

# Thromboembolic Events Burden in Patients With Solid Tumors and Their Predisposing Factors: A Cross-Sectional Study

Shouki Bazarbashi (✉ [bazarbashi@gmail.com](mailto:bazarbashi@gmail.com))

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8913-8158>

Turkiah Alkhalidi

King Fahad Medical City

Maryam Melaibari

King Abdulaziz University

Sara Almuhsen

King Fahad Medical City

Samar Al-Harbi

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center

Jihad Aljumaa

Alfaisal University College of Medicine

Abdelmoneim Eldali

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center

Fatma Maraiki

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center

Mohamed Aseafan

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center

Tarek Owaidah

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center

Hazzaa Alzahrani

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center

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## Research Article

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# Abstract

**Background:** The relationship between cancers and thromboembolic events is well established. In our study we aim to determine the burden of thromboembolic events in patients with solid tumors and identify the risk factors related to their development.

**Methods:** Data on patients with solid tumors and thromboembolism between January 2013 and September 2014 were collected and analyzed.

**Results:** During the studied period 174 patients were identified, 172 (98.9%) of which had venous thrombus embolism. 137 (79%) were diagnosed with deep vein thromboses and 67 (38.5%) with pulmonary embolisms. 84 (48.3%) were symptomatic and 90 (51.7) were incidental at diagnosis. The most common risk factors were female sex, high Body mass index, metastatic stage, colorectal and breast primaries, and anti-neoplastic therapy.

**Conclusion:** Our study confirmed the high burden of thromboembolic events in cancer patients and the relevant risk factors associated with its development.

## Background

The relationship between cancers and thromboembolic events (TEEs), including venous thromboembolisms (VTEs) and arterial thromboembolisms (ATEs), is well-known and well-established (1–3). Evidence has shown that cancer patients have a higher risk of developing TEEs in comparison with non-cancer patients (3). This increased risk results in an overall incidence of 1 to 43% in various cancers (4). VTEs account for the majority (70–90%) of cases while ATEs account for only 10–30% (2). Many studies have suggested that the incidence of TEEs varies according to ethnic background. Some western studies have reported that African Americans and Caucasians have a higher incidence in comparison with Hispanics and Native Americans (5). On the other hand, most Asian studies have suggested a lower incidence of VTEs in Asian cancer patients as compared to western studies (6–9).

Along with typical TEE risk factors such as obesity, advanced age, and prolonged immobilization, cancer patients have additional risks that influence the development of TEEs. The type of malignancy, type of anti-neoplastic therapy, and presence of metastases have been considered major risk factors in cancer patients (10, 11). Many studies have shown that VTEs occur at a higher frequency in patients with cancers of the pancreas, ovaries, and kidneys (4, 12, 13). Certain anti-neoplastic medications also have a notably higher risk of causing TEEs. Moore et al. noted that in their study, 18.1% of patients who received cisplatin developed either VTEs or ATEs (13). Patients receiving chemotherapy regimens containing gemcitabine also were found to be at a higher risk of developing VTEs and ATEs than those receiving non-gemcitabine-containing regimens (14). Hormonal agents such as tamoxifen, newer anti-neoplastic agents such as anti-angiogenic agents, and anti-epidermal growth factor receptor antibodies have all been shown to increase the risk of VTEs and ATEs in cancer patients in several studies (15–18).

Additionally, patients with metastatic diseases were found to be at a higher risk for VTEs, the risk ranging from 1.4–21.5-fold, compared to patients with limited disease (5, 19).

Established guidelines recommend primary prophylaxis for all hospitalized cancer patients, including those with reduced mobility and central venous catheters (20). Routine pharmacologic thromboprophylaxis for outpatient cancer patients is still controversial and not widely recommended (21, 22). Several attempts have been made to establish a scoring system based on known risk factors to identify cancer patients at a higher risk for VTEs. The most popular are the Khorana Model, the Vienna modification of the Khorana Model, the PROTECHT scoring system, the CONKO score, and the most recently described but not validated COMPASS-CAT scoring system (21, 23–27). Whether thromboprophylaxis results in a significant reduction in VTEs among high-risk groups remains to be established.

The primary objective of this study was to determine the incidence of different types of TEEs in patients with solid tumors and established thromboembolism diagnoses at a single institution in the Middle East. In addition, the study identified the characteristics and risk factors related to thrombosis events.

