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Update on the Diagnosis of Traveler's Diarrhea: Current Strategies and Emerging Trends

Kennedy Winata[1], Kartika Cahyaningrum[1], Dayana Puspawarna[1], Ngakan Satria Wibawa[1], Agung Kesuma Putra[1], Bagas Aditya Kurnia Pratama[1], Eva Santhy[1], Adi Arya[1], Miracle Lie[1], Herliana Yuliartha[1], Arnelia Tasau[1], Arya Giri Prebawa[2], Saraswati Laksmi Dewi[2]

Abstract

Traveler's diarrhea (TD) remains a prevalent condition affecting individuals traveling to regions with varying sanitation standards. The diagnosis of TD has evolved with advancements in diagnostic tools and a better understanding of its etiology. Traditionally diagnosed based on clinical presentation and exposure history, current approaches increasingly incorporate molecular techniques to identify causative pathogens more accurately. Recent updates highlight the integration of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and other molecular diagnostic methods that offer rapid, sensitive, and specific detection of bacterial, viral, and parasitic pathogens. These advances enable differentiation between infectious and non-infectious causes of diarrhea, which is crucial for effective management and treatment. Additionally, the role of stool cultures, although less commonly used in rapid diagnostics, remains important for comprehensive pathogen identification. Emerging research emphasizes the need for a tailored diagnostic approach considering geographic region, patient history, and symptom profile. The use of multiplex assays and metagenomic sequencing is showing promise in identifying a broad spectrum of pathogens and understanding the complex microbiological landscape of TD. This update underscores the importance of adopting a multifaceted diagnostic strategy to improve the accuracy of TD diagnosis, thereby enhancing patient care and contributing to the development of targeted treatment and preventive measures.

Keywords: diagnosis; metagenomic sequencing; molecular techniques; multiplex assays; traveler's diarrhea; pcr; stool culture

Correspondence:
Saraswati Laksmi Dewi
pt.saraswati.laksmi.dewi@warmadewa.ac.id

1. Undergraduate Student of Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universitas Warmadewa
2. Department of Internal Medicine Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universitas Warmadewa, Bali, Indonesia, 80235

Introduction

Traveler's diarrhea (TD) is a common and distressing condition affecting travelers to regions with differing levels of sanitation and hygiene. Among the traveler 10-20% will develops TD.1 Characterized by the sudden onset of diarrhea, often accompanied by abdominal cramps, nausea, and occasionally vomiting, TD can significantly impact a traveler's health and experience. Historically, the diagnosis of TD has relied heavily on clinical presentation and travel history, with empirical treatment often initiated without definitive pathogen identification.2

Recent advances in diagnostic methodologies have markedly enhanced our ability to identify the causative agents of TD. Traditional diagnostic approaches, such as stool cultures and microscopy, although still in use, are increasingly complemented by more sophisticated techniques. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and other molecular assays now offer the advantage of rapid, accurate, and comprehensive pathogen detection. These modern tools can identify a wide range of bacterial, viral, and parasitic pathogens, thereby facilitating a more targeted therapeutic approach.3

Furthermore, emerging diagnostic technologies, including multiplex assays and metagenomic sequencing, are transforming our understanding of the complex microbiological landscape of TD. These technologies allow for the simultaneous detection of multiple pathogens and the exploration of the gut microbiome's role in TD. This update provides an overview of the current diagnostic strategies for TD, highlighting the

integration of novel molecular techniques and emerging trends in pathogen identification. By enhancing diagnostic accuracy and understanding the diverse etiological factors contributing to TD, healthcare providers can improve patient outcomes and develop more effective preventive and therapeutic strategies.

Etiology

Traveler's diarrhea (TD) is a common illness that affects individuals traveling to areas with different sanitation and hygiene standards from what they are accustomed to. The etiology of TD is diverse and can involve various pathogens, including bacteria, viruses, parasites, and sometimes even fungi. Here's a detailed look at the main causes[4-6]:

Bacterial Causes

Enterotoxigenic *Escherichia coli* (ETEC). This is the most common bacterial cause of TD. **Mechanism**: Produces enterotoxins that cause watery diarrhea. **Symptoms**: Frequent, watery stools, abdominal cramping, nausea, and sometimes vomiting.

