysis has indicated a reduction in the risk of pneumonia with oral vitamin C supplementation, particularly in individuals with low dietary intakes [22].

Post-mortem investigations of severe COVID-19 have demonstrated a secondary organising pneumonia phenomenon [23], therefore, studies investigating vitamin C in relation to pneumonia may be relevant [18, 24-27] (Table 1). The most recent study, from A New Zealand, reported that their patients with pneumonia had depleted vitamin C levels compared with healthy controls (23 $\mu\text{mol/l}$ vs 56 $\mu\text{mol/l}$, $P < 0.001$). The total pneumonia cohort comprised 62% with hypovitaminosis C and 22% with vitamin C $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$, compared with 8% hypovitaminosis C and no cases with $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ in the healthy controls [24]. The more severely ill patients in the ICU had mean vitamin C levels of 11 $\mu\text{mol/l}$. Similar findings have been reported in other studies of critically ill septic patients [28-33] (Table 1). A New Zealand study of patients with sepsis found that 40% had vitamin C $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ and the majority of the patients had hypovitaminosis C (serum level $< 23 \mu\text{mol/l}$), despite receiving recommended enteral and parenteral intakes of the vitamin [29].

Table 1. Vitamin C status of patients with pneumonia, sepsis and severe COVID-19.

Study type	Cohort	Vitamin C (μmol/L) (% deficient, % hypovitaminosis C)	Refs
Pneumonia			
Case control	50 healthy volunteers	56 ± 2 ^a (0% ^b , 8% ^c)	[24]
	50 community-acquired pneumonia	23 ± 3 (22%, 62%)	
Case control	20 healthy volunteers	66 ± 3	[25]
	11 pneumonia cases	31 ± 9	
Case control	28 healthy participants	49 ± 1	[26]
	35 lobular pneumonia:		
	7 acute – did not survive	17 ± 1	
	15 acute – survived	24 ± 1	
	13 convalescent cases	34 ± 1	
Intervention (placebo group)	29 pneumonia/bronchitis:		[18]
	Week 0	24 ± 5 (40%) ^b	
	Week 2	19 ± 3 (37%)	
	Week 4	24 ± 6 (25%)	
Intervention (control group)	70 pneumonia cases:		[27]
	Day 0	41	
	Day 5 - 10	23 - 24	
	Day 15 – 20	32 - 35	
	Day 30	39	
Sepsis			
Intervention (baseline)	83 sepsis with ARDS:		[28]
	Day 0	22 (11 – 37) ^d	
	Day 2	23 (9 – 37)	
	Day 4	26 (9 – 41)	
	Day 7	29 (12 – 39)	
Observational	24 septic shock patients	15 ± 2 (38% ^b , 88% ^c)	[29]
Intervention (baseline)	24 severe sepsis patients	18 ± 2	[30]
Case control	6 healthy controls	48 ± 6	[31]
	19 severe sepsis	14 ± 3	
	37 septic shock	14 ± 3	
Case control	14 healthy controls	76 ± 6	[32]
	11 septic encephalopathy	19 ± 11	
Case control	34 healthy controls	62 (55 – 72) ^d	[33]
	62 ICU (injury, surgery, sepsis)	11 (8 – 22)	
Severe COVID-19			
Observational	21 critically ill COVID-19	22 ± 4 (45% ^b , 70% ^c) ^e	[34]
	11 survivors	29 ± 7 (40%, 50%)	
	10 non-survivors	15 ± 2 (50%, 90%)	
Observational	18 COVID-associated ARDS	17 with <9 μmol/L	[35]
		1 with 14 μmol/L	

^a Data represent mean and SEM or ^d median (and interquartile range). ^b Percentage of patients with vitamin C deficiency ($<11 \mu\text{mol/L}$) and ^c hypovitaminosis C ($<23 \mu\text{mol/L}$). ^e Personal communication (Cristian Arvinte, North Suburban Medical Center, Thornton, Colorado, USA). COVID coronavirus disease; ICU intensive care unit; ARDS acute respiratory distress syndrome. Some of this table has been reproduced from [36].

