Prevalence and Risk Factors of Electrocardiogram Abnormalities in Patients with Rheumatoid Arthritis: A Machine Learning Study with Follow-Up Data

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Research article

Keywords: rheumatoid arthritis, electrocardiogram, risk factors, machine learning, Cox regression

Posted Date: September 29th, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-934178/v1>

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Electrocardiogram (ECG) abnormalities could predict some subsequent cardiovascular events. Cardiac involvement is a major extra-articular manifestation in rheumatoid arthritis (RA). We aimed to determine the prevalence of three major ECG abnormalities in RA patients, discover the associated ECG abnormalities associated with machine learning (ML) approaches, and then examine these preselected factors in the follow-up patients with traditional Cox regression.

METHODS

Consecutive RA patients' records were retrieved from the hospital database; about one-third of patients had follow-up data. Abnormal ECGs with clinical significance were grouped into non-specific ST-segment/T-wave changes, QT interval prolongation, and QRS-T angle increase. Machine learning approaches assessed the associated factors of these abnormalities. The top-important factors selected by the most optimal ML would be used to construct Cox regression models.

RESULTS

Two hundred twenty-six patients were enrolled for the first step cross-sectional study. Non-specific ST-T changes (27%) were the most prevalent abnormalities among patients with abnormal ECGs. Random forest models had the best performance in the discovery of associated factors for three outcomes. Cox regression validated that rheumatoid factor and low-density lipoprotein were common risk factors within those three abnormalities. Hypertension, ESR, and serum immunoglobulin G were influential factors for non-specific ST-T changes, prolonged QT interval, and increased QRS-T angle specifically.

CONCLUSIONS

Non-specific ST-T changes were the most common abnormalities seen in ECGs of RA patients. Our finding suggests that rheumatoid factor, LDL, hypertension, and inflammatory indicators are important risk factors for these ECG abnormalities.

Significance And Innovations

- RA patients would be vulnerable to cardiovascular diseases. ECG is a feasible method to detect cardiac involvement. Previous studies have reported an association between ECG abnormalities and subsequent cardiovascular events.
- To our knowledge, this is the first endeavor to investigate the prevalence of several common ECG abnormalities in RA patients and the risk factors by machine learning approaches and Cox regression.

- If further studies support our findings, it might be possible to identify those at higher risk of developing ECG abnormalities earlier to take appropriate action to prevent it.

Background

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a chronic, inflammatory, autoimmune disease with synovial inflammation and joint destruction[1], affecting nearly 1% of the world's population[2]. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a major extra-articular manifestation and comorbidity in RA, increasing morbidity and premature CVD-related mortality[3, 4]. Except for the traditional cardiovascular risk factors, like diabetes, hypertension, and hyperlipidemia, the severity of inflammation in RA patients would also increase the risk of CVD[5–8].

Electrocardiogram (ECG) is a routine for detecting and diagnosing abnormalities in the cardiac system. Resting-ECG alterations could help physicians perform a timely intervention on those with high CVD risk. For example, tented T-wave and/or ST-segment changes have been proven to increase the all-cause mortality and be independent risk factors for early CVD events and incident coronary heart disease (CHD) in middle-aged and older individuals [9–12]. Longer heart-rate corrected QT (QTc) intervals have been discovered in RA patients than healthy controls[13]; QTc prolongation was even associated with all-cause death in RA patients [14, 15]. Moreover, QRS-T angle is a predictor of sudden death in a middle-aged general population[16] and could assess the dispersion of myocardial repolarisation, a critical factor in arrhythmogenicity[17]. Since QRS-T angle has been established as a repolarisation marker[18], there are still limited surveys on this change in RA patients. Therefore, as an affordable and non-invasive examination independent of the operator and the patient's condition, ECG could provide primary but stable evidence for consequent tests or treatments.

Multivariate logistic regression (LR) and Cox proportional hazard (CoxPH) regression are traditional methods for relative factors analysis [19, 20]. However, certain assumptions, such as no multicollinearity among variables, must be satisfied; otherwise, the result would lose robustness. Furthermore, neither LR nor CoxPH regression could not be applied to sparse and high-dimension data directly. Machine learning (ML) has been widely performed for nonlinear prediction tasks in recent years, being more efficient in predictive modeling without the above assumptions[21].