***Salmonella* spp.** The prevalence is less common but still a significant cause. **Mechanism**: Causes inflammation and can lead to diarrhea, fever, and abdominal pain. **Symptoms**: Diarrhea (which can be bloody), fever, and abdominal cramping.

***Campylobacter* spp. Prevalence**: A common cause of bacterial gastroenteritis. **Mechanism**: Often linked to undercooked poultry and contaminated water. **Symptoms**: Diarrhea (often bloody), fever, and abdominal pain.

***Shigella* spp. Prevalence**: Known for causing dysentery. **Mechanism**: Causes inflammatory diarrhea with blood and mucus. **Symptoms**: Bloody diarrhea, fever, and abdominal cramps.

***Vibrio cholerae* (Cholera)**. **Prevalence**: More common in areas with severe water contamination. **Mechanism**: Produces a toxin that causes severe watery diarrhea. **Symptoms**: Profuse, watery diarrhea, dehydration, and in severe cases, shock.

Viral Causes

Norovirus. **Prevalence**: A leading cause of viral gastroenteritis. **Mechanism**: Highly contagious and spreads through contaminated food, water, and surfaces. **Symptoms**: Nausea, vomiting, watery diarrhea, and stomach cramps.

Rotavirus. **Prevalence**: Common in young children but can affect travelers. **Mechanism**: Causes gastroenteritis, particularly in unvaccinated children. **Symptoms**: Severe diarrhea, vomiting, fever, and abdominal pain

Parasitic Causes

Giardia lamblia. **Prevalence**: Common in regions with poor sanitation. **Mechanism**: Causes giardiasis, a parasitic infection. **Symptoms**: Diarrhea (often greasy and foul-smelling), abdominal cramps, and bloating.

Entamoeba histolytica. **Prevalence**: Causes amoebic dysentery. **Mechanism**: Can cause bloody diarrhea and liver abscesses. **Symptoms**: Bloody diarrhea, abdominal pain, and sometimes fever.

***Cryptosporidium* spp. Prevalence**: Found in contaminated water. **Mechanism**: Causes cryptosporidiosis, a parasitic infection. **Symptoms**: Watery diarrhea, stomach cramps, and nausea.

Fungal Causes

Candida spp. Prevalence: Rarely a primary cause but can cause diarrhea, particularly in immunocompromised individuals.**Mechanism**: Overgrowth of Candida in the gastrointestinal tract. **Symptoms**: Diarrhea, often accompanied by other symptoms of Candida infection.

Additional Factors

Antibiotic Use: Disruption of normal gut flora due to antibiotic use can lead to diarrhea, sometimes caused by *Clostridium difficile* (C. diff).

Food and Water Contamination: Contaminated food and water are common routes for pathogen transmission, especially in regions with poor sanitation.

Pathophysiology

The pathophysiology of Traveler's Diarrhea (TD) involves a complex interplay between pathogens, the host's gastrointestinal system, and environmental factors. The mechanisms by which different pathogens cause diarrhea can vary, but they generally involve disruption of normal gut function, leading to diarrhea and associated symptoms. Diarrhea are fundamentally caused by

inadequate water absorption from intestine luminal materials. Water travels through the intestinal mucosa due to osmotic forces produced by the movement of solutes, such as nutrients and electrolytes, rather than actively crossing it. Secretion and absorption typically occur at the same time, but absorption is quantitatively higher. Diarrhea and extra water in the lumen are caused by either a decrease in absorption or an increase in secretion. Reduced stool consistency is the result of excess water in the stool. Therefore, altered intestinal water and electrolyte transfer is the cause of diarrhea. Diarrhea's pathophysiologic mechanisms encompass osmotic, secretory, inflammatory, and modified motility processes. An unabsorbed material that follows osmotic gradients to pull water from the plasma into the intestinal lumen is the cause of osmotic diarrhea. Despite the misnomer, reduced absorption rather than net secretion is more frequently the cause of secretory diarrhea, which is caused by disrupted electrolyte transport. Diarrhea with exudative, secretory, or osmotic components is a complication of inflammatory disorders. By varying the amount of luminal content exposed to the intestinal absorptive surface, changes in intestinal or colon motility might affect the absorption of fluids. On the other hand, no one cause of diarrhea is genuinely unifactorial from a pathophysiologic standpoint.