As yet, there have been few studies reporting the vitamin C status of patients with COVID-19 (Table 1). A study of 21 critically ill COVID-19 patients admitted to ICU in the US found a mean level of 22 $\mu\text{mol/l}$, thus a majority had hypovitaminosis C. The mean level for 11 survivors was 29 $\mu\text{mol/l}$ compared to 15 $\mu\text{mol/l}$ for the 10 non-survivors; of these five (50%) had $\leq 11 \mu\text{mol/l}$ [34]. A study in an ICU in Barcelona of 18 COVID-19 adult patients meeting acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) criteria found that 17 had undetectable levels of vitamin C and one patient had a low vitamin C (14 $\mu\text{mol/l}$) [35]. Thus, low vitamin C levels are common in critically ill hospitalized patients with respiratory infections, pneumonia, sepsis and COVID-19, the most likely explanation being increased metabolic consumption [37].

3. Mechanisms of action of vitamin C in infections, sepsis and COVID-19

Vitamin C has important anti-inflammatory, immunomodulating, antioxidant, antithrombotic and antiviral properties [38-40]. The vitamin demonstrates direct virucidal activity and has effector mechanisms in both the innate and adaptive immune system [41-44]. The effects of vitamin C on immunity during infection are many and include the development and maturation of T-lymphocytes and the functions of phagocytosis and chemotaxis of leucocytes [45]. It also has a vital role as an antioxidant whereby phagocytes import oxidised vitamin C (dehydroascorbic acid) and regenerate it to reduced vitamin C (ascorbic acid) [46, 47].

Importantly, and with specific reference to the critical phase of COVID-19, vitamin C contributes to the downregulation of cytokines, protecting the endothelium from oxidant injury and has an essential role in tissue repair [48, 49]. The interaction between oxidative stress and the induction of genes integral to the inflammatory response, including TNF α , IL-1, IL-8, and ICAM-1 has been shown to be mediated through activation of NF- κ B [50]. Vitamin C lessens reactive oxidative species (ROS) and inflammation via attenuation of NF- κ B activation [51]. Vitamin C significantly increases superoxide dismutase, catalase and glutathione and decreases serum TNF α and IL-1 β levels in a rat ARDS model [52]. These effects of vitamin C may be due to its epigenetic regulation of various genes, i.e. upregulation of antioxidant proteins and downregulation of proinflammatory cytokines, rather than its direct scavenging of oxidants.

While SARS-CoV-2 downregulates the expression of type-1 interferons (the host's primary anti-viral defense mechanism) [53], vitamin C upregulates these key host defense proteins [40]. In GULO knockout mice vitamin C shows in vivo anti-viral immune responses and a reduction in viral titers in the lung at the early stage of infection, especially against influenza virus, through increased production of interferon [54]. Animal studies show that vitamin C reduces the incidence and severity of bacterial and viral infections [55], including increased resistance of chick embryo tracheal organ cultures to coronavirus infection and protection of broiler chicks against avian coronavirus [56, 57].

Based on the identification of ACE2 as the receptor for SARS-CoV-2 entry there is a hypothesis that the increased risk of severe COVID-19 is a function of upregulated ACE2, as is found in the co-morbidities of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and hypertension [58]. The SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein is able to bind to ACE2 [59]. It is noteworthy that in human arterial endothelial cells vitamin C abolished ACE2 upregulation induced by IL-7 [60].

Although there are many potential targets for vitamin C in the process of infection, viral replication and pathology in COVID-19, it is noteworthy that a key protease in the virus, Mpro, whose function is to activate several viral non-structural proteins, has been proposed as a target. In a modelling study using the crystal structure of Mpro, the active site of this enzyme was found to bind magnesium ascorbate, which had the strongest binding out of 106 nutraceuticals. The authors suggested that ascorbate might, therefore, be a powerful inhibitor of the enzyme [61].

The critical and often fatal phase of COVID-19, primarily triggered by the host's reaction to dead virus particles, occurs with increased production of potent proinflammatory cytokines and chemokines, resulting in the development of multi-organ failure [62]. This may result in neutrophil migration and accumulation in the lung interstitium and bronchoalveolar space and is considered a key determinant of progression in ARDS [63]. Neutrophil extracellular traps (NETosis) is a cell death

pathway different from apoptosis and necrosis that traps and inactivates pathogens [64]. This is a maladaptive response that may contribute to tissue and organ damage leading to organ failure. Vitamin C deficiency in GULO-knockout mice showed enhanced NETosis in the lungs of septic animals and increased circulating cell-free DNA suggesting that vitamin C is a novel regulator of NETosis [65]. Furthermore, vitamin C enhances lung epithelial barrier function in an animal model of sepsis by promoting epigenetic and transcriptional expression of protein-channels at the alveolar capillary membrane that regulate alveolar fluid clearance which include cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator, aquaporin-5, the Na⁺/K⁺-ATPase pump and epithelial sodium channel [66].