In the present study, we will perform multiple ML methods and conventional LR to screen variables related to three types of ECG abnormalities in a cross-sectional RA population; then validate our findings in the follow-up cohort with conventional CoxPH models.

Methods

Patient selection

RA patients' records were retrieved from the database of the Division of Rheumatology of Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-sen University from January 2015 to September 2020. Eligible patients were 1) aged ≥ 18 , 2) met the 2018 American College of Rheumatology and European League Against Rheumatism

(ACR/EULAR) classification criteria[22], and 3) had available ECG records at the time of diagnosis or the follow-up visit. Patients were excluded if they 1) had a CVD event or severe valvular disease; 2) were with hepatic and/or renal failure, and/or abnormal serum electrolytes, 3) were pregnant, 4) were with malignant tumors, 5) were with thyroid disorders (e.g., Grave's disease).

Sample size

The sample sizes were estimated by PASS 15 software (<https://www.ncss.com>), with the statistical power ($1-\beta$) set 0.90, type I error (α) set 0.05, and assuming that the prevalence of non-specific ST-T changes was about 18% among RA patients[23]. The software calculated that a total sample size of at least 174 would suffice. Finally, we recruited 226 patients for the present study.

Data collection

We used a standard protocol to collect data (characteristics were in Table 1), including demographics, disease-related conditions, medication history, laboratory tests, complications, lifestyles, and standard digitally available recorded 12-lead resting ECG reports. Two experienced physicians rechecked computer-assisted reading of ECG reports.

Table 1
Candidate variables

Characteristics	Variables (N = 82)*
Demographic	(1) age# ; (2) disease duration#; (3) gender; (4) menopausal status for females; (5) BMI#
Disease-related	(6) DAS28-ESR#; (7) DAS28-CRP#; (8) rheumatoid nodules; (9) CRP elevation; (10) CRP#; (11) ESR elevation; (12) ESR#; (13) Baker's cyst; (14) overlap syndrome; (15) vasculitis; (16)RA-ILD; (17) RA-PAH; (18) Felty syndrome
Long-term medication history	(19) initial treatment; (20) regular treatment; (21)period of GC usage#; (22)MTX; (23) LEF; (24) SASP; (25) GTW; (26) HCQ; (27) TGP; (28) Iguratimod; (29) NSAIDs; (30) bDMARDs; (31) types of bDMARDs; (32)Statins; (33) PPI
Laboratorial tests	(34)abnormal WBC#; (35) abnormal PLT #; (36) leukocyturia#; (37) hematuriesis#; (38)hypoproteinemia; (39) BUN elevation; (40) sUA elevation; (41) sUA#; (42) CysC elevation; (43) β 2MG elevation; (44) hypercholesterolemia #; (45) hypertriglyceridemia; (46) low HDL#; (47) high LDL#; (48) serum IgG#; (49) serum IgA#; (50) serum IgM#; (51) serum C3#; (52) serum C4#; (53) serum total complement#; (54) RF positive; (55) RF#; (56)FER; (57) CEA; (58) AFP; (59) RF-IgA; (60) RF-IgG; (61) RF-IgM; (62) ANA; (63) anti-histone; (64) anti-dsDNA; (65) anti-U1RNP; (66) anti-SSA; (67) anti-scl-70; (68) GPI; (69) AKA; (70) anti-RA33; (71) ACAP
Comorbidity and lifestyle	(72) hypertension; (73) types of hypertension; (74) grades of hypertension#; (75) risk groups of hypertension#; (76) not controlled hypertension; (77) pathoglycemia; (78)types of pathoglycemia; (79) anemia; (80) severities of anemia#; (81) current smoking habits; (82) current drinking habits.
<p>*: all variables were discrete. #: ranked variables.</p> <p>RA: rheumatoid arthritis; BMI: body mass index; DAS: disease activity score; ESR: erythrocyte sedimentation rate; CRP:C-reactive protein; ILD: intestinal lung disease; PAH: pulmonary arterial hypertension; GC: glucocorticoid; MTX: methotrexate; LEF: leflunomide; SASP: salicylazosulfapyridine; GTW: tripterygium glycosides; HCQ: hydroxychloroquine; TGP: total glycosides of paeony; NSAIDs: non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs; bDMARDs: biological disease modifying antirheumatic drug; PPI: proton pump inhibitor; WBC: white blood cell; PLT: platelets; BUN: blood urea nitrogen; sUA: serum uric acid; CysC: cystatin C; β2MG: β2-microglobulin; HDL: high-density lipoprotein; LDL: low-density lipoprotein; Ig: immunoglobulin; C3&4: complement 3 and 4; RF: rheumatoid factor; FER: ferritin; CEA: carcinoembryonic antigen; AFP: alpha fetoprotein; ANA: anti-nuclear antibody; dsDNA: double-stranded DNA; GPI: glucose-6-phosphate isomerase; AKA: antikeratin antibodies; ACAP: anti-cyclic citrullinated peptide antibody.</p>	

