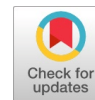


# Tacrolimus Interaction with Azole Antifungals in Kidney Transplant Recipients: Is Fluconazole or Clotrimazole a Worse Offender?



Jane Revollo, Vinaya Rao, Amy Krauss, Alison L. Apple, R. Ph., Benjamin Duhart

**Abstract:** The utilization of rabbit ant thymocyte globulin induction with tacrolimus-based maintenance immunosuppression may increase the risk for opportunistic fungal infections, particularly oral-esophageal candidiasis. Both are commonly prescribed for deceased donor kidney transplant recipients Tacrolimus (TAC), a calcineurin inhibitor, is metabolized hepatically by cytochrome P450 3A4/5 enzymes. Due to this, a drug interaction can occur with TAC and either fluconazole (FCZ) or clotrimazole (CTMZ). Both are commonly used for antifungal prophylaxis. While both FCZ and CTMZ inhibit CYP3A4/5, systemic absorption of CTMZ is minimal, theoretically limiting the interaction with TAC and reducing the need for dose readjustments. Medical records for adult patients receiving a renal transplant between March 2009 and September 2011 were retrospectively reviewed for TAC dose adjustments following discontinuation of the antifungal agent required to maintain therapeutic TAC blood levels. The change in TAC dose: trough ratio 4-8 weeks after azole discontinuation was greater in patients receiving FCZ compared to CTMZ (FCZ +92.9% vs CTMZ +43.4%,  $p=0.004$ ). In addition, the proportion of patients requiring  $\geq 30\%$  TAC dose increase was 70% with FCZ versus 45% with CTMZ ( $p = 0.006$ ). The choice of antifungal also did not affect the number of sub-therapeutic TAC levels, the number of patients with sub-therapeutic levels pre- or post-discontinuation, or the incidence of biopsy-proven allograft rejection.

**Keywords:** Tacrolimus, Fluconazole, Clotrimazole, Kidney transplant

## I. INTRODUCTION

Tacrolimus (TAC) is an oral calcineurin inhibitor commonly used as a maintenance immunosuppressant in renal transplant recipients.

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\*Correspondence Author(s)

**Jane Revollo**, Pharm.D., CPP, Department of Pharmacy, Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Center, Charlotte, NC, United States of America (USA). Email: [jane.revollo@atriumhealth.org](mailto:jane.revollo@atriumhealth.org)

**Vinaya Rao**, MD, Department of Nephrology, Medical University of South Carolina, Charleston, SC, United States of America (USA). Email: [raov@musc.edu](mailto:raov@musc.edu)

**Alison Apple**, RPh, MS, Department of Pharmacy, Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, United States of America (USA). Email: [Alison.apple@pennmedicine.upenn.edu](mailto:Alison.apple@pennmedicine.upenn.edu)

**Amy Krauss**, PharmD, BCPS, Department of Pharmacy, Gritman Medical Center, Moscow, ID, United States of America (USA). Email: [amy.krauss@gritman.org](mailto:amy.krauss@gritman.org)

**Benjamin Duhart**\*, Jr., MS, PharmD, Department of Clinical Pharmacy and Translational Research, University of Tennessee Health Science Center College of Pharmacy, Memphis, TN, United States of America (USA). E-mail: [btduhart@uthsc.edu](mailto:btduhart@uthsc.edu)

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The potent immunosuppression provided by TAC-based maintenance immunosuppression and rabbit antithymocyte globulin induction prevents graft rejection in deceased donor kidney transplant recipients; however, it may also increase the patients' risk of opportunistic bacterial, viral, and fungal infections. To limit the risk of fungal infections, particularly oral-esophageal candidiasis, renal transplant patients at our institution are given anti-fungal prophylaxis for the first 60 to 90 days after kidney transplant. Interactions between TAC and anti-fungal agents are widely accepted, yet significant inter-patient variability in the effect of the interaction exists. The magnitude of interaction between FCZ and CYP3A4/5 substrates is believed to be concentration-dependent, which is determined by FCZ dose as well as renal clearance (the primary route of FCZ elimination). Furthermore, although drug interactions with FCZ are thought to be primarily mediated through CYP3A4, CYP3A5 has also been shown to play a significant role in TAC metabolism.