There is also increasing evidence that vitamin C, which is a pleiotropic stress hormone, may be playing a critical role in mediating the adrenocortical stress response, particularly in sepsis [38]. Vitamin C concentrations are three to ten times higher in the adrenal glands than in any other organ [67]. It is released from the adrenal cortex under conditions of physiological stress (ACTH stimulation), including viral exposure, raising plasma levels fivefold [68]. Vitamin C enhances cortisol production and potentiates the anti-inflammatory and endothelial cytoprotective effects of glucocorticoids [69, 70]. Exogenous glucocorticoid steroids are the only proven disease-modifying treatment for COVID-19 [71]. The postulated mechanisms for vitamin C's amelioration of COVID-19 pathology are shown in Figure 1.

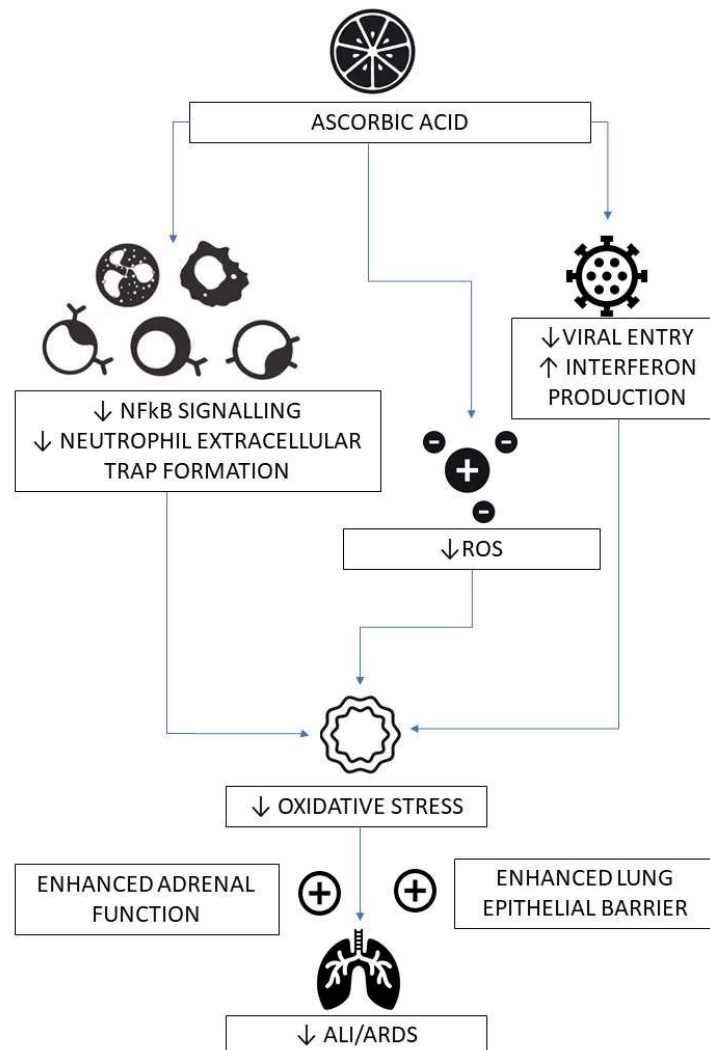


Figure 1. Postulated mechanisms for vitamin C's amelioration of COVID-19 pathology.

4. Clinical Evidence for the Role of Vitamin C in Colds

Nobel laureate Linus Pauling concluded from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) that vitamin C prevented and alleviated colds thus popularising its use in the 1970s [72, 73]. A Cochrane Review of placebo-controlled trials giving oral vitamin C for preventing and treating colds found that supplementation above 200 mg did not reduce the incidence in the general population [74]. However, in five trials involving a total of 598 marathon runners, skiers and soldiers on subarctic exercises vitamin C reduced the incidence of colds by 52% ($P < 0.0001$) [74]. Based on these findings, vitamin C can influence resistance to virus infections in special conditions, such as during brief periods of severe physical exercise.

Whereas trials where vitamin C has been administered only after the onset of symptoms have not shown consistent benefits, trials which regularly administered vitamin C reduced the duration of infections in adults by 8% and in children by 14%, with an apparent dose-dependency up to 6-8 g/day [55, 74]. In children, 1 to 2 g/day vitamin C reduced cold duration by 18% with the severity of colds being reduced by regular administration [74].