Missing Data

Proportions of missing values were less than 5% across all variables. Multiple imputations were implemented using the 'Multivariate Imputation by Chained Equations' algorithm in R package 'mice' to account for missing data to minimise bias and precision reduction.

Outcome definition

ECGs were categorised into the normal group and the abnormal one. The abnormal ECGs were further defined if patients were a) with non-specific ST-T changes, b) after heart-rate corrected by Bazetts formula ($QTc = QT/\sqrt{RR}$), QTc interval ≥ 430 ms is considered prolonged QTc (since there is no consensus on defining a normal QTc range, with proposed upper limits of normal extending from 430 to 470 ms[24]); c) spatial QRS-T angle is $\geq 90^\circ$ [25, 26] is defined increased. When more than one abnormality was observed in the same participant, each would be recorded separately.

ML modeling process

To assess the influential factors for three ECG abnormalities, we respectively performed five ML methods, including random forest (RF), stochastic boosting models ('ada'), the latest absolute shrinkage and selection operator (LASSO), extreme Gradient Boosting tree ('xgbtree'), and neural net ('nnet'). Then we used stacking models (using logistic regression as the core algorithm) to ensemble models mentioned above. Therefore, we created six models.

To begin with, we randomly divided samples into the training set and the validation set (ratio 70:30) with the same proportion of positive outcomes by synthetic minority oversampling technique (SMOTE) for reducing the negative effect of the imbalance class of the constructed models[27]. The training set was used to model with 5-fold three times repeated cross-validation.

ML model performance evaluation

Discrimination indicators, including the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (ROC-AUC), precision, accuracy, recall rate, F1-Measure, and Brier's score for indicating the calibration of 6 models, will be evaluated in the validation set.

Once the most optional models for three outcomes were selected, we screened the top important factors for consequent survival analyses in the follow-up cohort to validate and calculate the hazard ratio (HR) by CoxPH regression. All the analysis was conducted by R 3.6.1 (R Core Team, Vienna, Austria). Package 'caret', 'coxph', 'DwMR' were used for data analysis. The detailed study flow diagram is illustrated in Fig. 1.

Statistical analysis

Statistics were presented as mean $\pm$ standard error (SD) for continuous variables with normal distribution, median [Interquartile Range, IQR] for those without normal distribution, and percentage for categorical variables. A 2-tailed p -value < 0.05 was considered to indicate statistical significance.

Results

Characteristics of patients

A total of 226 RA patients participated in the present study. 53.1% of them were female. 96.9% of participants were aged ≥ 40 . Follow-up data were available for 95 patients; the median follow-up interval

was 13 months (12 to 22). The baseline characteristics of the patients are presented in Supplementary Table 1, and follow-up information is shown in Supplementary Table 2.

Prevalence of ECG abnormalities

The prevalence of three types of ECG abnormalities is shown in Fig. 2. 7 of 226 patients at baseline and 4 of 95 follow-up patients had more than two ECG abnormalities. All two follow-up patients with increased QRS-T angle had been diagnosed at baseline; on the contrary, follow-up patients with the other two abnormalities were all new-onset in the follow-up.