Before August 2010, fluconazole (FCZ) 200 mg daily (adjusted to renal function) for 3 months' post-transplant was our standard anti-fungal prophylaxis regimen for kidney recipients. TAC is metabolized by several CYP450 enzymes, including CYP3A4 and CYP3A5, while FCZ is a known CYP3A4/5 inhibitor. Upon discontinuation of FCZ at post-operative day 90, the patient's dose of TAC generally required an upward titration in the outpatient clinic to maintain therapeutic levels of immunosuppression. The clinician's impression was that this precaution was not being consistently performed in a timely fashion, resulting in prolonged sub-therapeutic levels for numerous patients. Due to this, a switch was made in the anti-fungal regimen to clotrimazole (CTMZ) troches, in hopes of reducing the magnitude of the drug interaction between TAC and FCZ, as well as the urgency for associated dose readjustments. While CTMZ has also been shown to inhibit CYP3A4 and, presumably, 3A5, this agent undergoes minimal systemic absorption compared to FCZ tablets, theoretically limiting the potential for interaction with TAC and reducing the need for dose readjustments. Several studies have demonstrated an interaction between TAC and FCZ, as well as TAC and CTMZ in renal transplant patients. Authors reported that a decrease in the TAC dose of 40-75% was necessary to avoid supra-therapeutic TAC levels when initiating FCZ [1-2]. When CMTZ was initiated, authors reported ~2.4-fold increases in TAC levels in kidney recipients [3] and ~2-fold increase in liver recipients [4], respectively.



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Whereas in another case report, authors stated that the TAC level decreased by 60% upon the discontinuation of prophylactic CTMZ [5].

This study aimed to compare the change in the TAC dose-to-blood level ratio and the associated TAC dose adjustments necessary to achieve therapeutic TAC levels after discontinuation of either FCZ or CTMZ in adult renal transplant recipients. In addition, we determined the prevalence of therapeutic, supra-therapeutic and sub-therapeutic TAC levels during the restabilization period. We also examined whether the choice of antifungal agent was associated with differing clinical outcomes, including the overall incidence of graft rejection during the first-year post-transplant, and whether sub-therapeutic levels during the period leading up to the restabilization of TAC dosing were associated with an increased incidence of rejection.

## II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

A retrospective chart review of adult renal transplant recipients receiving tacrolimus and FCZ or CTMZ antifungal prophylaxis was performed. Patients were identified using the Transplant Institute and the United Network for Organ Sharing's computerised databases. Data were collected from Cerner, Telereports, the Transplant Electronic Chart (post-April 2011), and outpatient paper medical charts or their electronic archives (pre-April 2011).

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center (IRB number 12-02182-XM). Patients were included if they had received a solitary kidney transplant at Methodist University Hospital and received post-transplant immunosuppression with TAC and anti-fungal prophylaxis with either FCZ or CTMZ. Exclusion criteria included receipt of an immunosuppressive agent other than TAC or an antifungal other than FCZ or CTMZ, a fungal infection requiring therapeutic doses of antifungal medications within the first 5 months post-transplant, failure to follow-up in the outpatient transplant clinic for at least 12 months post-transplant, renal allograft loss within the first 3 months post-transplant, documented medication non-compliance, non-continuous use of another potentially interacting medication pre- and post-antifungal discontinuation, or fewer than 3 TAC blood levels before and in the 4-8 week window after antifungal discontinuation.