The latest UK placebo-controlled trial illustrates the meaningful clinical difference between the number of colds, cold duration and severity [75]. This small trial comprised 168 volunteers who were randomized to receive a placebo or vitamin C (2 x 500 mg daily) over a 60-day winter period. The vitamin C group had fewer colds (37 vs 50, $P = 0.05$), and even fewer virally challenged 'cold' days (85 vs 178, $P = 0.03$) and a shorter duration of severe symptom days (1.8 vs 3.1 days, $P = 0.03$). The number of participants who had two colds during the trial was significantly reduced (2/84 on vitamin C vs 16/84 in the placebo group; $P = 0.04$) [75].

In summary, cold symptoms have been shown to be less severe and resolve more quickly with oral vitamin C with a dose-dependent effect. Colds, caused by over 100 different virus strains, some of which are coronaviruses, are defined by a group of symptoms similar to the majority of those who get SARS-CoV-2 infection and do not convert into the acute illness phase. This similarity of symptoms and the disease-modifying effect of vitamin C across a wide range of cold-related viruses is further rationale for considering that vitamin C's effects in reducing severity and duration of infection is not virus-specific and could thus also potentially alleviate SARS-CoV-2 related symptoms. Each of these effects – reduced duration, severity and number of colds – could reasonably be hypothesized, in the context of SARS-CoV-2, to reduce conversion from mild infection to the critical phase of COVID-19. Given the consistent effect of regular vitamin C intake on the duration and severity of colds, and the low cost and safety, it would be appropriate for patients with respiratory virus infections to have the benefits of therapeutic vitamin C assessed.

Since the disease caused by the novel coronavirus can be more severe than the ordinary virus infections, the above estimates may justify a regular increased daily intake of vitamin C for the period when the prevalence of the virus is high; when a patient suffers from a virus infection with active cold symptoms; in those testing PCR positive to SARS-CoV2 and in COVID-19 hospitalised patients; an oral dose of up to 6-8 g/day might be considered. Pauling's recommendation of 1 gram every hour of oral ascorbic acid during active infection has yet to be studied in an RCT, therefore the most effective dose has yet to be determined.

5. Clinical Evidence for the Role of Vitamin C in Pneumonia

In 1951 Klenner investigated the effects of high doses of vitamin C, given intravenously, against viral diseases including pneumonia [76]. A Cochrane review on pneumonia and vitamin C identified three prophylactic RCTs reporting the number of pneumonia cases in participants who were administered oral vitamin C [22]. Each of these found a $\geq 80\%$ lower incidence of pneumonia for the vitamin C group [77-79]. One was an RCT giving 2 g/day versus placebo to US Marine recruits during a two-month recruit training period and reported 1/331 cases of pneumonia in the vitamin C group versus 7/343 cases in the placebo group ($P = 0.044$) [77].

Two therapeutic trials were identified (Table 2). One was an RCT with elderly people in the UK (mean age 81 years), hospitalized with acute bronchitis or pneumonia. The study found that the plasma vitamin C level at baseline was 23 $\mu\text{mol/l}$ (hypovitaminosis C) and one third of the patients

had a vitamin C level of ≤ 11 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ [18]. Vitamin C (0.2 g/day) reduced the respiratory symptom score in the more ill patients but not the less ill. There were six deaths during the study, all among the more ill patients: five in the placebo group, but only one in the vitamin C group. The other RCT, in the former Soviet Union, administered two different doses, a variable high or low dose relating to the dosage of antibiotics given [27]. The duration of hospital stay in the control group was 23.7 days. In the low dose vitamin C group (0.25 – 0.8 g/day) hospital stay was 19% shorter and in the high dose group (0.5 - 1.6g/day) it was 36% shorter. A benefit was also reported on erythrocyte sedimentation rate and the normalization of chest X-ray and temperature.

Table 2. Vitamin C RCTs in patients with pneumonia, sepsis and severe COVID-19.