Models' performance and algorithm selection

RF generated the highest AUCs in predicting non-specific ST-T changes(0.974), QT interval(0.987), and QRS-T angle (0.915), with the lowest Brier's scores in all of these three models. The detailed models' performance is shown in Table 2. Finally, we selected the RF algorithm to construct models.

Table 2
Models' performance

Nonspecific ST-T changes					
Models	AUC	Brier's score	Precision	Recall rate	F1-measure
RF	0.974	0.416	0.711	0.969	0.821
ADA	0.947	0.574	0.778	0.933	0.848
LASSO	0.942	0.577	0.789	0.922	0.850
NNET	0.886	0.712	0.756	0.907	0.824
Stacking model (LR)	0.970	0.668	0.811	0.961	0.879
Prolonged QTc interval					
RF	0.987	0.398	0.857	0.996	0.923
LASSO	0.979	0.586	0.994	0.913	0.955
NNET	0.982	0.745	0.993	0.913	0.955
Stacking model (LR)	0.962	0.593	0.952	0.833	0.889
Increased QRS-T angle					
RF	0.915	0.314	0.611	0.997	0.758
ADA	0.873	0.516	0.667	0.857	0.750
LASSO	0.857	0.459	0.667	0.823	0.774
xGBTree	0.886	0.567	0.661	0.786	0.688
Stacking model (LR)	0.891	0.478	0.778	0.778	0.778
RF: random forest; ADA: stochastic boosting models;xGBTree: eXtreme gradient boosting; NNET: neural net; LASSO: least absolute shrinkage and selection operator. AUC: area under the receiver operating characteristic curve.					

Table 3 Adjusted hazard ratios of three outcomes

	Nonspecific ST-T changes		Prolonged QTc interval		Increased QRS-T angle	
	AIC = 203.6		AIC = 627.7		AIC = 699.7	
	<i>HR [95%CI]</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>HR [95%CI]</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>HR [95%CI]</i>	<i>p</i>
Rheumatoid factor, IU/mL*						
Normal (< 16)	Ref.		Ref.		Ref.	
~100	0.83 [0.80, 0.85]	< 0.001	1.22 [0.43, 3.47]	0.706	1.23 [0.79, 1.90]	0.355
~300	0.84 [0.81, 0.87]	< 0.001	9.69 [6.12, 15.33]	< 0.001	1.72 [1.13, 2.62]	0.011
~600	1.02 [0.97, 1.07]	0.463	4.75 [2.33, 9.71]	< 0.001	2.91 [1.54, 5.50]	0.001
~900	0.91 [0.84, 0.98]	0.017	12.20 [6.29, 23.67]	< 0.001	4.86 [1.34, 17.61]	0.016
>900	27.78 [25.00, 30.87]	< 0.001	9.52 [1.32, 68.51]	0.025	Inf [0.00, Inf]	0.992
Period of GC usage, months*						
No	Ref.		Ref.			
~6	0.96 [0.90, 1.02]	0.209	0.95 [0.86, 1.04]	0.283		
~12	1.18 [1.13, 1.24]	< 0.001	0.84 [0.77, 0.91]	< 0.001		
~24	1.39 [1.32, 1.45]	< 0.001	1.00 [0.91, 1.09]	0.923		
>24	0.31 [0.25, 0.38]	< 0.001	0.97 [0.88, 1.08]	0.605		
Grades of hypertension						
No	Ref.					
1	0.99 [0.33, 3.02]	0.988				
2	0.15 [0.05, 0.53]	0.003				
3	0.14 [0.03, 0.65]	0.012				