## **Methods**

### **Study design**

This was a retrospective single-institution study conducted at a national referral center for cancer in Saudi Arabia. Patients with solid tumor diagnoses who had developed TEEs in either the inpatient or outpatient setting between January 2013 and September 2014 were eligible for inclusion.

### **Data collection**

The medical records of the eligible patients were reviewed for the following information: patient-related factors, which include age, sex, body mass index, co-morbid conditions, and Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group (ECOG) performance status; cancer related factors, which include the primary tumor site and disease stage; treatment-related factors, including anti-neoplastic agents and radiotherapy in use at the time of the TEE; recent surgical procedures, and blood transfusions. Finally, TEE-related factors, including the types (venous versus arterial) were reviewed. Other information, such as diagnosis method, clinical presentation, previous TEE history, history of current VTE prophylaxis, hospitalization at the time of TEE, relationship to the central venous catheters, and finally, the Khorana Score.

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles contained in the declaration of Helsinki (2000), Good Clinical Practice Guidelines and the policies and guidelines of the institution it was carried in. The study was approved by the institutional review board. In view of the retrospective nature of the study, a waiver of consent was obtained from the institutional review board. The identity of the

patients studied remained anonymous, since no identifying data or protected health information were recorded. All data were password secured to safeguard the confidentiality of the collected patient's data

## Statistical analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences software version 20 (SPSS: IBM Co., USA) was used to analyze the data. Continuous variables were described as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation, categorical variables were described as numbers (percentages), and cross-tabulation was used to summarize the relationships between two categorical variables.

## Results

A total of 312 medical records were reviewed, and 174 of them met the eligibility criteria. The most common thromboembolism (98.9%) was venous TEE, as seen in Table 1. The venous TEEs were most commonly presented as peripheral deep venous thrombosis (DVT) (50%), which combined upper and lower DVT, and pulmonary embolism (PE) (38.5%). Others were visceral veins thrombosis (17.2%), jugular thrombosis (8%), and renal vein thrombosis (3.4%). Nearly half of the patients were symptomatic, and the rest were diagnosed incidentally. The commonest diagnostic method was CT scan (69%). 31% of patients were admitted for management of their TEEs. Risk factors such as previous incidence of TEE at diagnosis and relation to central venous catheter were low (8.6% and 13.8%, respectively). 23% of patients were diagnosed with TEE during hospitalization. The majority of patients had either an intermediate or high Khorana Score (73%) with only 10.3% of them on a DVT prophylaxis treatment at the time of TEE diagnosis.

Table 1  
Incidence, characteristics, and risk factors related to 174 TEE events.

Item	No (%)
Type of TEE <sup>a</sup>	
Arterial	2 (1.1)
Venous	172 (98.9)
PE <sup>b</sup>	
	67 (38.5)
DVT <sup>c</sup>	
	87 (50)
Lower extremities DVT	44 (25.3)
Upper extremities DVT	29 (16.7)
Other venous thrombosis	
Jugular	14 (8)
Renal vein thrombosis	6 (3.4)
Visceral veins thrombosis	30 (17.2)
Clinical presentation	
Symptomatic	84 (48.3)
Incidental	90 (51.7)
Diagnostic method	
Computerized tomography	120 (69)
Ultrasonography	52 (29.9)
Computerized tomography angiography	2 (1.1)
History of TEEs	
	15 (8.6)
Current hospitalization at TEE	
	40 (23)
Admission because of TEE	
	54 (31)
Relation to central venous catheter	
	24 (13.8)

a. TEEs; Thromboembolic events, b. PE; pulmonary embolism, c. DVT; deep vein thrombosis, d. VTE; venous thromboembolism

Item	No (%)
Current VTE <sup>d</sup> prophylaxis at diagnosis	18 (10.3)
Khorana Score	
Low	37 (21.3)
Intermediate	93 (53.5)
High	34 (19.5)
Not identified	10 (5.7)
a. TEEs; Thromboembolic events, b. PE; pulmonary embolism, c. DVT; deep vein thrombosis, d. VTE; venous thromboembolism	

Baseline risk factors characteristic are shown in Table 2. The majority of patients were females (69%) and had ECOG performance status of 2 or higher (47.7%). The mean body mass index (BMI) was 28 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. Hypertension (27%) and diabetes mellitus (21.3%) were the most common associated co-morbidities. Colorectal cancer represented the largest group of cancer patients (19%), followed by breast cancer (18.4%) and lymphoma (10.9%); an almost similar incidence occurred among ovarian, stomach, ampullary, and lung cancers (~ 5–7%). Most of the TEE cases were found in patients with metastatic disease (71.8%). Of the 125 patients with metastatic disease 80 (64%) received anti-neoplastic therapy (targeted, hormonal, and/or chemotherapy), with a similar percentage for non-metastatic diseases. In all patient groups, 62% of patients were on chemotherapy within two months prior to their TEE diagnosis. Other treatment-related risk factors such as surgery, blood transfusion, and radiotherapy were low (< 20%). The most common chemotherapy agents were capecitabine and oxaliplatin (> 10%), which is in accordance with the most common cancer diagnosis colorectal cancer.