Patients	Intervention	Patient outcomes	Refs
Pneumonia			
57 pneumonia/bronchitis: 29 placebo 28 treatment	Oral vitamin C: 0 g/d 0.2 g/d Duration: 28 d	↓ respiratory symptom score in most severely ill 17% mortality in placebo group 4% mortality in treatment group	[18]
140 pneumonia cases: 70 control 39 low dose 31 high dose	Oral vitamin C: 0 g/d 0.25-0.8 g/d 0.5-1.6 g/d Duration: 10 d	↓ hospital length of stay: 24 days 19 days 15 days	[27]
Sepsis			
167 sepsis and ARDS 83 placebo 84 treatment	IV vitamin C: 0 mg/kg/d 200 mg/kg/d Duration: 4 d	X systemic organ failure score X C-reactive protein, thrombomodulin X ventilator-free days ↓ 28 day mortality ↑ ICU-free days ↑ hospital-free days	[28]
100 septic shock 50/group	IV vitamin C: 0 or 6 g/d Duration: until ICU discharge	↓ vasopressor duration ↓ ICU length of stay X length of mechanical ventilation X renal replacement therapy X ICU mortality	[80]
28 septic shock 14/group	IV vitamin C: 0 or 100 mg/kg/d Duration: 3 d	↓ norepinephrine dose and duration ↓ 28 d mortality X ICU length of stay	[81]
24 severe sepsis 8/group	IV vitamin C: 0, 50 or 200 mg/kg/d Duration: 4 d	↓ systemic organ failure score ↓ C-reactive protein, procalcitonin, thrombomodulin	[30]
Severe COVID-19			
54 critical COVID-19 28 placebo 26 treatment	IV vitamin C: 0 g/d 24 g/d Duration: 7 d	X ventilation-free days ↑ $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FiO}_2$ ↓ Interleukin-6 ↓ 28 day mortality in patients with SOFA scores ≥ 3	[82]

ARDS acute respiratory distress syndrome; COVID coronavirus disease; FiO_2 fraction of inspired oxygen; IV intravenous; PaO_2 partial pressure of oxygen; SOFA sequential organ failure assessment. ↓ decrease; X no change. Some of this table has been reproduced from [36].

6. Clinical Evidence for the Role of Vitamin C in Critically Ill Septic Patients

The major cause for concern regarding COVID-19 is the high frequency of ICU treatment that is needed. Meta-analyses of intravenous vitamin C supplementation in critically ill (burns, sepsis and septic shock) patients indicated that it can lead to vasopressor sparing effects, reduced duration of ICU stay and a reduced need for mechanical ventilation [83]. In six trials, orally administered vitamin C in doses of 1–3 g/day reduced the length of ICU stay by 8.6% ($P = 0.003$) [84]. In five trials including 471 patients requiring ventilation for over 10 hours, a dosage of 1–6 g/day of vitamin C reduced ventilation time by 25% ($P < 0.0001$) [85].

There is clear evidence that vitamin C levels decline precipitously in critically ill patients and in those with sepsis (Table 1) [36]. Although 0.1 g/day of vitamin C can maintain a normal plasma level in a healthy person, much higher doses (2–3 g/day) are needed to keep plasma vitamin C levels of critically ill patients within the normal range [11, 86]. Being water-soluble, and thus excreted within hours, frequency of dose is important to maintain sufficient blood levels during active infection. Limitations in bioavailability in conditions of rapid vitamin C depletion in critically unwell patients have generated the hypothesis that the required therapeutic plasma levels to optimally reduce oxidative stress and exert an anti-inflammatory effect, are more effectively achieved with intravenous administration than with oral administration alone [29, 87].

Clinicians using intravenous vitamin C in severely ill COVID-19 patients have reported clinical effect giving 3 grams every 6 hours together with steroids and anti-coagulants [88]. However, clear evidence for the most effective dose and frequency has not yet been determined. A four-group randomized pharmacokinetic trial testing 2 or 10 g/day, either delivered as a twice-daily bolus infusion or continuous infusion found that the 2 g/day dose was associated with normal plasma concentrations, and the 10 g/day dose was associated with supranormal plasma concentrations, increased oxalate excretion, and metabolic alkalosis. The study's authors concluded that sustained therapy is needed to prevent hypovitaminosis C [11].

Vitamin C has been reported to reduce mortality in septic patients requiring vasopressor treatment randomly assigned to be given 25 mg/kg body weight/day intravenous vitamin C every 6 hours versus placebo (Table 2). Mortality at 28 days was significantly lower in the ascorbic acid than the placebo group (14% vs 64%, respectively; $P = 0.009$) [81].