The primary endpoint was the average change in the TAC dose-to-trough level ratio from pre-antifungal discontinuation to the 4–8-week post-discontinuation period for patients receiving FCZ versus CTMZ. Secondary endpoints included comparison of the number of patients with sub-therapeutic TAC levels 4-8 weeks and 6 months after anti-fungal discontinuation, the number of sub-therapeutic TAC levels within 8 weeks and 6 months of discontinuation, the number of patients requiring  $\geq 30\%$  increase in TAC dose, and the rate of biopsy-proven acute rejection in patients receiving FCZ or CTMZ.

Data were collected on adult renal transplant patients who received their transplant between August 2010 and September 2011 (CTMZ group). Data were also collected on an equivalent number of patients who received their transplant in the period immediately preceding August 2010

(FCZ group). The TAC dose: blood trough ratio was calculated using the three TAC trough levels immediately before and at least three levels 4-8 weeks after discontinuation of the anti-fungal agent, allowing for at least a one-week washout period after discontinuation. For patients with large fluctuations in trough levels, up to five levels will be collected, with the two most extreme values discarded (i.e., those not within 25% of the intra-individual mean). TAC blood levels measured outside of the 9–15-hour trough target window were omitted from collection/analysis if that information was documented; repeat levels within 2 weeks that are documented as per clinic notes were substituted if clearly within the pre- vs post-azole period. An additional TAC dose: blood trough ratio was collected at 6 months post-transplant.

Data was analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistical software. Continuous, non-parametric data was analyzed using the Mann-Whitney U test. Nominal data was analysed using the Chi-Square test. Primary and secondary endpoints were compared between the FCZ and CTMZ groups using a two-sided hypothesis with an alpha level of 0.05. Estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) was calculated using the Modification of Diet in Renal Diet equation.

## III. RESULTS

### A. Baseline Characteristics

Sixty patients were enrolled in each cohort. Baseline characteristics were similar in each of the groups (Table 1). At the time of discontinuation, an equivalent number of patients had an  $eGFR < 50 \text{ ml/min/1.73m}^2$ , and all patients in both cohorts were on full doses of FCZ (200mg tablets daily) or CTMZ (10mg troches TID). There was no difference in the proportion of African American (AA) or non-AA patients between groups. However, overall, the AA population was 70% in this study.

### B. Change in TAC Dosing Post-Anti-Fungal Discontinuation

Patients receiving FCZ had a significantly larger increase in TAC dose: trough level ratio at 4-8 weeks post-discontinuation compared to the pre-discontinuation ratio than patients receiving CTMZ (+93% vs. +43%,  $p=0.004$ ) (Table 2). The increase in TAC dose (mg TAC/patient weight in kg) was also significantly increased 4-8 weeks after FCZ discontinuation versus CTMZ discontinuation (+53% vs. +23%,  $p=0.01$ ).

At 6 months after FCZ or CTMZ discontinuation, there was a borderline significant difference between TAC dose: trough level ratio (+89% vs. +57%,  $p=0.046$ ) but no difference in TAC mg/kg dose (+41% vs. +44%,  $p=0.773$ ), when compared to the pre-discontinuation ratio and dose. From 4-8 weeks to 6 months' post-discontinuation, there was no difference in the TAC dose: trough level ratio in patients on FCZ or CTMZ (+0.6% vs. +11%,  $p=0.16$ ). However, patients post-CTMZ had a significantly larger increase in TAC mg/kg dose than patients post-FCZ in the 4-8 week to 6-month time frame (-4.3% FCZ vs. +14% CTMZ,  $p=0.001$ ).



We also examined the proportion of patients requiring  $\geq 30\%$  increase in TAC dose after the anti-fungal medication was discontinued. We chose 30% as our cut-off because that was the recommended empiric increase in TAC dose at the time of anti-fungal discontinuation in the protocol from our institution's transplant clinic. More patients required  $\geq 30\%$  increase in TAC dose within the first 8 weeks with FCZ than with CTMZ when compared to the pre-discontinuation dose (70% vs. 45%,  $p=0.006$ ). However, by the 6-month time point, there was no longer a difference between the cohorts (63% (FCZ) vs. 55% (CTMZ),  $p = 0.35$ ).