Enterotoxins cause excessive activity of nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide in the intestinal cell walls that increases the level of 3'5'-cyclic adenin monophosphate (cyclic AMP) in cells that causes the active secretion of anion chloride in the gut followed by water, bicarbonate ions, cations. (natrium dan kalium). Clinically, the manifestation of TD in the enterotoxigenic group is secretory diarrhea or liquid diarrhoea. Examples of non-invasive bacteria are V. Cholerae, Enterotoxgenic E.coli (ETEC), and C. Perfringens.6 As for the virus that can cause secretory diarrhea, the rotavirus

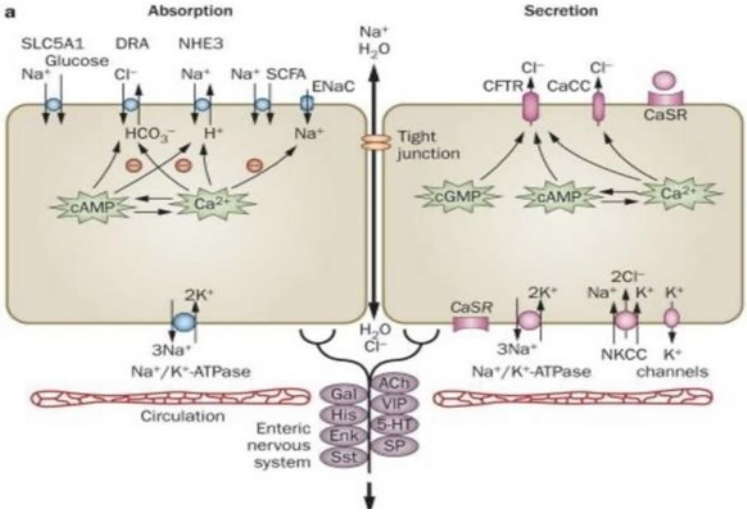

Figure 1. Proposed mechanism of secretoric TD[6]

Disorders of fluid and electrolyte absorption due to diarrhea, can occur as a result of direct invasion of the intestinal mucosa or the destruction of erythrocytes by cytolytic toxins released by pathogens. (Leung et al., 2019). Damage to the intestinal walls in the form of necrosis and ulceration can cause diarrhea, with the type of inflammatory diarrhoea. As a result, the diarrhea fluid is mixed with mucus and blood. Examples of invasive bacteria are Enteroinvasive E.coli (EIEC), Salmonella, Shigella, Yersingia, C. Perfingens type C

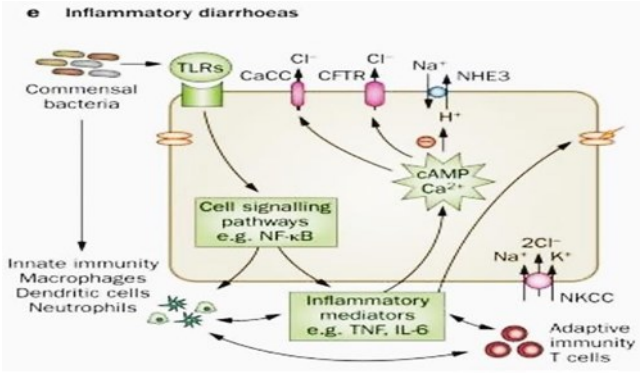

Figure 2. Proposed mechanism of inflammatory TD[6]

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Bacterial Pathogens

Bacteri *Enterotoxigenic Escherichia coli (ETEC).*

Mechanism: produces enterotoxins (mainly heat-labile toxin [LT] and heat-stable toxin [ST]) that affect the intestinal mucosa.

Pathophysiology:

Toxin Binding: LT binds to the intestinal epithelial cells, stimulating adenylate cyclase, which increases cyclic AMP (cAMP) levels.

Fluid Secretion: Elevated cAMP activates protein kinase A (PKA), leading to increased chloride ion secretion and reduced sodium and potassium absorption, resulting in excessive water secretion into the intestinal lumen.

Effect: This causes watery diarrhea, abdominal cramps, and nausea.

Bacteri Salmonella spp.

Mechanism: Salmonella species invade the intestinal mucosa and cause inflammation.