In the largest trial of intravenous vitamin C in sepsis-associated ARDS, the CITRIS-ALI trial, patients were given vitamin C at a dose of 50 mg/kg every 6 hours for 4 days, thus providing 15 g/day for a 75 kg person, or placebo (Table 2). Patients in the vitamin C group did not have significantly improved markers of inflammation, vascular injury or organ dysfunction which were the primary outcomes [28]. However, there was statistically significant benefit in three of the four clinically relevant outcomes, i.e., mortality ($P = 0.03$), duration of ICU-free days ($P = 0.03$) and hospital-free days ($P = 0.04$). Reanalysis of the data indicated that during the 4-day vitamin C administration, mortality was 81% lower, but after the cessation of vitamin C administration, there was no difference between the two trial groups [89]. By the end of the 4-day vitamin C administration, the mortality rate was 23% (19/83) in the placebo group and 5% (4/84) in the vitamin C group ($P = 0.0007$). This difference of 18% corresponds to the number needed to treat of 5.5. Furthermore, the study authors, in recognition of the exclusion of SOFA scores in deceased patients, reported in a post hoc analysis assigning deceased patients a SOFA score of 20 and discharged patients a SOFA score of 0, that there was a 60% probability that any random patient from the placebo group had a higher SOFA score than any random patient from the vitamin C group ($P = 0.03$) at 96 hours [90].

Another trial randomized 216 patients to low-dose intravenous vitamin C (1.5g every 6 hours thus providing 7.5 g/day), thiamine, and hydrocortisone up to 10 days or until septic shock resolved, with a mean of 3.4 days, versus hydroxycortisone alone and found no effect on the primary outcome of vasopressor-free time to 7 days or on 90-day mortality [91]. Two limitations of this study are the delay in giving vitamin C [92], and the absence of a vitamin C only arm [93], hence, this study only shows that the addition of vitamin C, possibly too late in the disease process and for too short a time, to hydroxycortisone treatment added no treatment advantage.

7. Clinical Evidence for the Role of Vitamin C in COVID-19

Given the potential benefit of vitamin C, in oral and intravenous doses of 2-8 g/day, to reduce duration and severity of the common cold, pneumonia, sepsis and ARDS, this warrants investigating whether early oral supplementation could be beneficial in preventing conversion from mild infection to more critical COVID-19 infection and, if given intravenously to those with critical COVID-19 symptoms, in reducing mortality and ICU stay, thus speeding up recovery.

It is of interest to note that many of the risk factors for COVID-19 overlap with those for vitamin C deficiency [94]. Certain sub-groups (male, African American, older, those suffering with co-morbidities of diabetes, hypertension, COPD), all at higher risk of severe COVID-19, have also been shown to have lower serum vitamin C levels [95]. Average plasma vitamin C levels are generally lower in men than women even with comparative intakes of vitamin C, which has been attributed to their higher body weight [94]. A hypothesis of altered sodium-dependent vitamin C transporter (SVCT 1 and 2) expression in these sub-groups has also been proposed [95]. In old versus young rat's hepatocytes vitamin C level declines by 66% which is largely attributed to reduced absorption due to a 45% decline in SVCT 1 with age [96]. It is noteworthy that inflammatory cytokines present in co-morbidities downregulate SVCT2 resulting in depletion of intracellular vitamin C [97, 98].

There are currently 45 trials registered on Clinicaltrials.gov investigating vitamin C with or without other treatments for COVID-19. In the first RCT to test the value of vitamin C in critically ill COVID-19 patients, 54 ventilated patients in Wuhan, China were treated with a placebo (sterile water) or intravenous vitamin C at a dose of 24 g/day for 7 days [82] (Table 2). After 7-day's treatment, the ratio of $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FiO}_2$ in the vitamin C group was 229 mmHg versus 151 mmHg in the control group ($P = 0.01$), and also improved over time in the vitamin C group, but fell in the control group. On day 7 the IL-6 level was lower in the vitamin C group than in the placebo group: 19 pg/ml versus 158 pg/ml ($P = 0.04$). The more severely ill patients with SOFA scores ≥ 3 in the vitamin C group exhibited a reduction in 28-day mortality: 18% versus 50% ($P = 0.05$) in univariate survival analysis (see Figure 2). No study-related adverse events were reported. The effects of treatment on the ratio $\text{PaO}_2/\text{FiO}_2$ and on IL-6 are clinically important, but further studies are needed to determine if the trend in lower mortality can be confirmed. The trial was originally designed for 140 subjects thus was underpowered with 54 patients due to lack of new admissions.