Table 2  
Baseline risk factors and characteristics of 174 TEE.

Item	No (%)
Age, median (range)	50 ± 16.5
Sex	
Male	54 (31)
Female	120 (69)
BMI <sup>a</sup> (mean ± SD <sup>b</sup> )	28 ± 6
Co-morbidities	
Hypertension	47 (27)
Diabetes Mellitus	37 (21.3)
Lung Disease	13 (7.5)
Atrial fibrillation/flutter	5 (2.9)
Heart Failure	3 (1.7)
Liver Disease	2 (1.1)
Others	4 (25.3)
Performance status (ECOG <sup>c</sup> )	
0	10 (5.7)
1	53 (30.5)
2	40 (23)
3	35 (20.1)
4	8 (4.6)
Unknown	28 (16.1)
Primary malignancy	

a. BMI; body mass index, b. SD; standard deviation, c. ECOG; Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group

<b>Item</b>	<b>No (%)</b>
Colorectal	33 (19)
Breast	32 (18.4)
Lymphoma	19 (10.9)
Ovary	13 (7.6)
Stomach	12 (6.9)
Ampulla of vater	12 (6.9)
Lung	11 (6.3)
Pancreas	8 (4.6)
Corpus uteri	5 (2.9)
Head and neck	3 (1.7)
Liver	2 (1.1)
Cervix uteri	2 (1.1)
Sarcoma	2 (1.1)
Esophagus	1 (0.6)
Others	19 (10.9)
<b>Cancer stage</b>	
Localized	22 (12.6)
Regional	27 (15.6)
Metastatic	125 (71.8)
<b>Treatment received within 60 days</b>	
Major surgery	22 (12.6)
Blood transfusion	31 (17.8)
Radiotherapy	11 (6.3)
Targeted therapy	27 (15.5)
Hormonal therapy	8 (4.6)

a. BMI; body mass index, b. SD; standard deviation, c. ECOG; Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group

Item	No (%)
Chemotherapy	108 (62)
Capecitabine	28 (16.1)
Oxaliplatin	27 (15.5)
Cyclophosphamide	17 (9.8)
5-Fluorouracil	16 (9.2)
Doxorubicin	15 (8.6)
Cisplatin	12 (6.9)
Carboplatin	11 (6.3)
Vincristine	10 (5.7)
Gemcitabine	7 (4)
6-Mercaptopurine	2 (1.1)
Cytarabine	1 (0.6)
Others	34 (19.5)
Not on treatment	44 (25)

a. BMI; body mass index, b. SD; standard deviation, c. ECOG; Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group

## Discussion

Our study represents an evaluation of all TEEs diagnosed in patients with solid tumors within a two-year period at a single institution. The study showed a majority of venous TEEs, with the most common being DVT (50%) and PE (38.5%). Incidental diagnoses and symptomatic diseases were similar (~ 50% each), with a 31% requiring hospitalization. Khorana Scores were intermediate and high (77.4%) in this population. The most common risk factors identified in the study included female sex, elevated BMI, hypertension and diabetes co-morbidities, metastatic stage, colorectal and breast cancer sites, and anti-neoplastic therapy administration within the last two months of presentation.

The study highlights several aspects, some of which are controversial, related to TEEs in cancer patients. One of these is sex. Many reports have suggested that TEEs are more common in females (12, 27); others, however, have not confirmed this finding (28–30). In our study, the majority of our subjects who had TEEs (69.0%) were females. Certain comorbidities (cardiovascular, hypertension, diabetes, and obesity) have been shown to considerably increase the risk for TEE development (31). In our study, 47 (27.0%) and 37 (21.3%) of the patients had hypertension and diabetes, respectively. These numbers are not different from the incidence of diabetes and hypertension in the general population in our region (32, 33).