Pathophysiology:

Cellular Invasion: Salmonella enters the epithelial cells of the intestines, triggering an inflammatory response.

Inflammation: The invasion leads to the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines, causing localized inflammation.

Effect: This results in diarrhea that can be watery or bloody, abdominal pain, and fever.

Campylobacter spp.

Mechanism: Campylobacter spp. primarily cause inflammation in the intestines.

Pathophysiology:

Cellular Interaction: The bacteria adhere to and invade the intestinal epithelium, leading to an inflammatory response.

Inflammation: The inflammatory response includes the infiltration of neutrophils and the release of cytokines.

Effect: This results in diarrhea that is often bloody, abdominal pain, and fever.

Shigella spp.

Mechanism: Shigella species invade the intestinal mucosa and cause severe inflammation.

Pathophysiology:

Intracellular Invasion: Shigella invades epithelial cells of the colon, leading to cell death and ulceration.

Inflammation: This invasion triggers an intense inflammatory response, with increased secretion of cytokines and recruitment of immune cells.

Effect: This results in bloody diarrhea, mucus production, and abdominal cramps.

Vibrio cholerae (Cholera)

Mechanism: Cholera toxin produced by *Vibrio cholerae* affects intestinal cells.

Pathophysiology:

Toxin Binding: Cholera toxin binds to the GM1 ganglioside on the surface of intestinal epithelial cells.

cAMP Increase: The toxin stimulates adenylate cyclase, leading to elevated cAMP levels.

Fluid Secretion: Increased cAMP causes the secretion of chloride ions and water into the intestinal lumen, with reduced absorption of sodium and water.

Effect: This causes profuse, watery diarrhea often described as "rice-water stools," severe dehydration, and electrolyte imbalances.

Viral Pathogens[7,8]

Norovirus

Mechanism: Noroviruses infect and damage the intestinal epithelium.

Pathophysiology:

Cellular Impact: Norovirus binds to and infects intestinal epithelial cells, causing cell death and disrupting normal gut function.

Immune Response: The infection induces an immune response, including the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines.

Effect: This leads to watery diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, and stomach cramps.

Rotavirus

Mechanism: Rotavirus primarily affects young children and damages the intestinal lining.

Pathophysiology:

Cellular Impact: Rotavirus infects and destroys enterocytes in the small intestine, impairing absorption.

Enzyme Disruption: The destruction of enterocytes leads to reduced production of digestive enzymes.

Effect: This results in watery diarrhea, vomiting, and fever.

Parasitic Pathogens

Giardia lamblia

Mechanism: Giardia lamblia adheres to the intestinal lining and disrupts normal absorption.

Pathophysiology:

Attachment: Giardia adheres to the intestinal mucosa using adhesive discs, causing physical damage to the epithelium.

Disruption: The presence of Giardia interferes with nutrient absorption and causes inflammation.

Effect: This results in chronic, greasy, and foul-smelling diarrhea, abdominal pain, and bloating.

Entamoeba histolytica

Mechanism: *Entamoeba histolytica* invades the colonic mucosa.

Pathophysiology:

Invasion: The parasite penetrates and destroys the mucosal layer, causing ulcerations.

Inflammation: The invasion triggers a significant inflammatory response.

Effect: This results in bloody diarrhea, abdominal pain, and sometimes fever.

Cryptosporidium spp.

Mechanism: Cryptosporidium spp. infect the intestinal epithelial cells.

Pathophysiology:

Invasion: The oocysts of Cryptosporidium invade and infect the intestinal lining, causing inflammation and disrupting absorption.

Effect: This results in watery diarrhea, stomach cramps, and nausea

Current Strategies in Diagnosis [9-10]

Clinical Assessment:

History and Symptoms: Diagnosing TD typically begins with a thorough patient history and symptom assessment. Common symptoms include frequent, watery stools, abdominal cramping, and sometimes nausea and vomiting.

Duration: The condition is usually self -limiting, lasting 1-5 days. Symptoms persisting beyond this period may suggest a different etiology or secondary infection.

Stool Analysis:

Microscopy and Culture: Stool samples are analyzed for bacteria, parasites, and sometimes viruses. Traditional cultures are used to identify common bacterial pathogens like *Escherichia coli* (ETEC), *Salmonella*, *Shigella*, and *Campylobacter*.