High low-density lipoprotein (LDL), mmol/L						
optimal (~ 2.59 mmol/L)	Ref.		Ref.		Ref.	
near optimal (-3.37)	0.34 [0.14, 0.82]	0.017	0.47 [0.01, 15.78]	0.675	2.17 [1.26, 3.73]	0.005
borderline high (~ 4.12)	1.37 [0.24, 7.89]	0.723	0.01 [0.00, 8213.42]	0.475	13.43 [7.69, 23.44]	< 0.001
high (~ 4.90)	0.00 [0.00, Inf]	0.556	0.55 [0.07, 4.49]	0.574	0.00 [0.00, 0.00]	< 0.001
very high (> 4.90)	1051.55 [0.00, Inf]	0.776	1.54 [0.25, 9.54]	0.64	0.00 [0.00, Inf]	0.926
Gender						
Female			Ref.			
Male			0.21 [0.10, 0.47]	< 0.001		
BMI, kg/m ² , n (%)*						
normal (18.5 ~ 23.9)			Ref.			
underweight (< 18.5)			1.17 [1.07, 1.28]	< 0.001		
overweight (24 ~ 27.9)			0.88 [0.75, 1.03]	0.099		
obese (> = 28)			1.29 [0.07, 22.60]	0.86		
ESR						
~15(male) or ~ 20(female)			Ref.			
~30			1.52 [0.58, 3.99]	0.39		
~50			6.38 [4.03, 10.09]	< 0.001		
~70			5.80 [3.63, 9.26]	< 0.001		
~90			1.61 [0.72, 3.63]	0.248		
>90			0.57 [0.13, 2.54]	0.46		
sUA, µmol/L*						

<420	Ref.		
~500	2.01 [1.20, 3.35]	0.008	
~ 600	1.58 [0.70, 3.58]	0.273	
~700	0.00 [0.00, Inf]	0.937	
Hypoalbumin*			
No	Ref.		
Yes	0.97 [0.90, 1.05]	0.42	
Anemia			
No	Ref.		
Mild	0.26 [0.14, 0.47]	< 0.001	
Moderate	2.65 [0.86, 8.14]	0.09	
Severe	Inf [0.00, Inf]	0.868	
CRP, mg/L, n (%)			
<=6		Ref.	
~10		1.70 [1.07, 2.71]	0.025
~20		0.62 [0.35, 1.08]	0.09
~30		0.00 [0.00, Inf]	0.701
~50		0.00 [0.00, Inf]	0.85
>50		0.00 [0.00, Inf]	0.89
Serum immunoglobulin G (IgG)			
normal		Ref.	
decreased		6.33 [4.17, 9.62]	< 0.001

increased	3.54 [1.92, 6.53]	< 0.001
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**: After entering variables into the Cox regression equations, the proportional hazards (PH) assumption would be checked using statistical tests based on the scaled Schoenfeld residuals. R function 'cox.zph' was used. P < 0.05 is deemed violating the PH assumption so that we created an time-variable interaction item (time-dependent variables), then replace the original variables with these items.*

RF models and variables importance

As shown in Supplementary Fig. 1, we included all variables in the RF models ensuring the lowest error rate. After tuning parameters, we constructed three optimal RF models; parameters of models and the performance of RF models can be seen in Supplementary Table 4.

Figure 3 showed the top-6 important variables of three RF models. Age and indices of inflammation (CRP, ESR) were in the top rank of the three models. Supplementary Fig. 2 showed the top-15 important variables of RF models.

Cox regression for validating factors found associated with ECG abnormalities in RF models

We selected 'stable' factors whose relative importance was >= 5 to perform univariate and multivariate Cox regression. Variables and crude hazard ratio (HR) were shown in Supplementary Table 5; the adjusted ones were compiled in Table 3.

Rheumatoid factor was significant for three kinds of abnormalities; however, its effect was opposite in ST-T changes and the other, except for the very high level (> 900 IU/mL, HR[95%CI] = 27.78 [25.00, 30.87], p< 0.001). The effect of LDL is also different within non-specific ST-T changes and increased QRS-T angle. Slightly increased LDL level (near-optimal) is a protective factor for ST-T changes (HR[95%CI] = 0.34 [0.14, 0.82], p= 0.017) but a strong risk factor for QRS-T angle increase (HR[95%CI] = 2.17 [1.26, 3.73], p= 0.005). Underweight patients might have a higher risk for QTc prolongation (HR[95%CI] = 1.17 [1.07, 1.28], p= < 0.001).