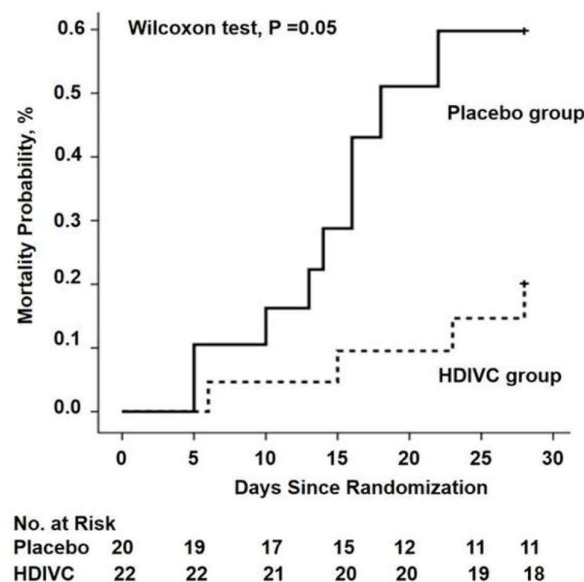


Figure 2. Kaplan-Meier analysis was used to estimate the 28-day mortality and survival curves were compared with the Wilcoxon test ($P=0.05$) among severe COVID-19 patients (baseline SOFA score ≥ 3). Cox regression was used as multiple comparisons ($P=0.06$, HR, 0.32[95%CI, 0.10-1.06]). HDIVC: high dose intravenous vitamin C. Reproduced with permission from Zhang J et al. [82].

The largest registered trial is the LOVIT-COVID trial (Lessening Organ dysfunction with VITamin C - COVID) in Canada which is recruiting 800 patients who will be randomly assigned to vitamin C (intravenous, 50 mg/kg every 6 hours) or placebo for 96 hours, i.e, equivalent to 15 g/day for a 75 kg person (NCT04401150). This protocol has further been added as a vitamin C arm in the REMAP-CAP trial (Randomized, Embedded, Multifactorial Adaptive Platform trial for Community-Acquired Pneumonia; NCT02735707). The study design provides further rationale for the use of vitamin C in COVID-19 patients [99]. There is also a high dose (10 g/day) vitamin C intervention study in 500 adults in progress in Palermo, Italy (NCT04323514).

There is concern, however, that these study designs limit the use of vitamin C to a maximum of four days which may be inadvisable in acutely ill patients due to potential return of symptoms if the inflammation is not resolved. This issue was illustrated by the CITRIS-ALI trial which showed maximum reduction in mortality compared to placebo on day 4, the final day of vitamin C administration, but decreased difference between the groups after 28 days [87, 89].

In the UK, the Chelsea and Westminster hospital ICU, where adult ICU patients were administered 1 g intravenous vitamin C every 12 hours [100] together with anticoagulants, has reported 29% mortality [101], compared to the average 41% reported by the ICNARC (Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre) for all UK ICUs [102]. While the authors have stated that the addition of an antioxidant in the form of vitamin C could have contributed to lower mortality it should be noted that other clinical factors and procedures could also account for the improved mortality and that the Chelsea and Westminster ICU serves a more affluent sector of the population with less deprivation on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Deprivation, while a risk factor for COVID-19 mortality, is also a predictor of low vitamin C status. In the UK an estimated 25% of men and 16% of women in the low-income/materially deprived population are deficient with vitamin C >11 $\mu\text{mol/l}$ [103].

The Frontline COVID-19 Critical Care Expert Group (FLCCC), a group of emergency medicine experts, have reported that with the combined use of 6 g/day intravenous vitamin C (1.5 g every 6 hours), plus steroids and anticoagulants, mortality was 5% in two ICUs in the US (United Memorial Hospital in Houston, Texas, and Norfolk General Hospital in Norfolk, Virginia), the lowest mortality in their respective counties [88].

A case report of 17 COVID-19 patients who were given 1 g intravenous vitamin C every 8 hours for 3 days reported a mortality rate of 12% with 18% rates of intubation and mechanical ventilation and a significant decrease in inflammatory markers, including ferritin and D-dimer, and a trend to decreasing FiO₂ requirements [104]. Another case of unexpected recovery following high dose intravenous vitamin C has been reported [105]. While these case reports are subject to confounding and are not *prima facie* evidence of effect, they do illustrate the feasibility of using vitamin C for COVID-19 with no adverse effects reported.

8. Safety of oral and intravenous vitamin C

The US DRI, having thoroughly considered the wide literature on vitamin C and many kinds of speculated harms, stated that the safe range is up to 2 g/day [106]. The European Food Safety Authority state that the lowest observable adverse effect level is 3-4 g/day (in relation to gastrointestinal effects) [107]. Injectable vitamin C phials state “there are no contraindications to the administration of ascorbic acid. As much as 6 grams has been administered parenterally to normal adults without evidence of toxicity” [108].