Due to the potential effect of renal function on the clearance of FCZ, we examined whether an eGFR  $< 50$  ml/min/1.73m<sup>2</sup> affected the change in TAC dose: trough level ratio (Table 3). All patients were on the full dose of FCZ (200 mg PO daily) and CTMZ (10 mg PO TID) at the time of anti-fungal discontinuation. However, we found no difference in the percentage change in the ratio between patients with normal and impaired renal function.

### C. Proportion of Sub-Therapeutic Levels Pre- and Post-Anti-Fungal Discontinuation

The antifungal used for prophylaxis did not affect the number of patients with at least one sub-therapeutic TAC level before or after discontinuation (Table 4). There was also no difference in the proportion of sub-therapeutic TAC levels among patients while they were on FCZ, CTMZ, or after the medication was stopped.

### D. Biopsy-Proven Acute Rejection

The rate of biopsy-proven kidney acute rejection following anti-fungal discontinuation was not different in the two cohorts. There were 2 episodes of rejection in the group receiving FCZ and 3 episodes in the group receiving CTMZ ( $p=1.0$ ). All 5 episodes were found to be acute T-cell-mediated rejection.

## IV. DISCUSSION

Both FCZ and CTMZ are commonly used in many kidney transplant protocols to prevent fungal infections in the first few months post-operatively. At our institution, we recently switched from FCZ to CTMZ in an effort to minimise the required dose adjustments for TAC. Since CTMZ is administered as troches, it is believed to be less systemically absorbed than FCZ tablets, thereby limiting the magnitude of the drug interaction with TAC. We found that by switching to CTMZ, the increase in TAC dose necessary to keep the trough level within the therapeutic range 4-8 weeks after the discontinuation of CTMZ was significantly less than when patients received FCZ. However, by 6 months post-anti-fungal, the difference between the cohorts had become non-significant. Interestingly, renal function did not affect the change in TAC dose: trough level ratio, even in the FCZ group. We chose to use the TAC dose: trough level ratio as the measure of TAC dose adjustments. According to the protocol at our institution, TAC trough goals typically decrease at post-transplant month 3, which is also when the anti-fungal medication was discontinued. By using the ratio, we were able to control for absolute changes in TAC dose, due to the lower goal TAC level. In addition, each patient served as their control to determine the proportional change

before and after discontinuation of the antifungal agent, providing a precise measure of the pharmacokinetic interaction between TAC and the antifungal agent. Despite the difference in TAC dose: trough level ratio change, there was no difference in the number of patients that had at least one sub-therapeutic TAC level within 8 weeks and at 6 months after discontinuing FCZ or CTMZ. Notably, although there was no difference between the groups, 80% of patients on FCZ and 65% of those on CTMZ had at least one sub-therapeutic level in the first 2 months following antifungal discontinuation. In addition, the choice of antifungal did not affect the incidence of biopsy-proven acute rejection in either cohort after patients stopped taking FCZ or CTMZ. While the authors of several articles make specific recommendations for TAC dose adjustments based on their results, significant questions remain. Notably, most studies have included a relatively small proportion of AA patients, which raises uncertainty regarding the applicability of the findings to the patient population at our institution, where two-thirds are AA. In addition, none of the published studies have directly compared the effects of FCZ and CTMZ on TAC dosing. We found that AA patients had significantly higher TAC dose requirements than non-AA patients. This difference may likely be due to the higher prevalence of the CYP3A5\*1 allele expression in the AA population, as previously reported [6-7]. This study is not without limitations. We may have lacked a sufficient number of patients for meaningful differences in some of our parameters. As this was a retrospective study, we were limited in the number of patients available for data collection. We were also unable to control for confounders, such as concomitant disease states, which may influence metabolism and dose changes in TAC for individual patients. This was primarily an outpatient study, and it may not be possible to identify all patients who were non-compliant with their medication regimen if this is not documented, if the patient does not admit to non-compliance, or if trough levels were not measured 12 hours post-TAC dose. In addition, the impact of other concurrent medications on the interaction between TAC and antifungal agents was not examined. Notably, the renal transplantation protocol at our center includes long-term steroid use post-transplant, which has been shown previously to decrease the bioavailability of TAC [8]. Due to the retrospective nature of this study, we were unable to obtain blood samples to identify genotypes for the patients in this study.