Parasite Testing: In regions where parasitic infections are prevalent, testing for protozoa like *Giardia lamblia* and *Entamoeba histolytica* is crucial.

Molecular Methods:

PCR Testing: Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) assays are increasingly used to detect specific pathogens, including both bacterial and parasitic DNA. PCR can be more sensitive and faster than traditional culture methods.

Metagenomics: This advanced technique allows for the detection of a broad range of pathogens in a single test, providing insights into the microbial composition of the stool sample.

Rapid Diagnostic Tests:

Lateral Flow Assays: These are used for the quick identification of specific bacterial toxins or antigens. They offer a faster diagnosis compared to traditional cultures but may have limitations in sensitivity and specificity.

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Emerging Trends in Diagnosis[11]

Increased Focus on Viral Pathogens:

Norovirus and Rotavirus: Recent studies have highlighted the role of viral pathogens in TD.

Advances in molecular diagnostic tools are improving the detection of these viruses.

Integration of Next-Generation Sequencing (NGS):

Broader Pathogen Detection: NGS technologies offer comprehensive pathogen detection and characterization by analyzing the entire microbiome of stool samples, which can help identify less common pathogens and understand their role in TD.

Enhanced Point-of-Care Diagnostics:

Field-Deployable Devices: There is a growing interest in developing portable diagnostic tools that can be used in remote areas or during travel, providing quicker results and facilitating early intervention.

Genomic Epidemiology:[12]

Tracking Strains and Outbreaks: Genomic sequencing is being used to track the spread of specific pathogen strains and outbreaks, improving our understanding of transmission patterns and the effectiveness of preventive measures.

Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning:

Predictive Modeling: AI and machine learning algorithms are being employed to predict outbreaks and diagnose TD based on symptom patterns, travel history, and environmental factors.

Prevention and Management

While diagnosis is crucial, effective management of TD also involves prevention strategies:

Safe Eating and Drinking: Avoiding raw or undercooked food and consuming bottled or treated water can reduce the risk of TD.

Hygiene: Practicing good hand hygiene and using alcohol-based hand sanitizers can help prevent infection.

Vaccination: For certain pathogens like *Vibrio cholerae*, vaccines are available and recommended for high-risk travelers.

Antibiotics[9]

Indications: Antibiotics are typically reserved for moderate to severe TD, particularly if caused by specific bacterial pathogens like *Enterotoxigenic E. coli (ETEC)*, *Campylobacter*, or *Shigella*. They are not usually recommended for viral or parasitic infections.

Common Choices:

Azithromycin: Effective against *Campylobacter* and *Shigella*, and often used in regions with high resistance to other antibiotics.

Ciprofloxacin: Effective against *E. coli* and other bacteria but not recommended due to resistance in some areas.

Rifaximin: An option for *ETEC*-related diarrhea and is often used due to its limited systemic absorption.

Antiparasitic Medications

For Protozoal Infections:

Giardia lamblia: Treated with metronidazole or tinidazole.

Entamoeba histolytica: Treated with metronidazole or paromomycin.

For Cryptosporidium: Nitazoxanide is the treatment of choice.

Prevention

Vaccination

Cholera Vaccine: Recommended for travel to areas where cholera is endemic.

Other Vaccines: While not widely available for all pathogens causing TD, vaccines for rotavirus (primarily for children) and certain bacterial pathogens may be considered based on travel destinations.

Special Considerations

Pregnant Women

Medication: Avoid certain medications that might be contraindicated during pregnancy. Seek guidance from a healthcare provider for safe treatment options.

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Children

Hydration: Ensure adequate fluid intake to prevent dehydration. Special oral rehydration solutions are available for children.

Antibiotics: Use with caution and based on medical advice, particularly in younger children.

Elderly

Hydration and Monitoring: Elderly individuals may be at higher risk for dehydration and should be monitored closely for signs of dehydration and complications.

Conclusion

The diagnosis of traveler's diarrhea continues to evolve with advancements in technology and an increased understanding of its diverse etiological factors. While traditional methods remain important, emerging trends like molecular diagnostics, rapid tests, and AI-driven approaches are enhancing our ability to quickly and accurately identify the causes of TD, ultimately leading to better management and prevention strategies.

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