Three concerns have been raised regarding high doses of vitamin C: diarrhea from high oral ingestion, kidney stones, particularly due to kidney dysfunction in the case of intravenous vitamin C i.e., if high doses can't be cleared, and unsuitability for those with specific genetically inherited metabolic issues that affect vitamin C utilisation. The latter relates to those with glucose-6-phosphate deficiency (G6PD) and also haemochromatosis and thalassaemia due to enhanced iron absorption with vitamin C. G6PD deficiency is not considered an exclusion criterion in the use of up to 6 g/day orally or intravenous vitamin C [109]. The FLCCC report that 3 g every 6 hours appears to be safe in patients with G6PD. It may be wise for those with haemochromatosis or thalassaemia to avoid high

dose vitamin C taken with iron-rich foods or supplements and short-term high dose vitamin C to be medically monitored [110].

Looser bowels, or diarrhoea, rarely occurs below 3 g/day and tolerance is increased considerably when fighting a viral infection [111]. Diarrhoea has not been reported as a complication in hospital-based oral treatment and does not occur with intravenous vitamin C administration. A survey of 9,328 patients given an average intravenous dose of 24 g of vitamin C every 4 days, primarily for cancer, infection or fatigue, reported 101 (1%) had side effects, mostly minor, including lethargy/fatigue in 59 patients, change in mental status in 21 patients and vein irritation/phlebitis in 6 patients [112].

Regarding kidney stone formation, the Kidney Stone Research Laboratory of the University of Cape Town conducted a controlled trial in which ten volunteer subjects were required to ingest 4 g of vitamin C per day for five days. Unlike the earlier studies, they put a preservative in the urine collection bottles to prevent the conversion of ascorbate to oxalic acid. The samples were analysed for numerous physicochemical risk factors of kidney stone formation. These risk factors were not significantly altered and the authors concluded that ingestion of large doses of vitamin C does not increase the risk of forming kidney stones and earlier trials had faulty study design involving unpreserved urine samples [113]. A prospective cohort study of 85,557 women with no history of kidney stones, with 1078 incidence of kidney stones over 14 years follow-up reported that vitamin C was not associated with risk [114]. A systematic review of studies giving vitamin C found a correlation between ascorbic acid supplementation and the incidence of kidney stones in men, but not women [115]. A study administering intravenous ascorbic acid in doses ranging from 0.2 to 1.5 g/kg body weight measured urinary oxalic excretion during and over 6 hours from infusion. The authors conclude that less than 0.5% of a very large intravenous dose of ascorbic acid was recovered as urinary oxalic acid in people with normal renal function [116]. A cautious position would be to exclude those with a history of kidney stones or kidney dysfunction from high dose oral or intravenous vitamin C unless medically supervised. Short-term high dose vitamin C in the region of 2-8 g/day is unlikely to be of significant concern in people with normal kidney function.

9. Conclusions

Vitamin C's potential benefits, low cost and safety profile and multiple disease-modifying actions including antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and immunomodulating effects make it an attractive therapeutic candidate in reducing viral load with oral supplementation in the range of 2-8 g/day to help attenuate the conversion to the critical phase of COVID-19. Likewise, vitamin C has potential benefits in treating acute respiratory infections and mitigating inflammation in critical COVID-19 patients with intravenous vitamin C infusion in the range of 6-24 g/day, for correcting disease-induced deficiency, reducing inflammation, enhancing interferon production and supporting the anti-inflammatory actions of glucocorticosteroids, especially given the high level of fatality for patients with severe COVID-19.

Given the remarkable safety of vitamin C, frequent deficiency among infected patients and extensive evidence of potential benefit current treatment is justified on compassionate grounds pending more COVID-19 clinical trial data becoming available, both for intravenous use within ICUs, but also orally with doses between 2 and 8 g/day in hospitalised patients due to increased need when fighting a viral infection as concluded in recent reviews [36, 117, 118]. The clinical choice of oral versus intravenous vitamin C may be guided by similar criteria for administering oral versus intravenous antibiotics, considering both severity of illness and whether the patient is able to swallow oral medication at least four times a day.

People in high-risk groups for COVID-19 mortality, and at risk of vitamin C deficiency, should be encouraged to supplement with vitamin C daily to ensure vitamin C adequacy at all times, and to increase the dose when virally infected to up to 6-8 g/day [119]. Whether or not this will prevent conversion to the critical phase in COVID-19 has yet to be determined.

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