Colorectal cancer was the commonest cancer seen in our study, with 33 patients representing 19% of our patient's population. This finding is not consistent with many other studies (5, 13, 34) and might indicate a higher risk for TEEs in our colorectal patients, which represents the second commonest solid tumor after breast cancer, seen at our institution(35). Breast cancer represents a low-risk type of malignancy in most risk models, such as Khorana Score (23, 27); however, it was the second most common malignancy (18.4%) with TEEs in our patient population.

We also looked at other reported risk factors that affect the incidence of TEEs in cancer patients. Performance status is one of them. Previous reports have demonstrated that poor performance status is an important risk factor for VTEs in cancer patients (34, 36). In our study, patients with ECOG performance status scores of 2 or more had the highest frequency (47.7%) of TEEs. However, the percentage of patients with ECOG performance status 1 was still relatively high (30.5%). Advanced stage and anti-neoplastic therapy are other important identified risk factors (13, 37, 38). In our study, 71.8% of patients had metastatic disease, 75% were on anti-neoplastic therapy, and 65.5% had metastatic disease and were on anti-neoplastic therapy. Of note, capecitabine and oxaliplatin were the most common agents used medications in our cohort of patients. An epirubicin, oxaliplatin, and capecitabine (EOX) regimen had been implicated, with an increased incidence of TEEs in gastric and esophageal cancer patients receiving pre-operative or peri-operative chemotherapy (39, 40). Most of the data related to capecitabine and oxaliplatin in colorectal cancer were, however, coupled with bevacizumab, which has thromboembolic properties in itself (41, 42). Twenty-four (13.8%) of the TEEs were catheter-related. Catheter-related thrombosis was low but more common than expected. Historically, catheter-related TEEs are more likely to be diagnosed incidentally and to occur in PICC lines than implantable catheters (43, 44). Hospitalization is also an important risk factor for TEEs in general (45), and more so for cancer-associated TEEs (32). This risk factor did represent one-fourth (23%) of all TEEs diagnosed in our study group.

TEEs in cancer patients adversely affect survival whether discovered symptomatically or incidentally through routine imaging (46, 47). In our study, nearly half of the TEE cases presented with incidental VTE. These findings were supported by other studies showing that incidental VTE accounts for half of TEE cases (48, 49). In addition to affecting survival, TEE in cancer patients places a humanistic and economic burden on patients and institutions (50). In our study, around one-third (31%) of our patients had to be admitted for their TEEs.

Several attempts have been made to identify patients at high risk of developing TEEs by developing risk assessment models. The most used model has been the Khorana scoring system (23). Many other risk assessment models have also been established (27, 29, 32). The majority of the patients in our study fell in the intermediate and high-risk score for the Khorana Model, constituting 77.4%. Recently, two trials tested the efficacy of oral anticoagulants in the prevention of venous thromboembolic events in patients with intermediate or high-risk Khorana Scores. In the CASSINI trial, rivaroxaban significantly reduced the number of VTEs and VTE-related deaths during the on-treatment period (50). Similarly, in the AVERT trial,

apixaban resulted in a significantly lower rate of VTE than the placebo in patients with intermediate and high-risk Khorana Scores (51).

Our study has several limitations. First, it is a single institution and a retrospective study. Additionally, the study does not calculate the incidence of TEE in our patients' population.

## Conclusion

Our study confirms the high burden of TEE in cancer patients. It also highlights the risk factors, including advanced cancer stage, cancer site, anti-neoplastic therapy, central venous catheters, and the role of certain chemotherapy agents, in the development of TEEs in cancer patients. It also supports the importance of risk assessment models in identifying cancer patients at risk of TEE, and the need for future studies to establish treatment prevention in those patients with intermediate and high scores.

## Abbreviations

**TEEs:** Thromboembolic events.

**VTEs:** Venous thromboembolisms

**ATEs:** Arterial thromboembolisms

**ECOG:** Eastern Cooperative Oncology Group

**BMI:** Body mass index

## Declarations

### **Ethics approval and consent to participate:**

The study was approved by the institutional review board under the number RAC 2141-138. In view of the retrospective nature of the study, a waiver of consent was obtained from the institutional review board.

### **Consent for publication:**

Not applicable

### **Availability of data and materials:**

All data generated and analyzed during this study are available upon request.

### **Competing interests:**

The authors have no financial or proprietary interests in any material discussed in this article.

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## Authors' contributions:

All authors contributed to the design and collecting data of the study. ME was responsible for the statistics part. SB and FM had the lead in writing and editing the manuscript.

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