## V. CONCLUSION

In summary, we found that there was a more minor change in the TAC dose: trough level ratio after discontinuation of CTMZ than with FCZ. In addition, significantly more patients required  $\geq 30\%$  increase in the TAC dose after discontinuing FCZ when compared to CTMZ. The drug interaction between CTMZ and tacrolimus was less significant than with FCZ. Despite this, there was no significant effect on the prevalence of biopsy-proven acute cellular rejection between groups.





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Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate	No, the article does not require ethical approval or consent to participate, as it presents evidence.
Availability of Data and Materials	Not relevant.
Authors Contributions	All authors have equal participation in this article.

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**Table 1: Patient Demographics and Baseline Characteristics**

	FCZ (n=60)	CTMZ (n=60)	p-value
Male	30 (50%)	31 (52%)	NS
African-American (AA)	40 (67%)	44 (73%)	NS
Non- AA	20 (33%)	16 (27%)	NS
Age (years)	48 ± 13	49 ± 14	NS
eGFR <50 ml/min/ 1.73m <sup>2</sup>	27 (45%)	28 (47%)	NS
Average Dose	200mg daily (100%)	10mg TID (100%)	N/A

**Table 2: Comparison of Average Changes in TAC Dose: Trough Level Ratios and Dose Requirements Pre- and Post-Antifungal Discontinuation**

	FCZ (n=60)	CTMZ (n=60)	p-value
Change TAC dose : trough level ratio			
Pre- to 4-8 weeks post-D/C	+93% (52 - 150)	+43% (3.0 - 115)	0.004
Pre- to 6 months post-D/C	+89% (37-134)	+57% (17-102)	0.046
Change TAC mg/kg			
Pre- to 4-8 weeks post-D/C	+53% (4.7 - 96)	+23% (-15 to 59)	0.01
Pre- to 6 months post-D/C	+41% (-7.7 to 81)	+43.5% (-5.8 to 82)	0.77
≥30% increase in TAC dose			
Pre- to 4-8 weeks post-D/C	70%	45%	0.006
Pre- to 6 months post-D/C	63%	55%	0.36

**Table 3: Impact of Renal Function on TAC Dose: Trough Level Ratio**

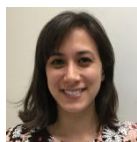
	FCZ (n=60)			CTMZ (n=60)		
	eGFR <50	eGFR >50	p-value	eGFR <50	eGFR >50	p-value
Change TAC dose : trough level ratio						
Pre- to 4-8 weeks post-D/C	+92% (58 - 173)	+94% (36 - 125)	0.19	+48% (5.6 - 101)	+38% (3.6 - 124)	0.4
4-8 weeks to 6 months post-D/C	-0.5% (-24 to 17)	+1.6% (-24 to 22)	0.9	+11% (-5.5 to 44)	+5.7% (-23 to 41)	0.48

**Table 4: Sub-Therapeutic TAC Blood Levels Pre- and Post-Antifungal Discontinuation**

	FCZ	CTMZ	p-value
# patients with sub-therapeutic levels			
Pre- D/C	21/60 (35%)	26/60 (43%)	0.35
4-8 weeks post- D/C	48/60 (80%)	39/60 (65%)	0.07
# sub-therapeutic levels			
Pre- D/C	23/180 (13%)	36/180 (20%)	0.09
4-8 weeks post- D/C	123/345 (36%)	75/243 (31%)	0.26