Discussion

In the present retrospective cohort study, we aimed to report the prevalence and associated factors of abnormal ventricular repolarisation, which consisted of non-specific ST-T change, prolonged QTc interval, QRS-T angle, etc. The prevalence of newly diagnosed non-specific ST-T changes at baseline and follow-up was higher than reported studies (27% and 20% vs. 17%[23] to 18%[28]). Several factors can explain this difference. Our study population had more moderate and active patients than the previous study cohorts[23] (89.9% vs. 62%, evaluated with DAS28-CRP). When it comes to new-onset prolonged QTc interval at baseline and follow-up, the incidence in our cohort was marked lower than the previous

literature (6.2% and 7.4% vs. 30%[28] and cumulative 47.5%[28]), probably because, compared with ours, Chauhan K. et al. had a cohort with a nearly double incidence of hypertension (43% vs. 22.5%) which plays a role in the mechanism of QT interval prolongation[29]. Not yet had published study revealed the occurrence of increased QRS-T angle in RA patients. Our cohort discovered that 5.3% of patients were with increased QRS-T angle.

Non-specific ST-T changes are common findings even in the general population[30]. Previous studies have indicated that these changes significantly correlate with cardiovascular morbidity and mortality[11, 12, 31, 32]. Although the clinical significance of non-specific ST-T changes in patients with RA without CVD is still not certain, it is enticing to speculate that they represent subclinical CVD. QT/QTc interval prolongation is also an independent cardiovascular risk factor [15, 33–35] and is mainly related to cardiac arrest, especially in the RA population. Emerging data have demonstrated the strong relationship between QTc and pro- and anti-inflammatory cytokines[36, 37]. Also, the presence of parasympathetic dysfunction, one of the autonomic dysfunctions in RA patients, could influence the QTc interval[38].

RF models could help primarily discover associated factors. Inflammatory markers, including ESR and CRP, were important for three kinds of ECG abnormalities. When validated in follow-up patients with multivariate CoxPH regression, increased concentration of rheumatoid factor was found a risk factor for three abnormalities, except the concentration was lower than 900 IU/ml for ST-T changes. The impact of CRP and ESR were significantly associated with QRS-T angle increase and QTc prolongation, respectively; however, due to the limited sample size, we did not discover a significant concentration-effect relationship. ESR and CRP are part of extended DAS-28, but their importance varies from different ECG abnormalities.

Age and disease duration is not critical for the higher risk of non-specific ST-T changes, consistent with the previous study[23]. However, another factor, GC usage period, which could partly reflect age, disease duration, and disease activity, influences differently in ST-T changes and QTc prolongation. A regular, adequate GC therapy might be more vital.

A population-based study has shown that LDL levels are independently associated with subclinical atherosclerosis[39], one of the magnifications of non-specific ST-T abnormalities[12], also statistically influencing non-specific ST-T changes in our study, even a near-optimal controlled level of LDL is protective. Nevertheless, when it comes to QRS-T angle increase, LDL should be strictly controlled at or under the optimal level.

Hypertension is a well-documented risk factor for ST-T change[40]; in our cohort, those in graded class-2 or low-risk groups have a higher risk; but hypertensive patients from the high-risk group had a protective effect on ST-T changes. Such difference could be probably because these patients were more cautious and active in controlling blood pressure.

Female has been reported positively related to QTc prolongation in RA[23]. These gender differences appear to correlate with age-dependent changes in serum levels of sex hormones. Androgens would

accelerate cardiac repolarisation processes and shorten potential action durations by the effect of testosterone on calcium currents[41]. Moreover, low BMI is an independent predictor of QTc interval prolongation in our cohort, similar to a cross-sectional study in women with eating disorders has demonstrated[42]. Therefore, appropriate nutrition enhancement for underweighted RA patients is recommended for lowering the risk of cardiac conduction abnormalities.

sUA level has a positive correlation with prolonged QTc interval, especially in men[43]. Our result also identified that even in those with sUA slightly increased, the risk of QTc prolongation would be twice. QTc intervals were found shortening in female subjects with sickle cell anemia[44]. Those with QTc prolongation in our cohort were mostly women (6 of 7); therefore, mild anemia might have a protective effect on QTc interval.