## AUTHORS PROFILE



**Jane Revollo**, Pharm.D., BCPS, CPP, currently works as a transplant clinical pharmacist in the Transplant Department at Atrium Health Carolinas Medical Centre in Charlotte, North Carolina, United States of America. She completed her PGY-2 residency in solid organ transplantation at the University of Cincinnati Medical Centre, Cincinnati, OH, United States of America, and now specialises in providing pharmaceutical care to adult kidney, pancreas, liver, and heart solid organ transplant recipients in the inpatient and ambulatory settings. Her solid organ transplant residency project entitled "Tacrolimus Interaction with Azole Antifungals in Kidney Transplant Recipients: Is Fluconazole or Clotrimazole a Worse Offender?" was accepted as a poster presentation at The American College of Clinical Pharmacy Annual Meeting.



**Vinaya Rao**, M.D., currently works as a transplant nephrologist in the Department of Nephrology at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston, South Carolina, United States of America. Her research involves evaluating medications in patients with chronic kidney disease and kidney transplant recipients. Three of the most recent manuscripts include "ACE-inhibitor/angiotensin receptor blockers (ACE-I/ARBs) therapy in COVID-19 infected dialysis patients" and "Immunosuppression in kidney transplant recipients with COVID-19 infection - where do we stand and where are we heading?" which were both published in Renal Failure; and Preliminary assessment of safety and adherence to a once-daily immunosuppression regimen in kidney transplantation: results of a randomized controlled pilot study" was published in Clinical Transplantation.



**Amy Krauss**, Pharm.D., BCPS, currently works as an oncology clinical pharmacist in the Department of Pharmacy at Gritman Medical Centre in Moscow, Idaho, United States. Amy served as the PGY-2 Solid Organ Transplantation Residency Director at Methodist University Hospital in Memphis, TN, USA, for multiple years. Her research involves the evaluation of medications in chronic kidney disease and solid organ transplant recipients, and previously, the pharmacodynamics of anticancer agents. Two of the most recent manuscripts include "Assessment of Rabbit Antithymocyte Globulin Dosing and Clinical Outcomes in Kidney Transplantation", published in the European Journal of Pharmaceutical and Medical Research and "Inadequate Antibiotic Dosing in Patients Receiving Sustained Low Efficiency Dialysis" published in The International Journal of Clinical Pharmacy.



**Alison L. Apple, R. Ph., M.S.**, is currently the Chief Pharmacy Officer (CPO) of the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States of America. As the CFO, she oversees all the pharmacy services at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania and serves as the PGY1/PGY2 Health System Pharmacy Administration Residency Program Director. Alison has served in various roles over the years, including Director of Pharmacy, Administrator of the Cancer Centre, Administrative Director of Clinical Services, Transplant Program Administrator, and System Director of Pharmacy at Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare in Memphis, Tennessee, United States. She was also an Associate Professor at the University of Tennessee Health Science Centre College of Pharmacy in Memphis, Tennessee, United States of America, for 15 years. Alison has been very active in residency accreditation over the past 15 years, including serving on the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists' Commission on Credentialing as Chair and as Lead Surveyor in both domestic and international residency accreditation.



**Benjamin Duhart, Jr., M.S., Pharm.D.**, currently works as an associate professor in the Department of Clinical Pharmacy and Translational Science within the College of Pharmacy at The University of Tennessee Health Science Centre in Memphis, Tennessee, United States of America. As a clinical educator, he also practices at Methodist University Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee. His research experience involves evaluating medication issues and health disparities that are discovered while providing pharmaceutical care to patients with nephrology and solid organ transplant needs. Two of the most recent manuscripts include an "Assessment of Rabbit Antithymocyte Globulin Dosing and Clinical Outcomes in Kidney Transplantation", published in the European Journal of Pharmaceutical and Medical Research and "Racial Health Disparity and

COVID-19" published in the Journal of Neuroimmune Pharmacology: The Official Journal of the Society on NeuroImmune Pharmacology.

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