The impact of immunoglobulin G on QTc prolongation in RA patients is a novel finding in our study. Abnormal levels of serum IgG are one of the early markers of autoimmune diseases[45], especially the increased ones. Aberrant glycosylated and autoimmunity-triggered IgG[46] could be responsible for inflammation-associated atherosclerosis cardiovascular symptoms[47].

In conclusion, machine-learning analysis can be used when multicollinearity occurs or in a high dimension data warehouse. For instance, the disease duration may depend on age; and preselected the essential variables for the following Cox regression. Another strength of the present study is the comparison between several machine learning approaches since each has its unique pros and cons. As a relatively affordable cardiovascular examination, ECG may be recommended for all the RA patients in their first visit and follow-up visits because such a systemic-involved and chronic disease needs interdisciplinary cooperation to assess the condition holistically and longitudinally. Assisted by the machine-learning method and validated by traditional CoxPH regression, some objective information might be acquired before inviting cardiologist consultations and further expensive or intrusive examinations.

There are several limitations of our study that can impact its generalizability to other populations and the interpretation of its clinical significance. First, the sample size was insufficient, especially the follow-up subjects. Second, we only used resting-12-lead ECGs rather than 24-hour ECG monitoring (Holter), which can measure diurnal variations of ECG intervals. It may cause a higher 'false-negative rate' when we diagnosed ECGs. Third, we cannot exclude the possibility of patient selection bias because only a single tertiary referral center participated in this study. Therefore, the prevalence of ECG abnormalities in this study cannot represent the real rate in China. Moreover, although ECG is an affordable, stable, and quick test along with no harm, the information that ECG could offer is limited. Other cardiac imaging examinations, for example, echocardiogram, cardiac magnetic resonance imaging, or radionuclide perfusion, could provide more details about the cardiac lesion. Further longitudinal, prospective studies assessing the role of potential risk factors will help clarify the mechanism of ECG abnormalities among RA patients.

Conclusion

Our data reveals that non-specific ST-T changes were the most common abnormalities seen in RA patients' ECGs, followed by QTc prolongation and QRS-T angle increase. Inflammatory factors and rheumatoid factors are more important than disease activity for these ECG abnormalities, along with LDL levels. Moreover, relatively strict management of LDL and uric acid may benefit RA patients. Efforts to monitor the ECGs of these key populations need to be instituted.

Abbreviations

ECG: Electrocardiogram

RA: Rheumatoid arthritis

ML: machine learning

CVD: cardiovascular disease

CHD: coronary heart disease

QTc: heart-rate corrected QT

LR: logistic regression

CoxPH: Cox proportional hazard regression

ACR: American College of Rheumatology

EULAR: European League Against Rheumatism

RF: random forest

LASSO: latest absolute shrinkage and selection operator

ADA: stochastic boosting models

Xgbtree: extreme Gradient Boosting tree

Nnet: neural net

SMOTE: synthetic minority oversampling technique

ROC-AUC: the area under the receiver operating characteristic curve

HR: hazard ratio

SD: standard error

IQR: interquartile range

DAS: disease activity score

ESR: erythrocyte sedimentation rate

CRP: C-reactive protein

LDL: low-density lipoprotein

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

All patients provided informed consent for the collection and use of clinical and laboratory data. The procedure complies with the declaration of Helsinki and is approved by the ethics committee The Third Affiliated Hospital of Sun Yat-sen University.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

None.

Authors' contributions

HZY and HZR were equally contributed to the manuscript. HZY and HZR analysed, modelled and interpreted the patient data and were both major contributors in writing the manuscript. HZR visualised the results. GXH and WWZ screened patients, confirmed the ECG results and collected the clinical and laboratory data. CY and PYF were responsible for the conception and amendment of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Figures

Figure 1

The study flow diagram.

ECG abnormalities in RA patients

Figure 2

The prevalence of ECG abnormalities

Figure 3

The top-6 important variables selected by three RF models. a. nonspecific ST-T changes; b. prolonged QTc interval; c. increased QRS-T angle.

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