



Age-dependent and sex-dependent disparity in mortality in patients with adrenal incidentalomas and autonomous cortisol secretion: an international, retrospective, cohort study

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Summary

Background The association between cortisol secretion and mortality in patients with adrenal incidentalomas is controversial. We aimed to assess all-cause mortality, prevalence of comorbidities, and occurrence of cardiovascular events in uniformly stratified patients with adrenal incidentalomas and cortisol autonomy (defined as non-suppressible serum cortisol on dexamethasone suppression testing).

Methods We conducted an international, retrospective, cohort study (NAPACA Outcome) at 30 centres in 16 countries. Eligible patients were aged 18 years or older with an adrenal incidentaloma (diameter ≥ 1 cm) detected between Jan 1, 1996, and Dec 31, 2015, and availability of a 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test result from the time of the initial diagnosis. Patients with clinically apparent hormone excess, active malignancy, or follow-up of less than 36 months were excluded. Patients were stratified according to the 0800–0900 h serum cortisol values after an overnight 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test; less than 50 nmol/L was classed as non-functioning adenoma, 50–138 nmol/L as possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and greater than 138 nmol/L as autonomous cortisol secretion. The primary endpoint was all-cause mortality. Secondary endpoints were the prevalence of cardiometabolic comorbidities, cardiovascular events, and cause-specific mortality. The primary and secondary endpoints were assessed in all study participants.

Findings Of 4374 potentially eligible patients, 3656 (2089 [57.1%] with non-functioning adenoma, 1320 [36.1%] with possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and 247 [6.8%] with autonomous cortisol secretion) were included in the study cohort for mortality analysis (2350 [64.3%] women and 1306 [35.7%] men; median age 61 years [IQR 53–68]; median follow-up 7.0 years [IQR 4.7–10.2]). During follow-up, 352 (9.6%) patients died. All-cause mortality (adjusted for age, sex, comorbidities, and previous cardiovascular events) was significantly increased in patients with possible autonomous cortisol secretion (HR 1.52, 95% CI 1.19–1.94) and autonomous cortisol secretion (1.77, 1.20–2.62) compared with patients with non-functioning adenoma. In women younger than 65 years, autonomous cortisol secretion was associated with higher all-cause mortality than non-functioning adenoma (HR 4.39, 95% CI 1.93–9.96), although this was not observed in men. Cardiometabolic comorbidities were significantly less frequent with non-functioning adenoma than with possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion (hypertension occurred in 1186 [58.6%] of 2024 patients with non-functioning adenoma, 944 [74.0%] of 1275 with possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and 179 [75.2%] of 238 with autonomous cortisol secretion; dyslipidaemia occurred in 724 [36.2%] of 1999 patients, 547 [43.8%] of 1250, and 123 [51.9%] of 237; and any diabetes occurred in 365 [18.2%] of 2002, 288 [23.0%] of 1250, and 62 [26.7%] of 232; all p values < 0.001).

Interpretation Cortisol autonomy is associated with increased all-cause mortality, particularly in women younger than 65 years. However, until results from randomised interventional trials are available, a conservative therapeutic approach seems to be justified in most patients with adrenal incidentaloma.

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Research in context

Evidence before this study

Adrenal incidentalomas are found in at least 3% of adults. In up to 50% of these people, endocrine investigations identify evidence of biochemical hypercortisolism without clinically overt glucocorticoid excess, a condition historically described as subclinical Cushing's syndrome. During preparation of the European Society of Endocrinology and European Network for the Study of Adrenal Tumours (ENSAT) 2016 Clinical Guidelines on Management of Adrenal Incidentalomas, a comprehensive literature search of PubMed, the NHS Economic Evaluation Database, and the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews and Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects was performed, from Jan 1, 2000, to Nov 30, 2014, for all systematic reviews and studies that had assessed any association between cortisol autonomy (defined as non-suppressible serum cortisol on dexamethasone suppression testing) with morbidity and mortality. This search revealed only two small studies, that together summarised 404 patients (including only 39 deaths), showing an increased mortality in patients with unsuppressed cortisol after dexamethasone. To confirm or refute this association, we initiated the present study under the auspices of ENSAT. Due to the paucity of available multicentre data for a sound power calculation, we aimed initially to collect data from at least 2000 patients. In 2021, we updated our initial literature search (to include literature from Dec 1, 2014, to July 31, 2021), and identified a systematic review from 2020 and a Swedish cohort study published in 2021. The systematic review, which included 1356 patients from nine studies, could not confirm the claimed association between cortisol autonomy and mortality, whereas the more recent cohort study, which included 1048 patients, found increased mortality in patients in whom serum cortisol was greater than 83 nmol/L after dexamethasone suppression testing.

Added value of this study

Our large, retrospective, international, cohort study, which included more than 3600 patients with adrenal adenomas and a follow-up of at least 3 years (median 7 years), provides additional strong evidence for an overall association of possible autonomous cortisol secretion (defined as 0800–0900 h serum cortisol of 50–138 nmol/L after an overnight 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test) and autonomous cortisol secretion (defined as >138 nmol/L) with all-cause mortality. To our knowledge, this is the first study to indicate that this risk varies by age and sex. Women younger than 65 years with autonomous cortisol secretion had the highest relative risk of death, with an adjusted hazard ratio (HR) of 4.39 (95% CI 1.93–9.96), whereas men older than 65 years did not appear to be at increased risk (HR 1.09, 95% CI 0.55–2.16) compared with patients with non-functioning adenoma. We also confirmed that the prevalence of cardiometabolic morbidity increases progressively with the degree of cortisol autonomy, which was more frequently detected in women and in the presence of bilateral tumours.

Implications of all the available evidence

Although our study confirms the association between cortisol autonomy, all-cause mortality and cardiometabolic morbidity, we highlight a need for caution with regard to therapeutic interventions. Our findings suggest that women younger than 65 years could benefit most from normalising cortisol secretion. However, only randomised interventional trials will be able to determine whether any intervention (either medical or surgical) is able to mitigate both cardiometabolic morbidity and mortality in patients with adrenal adenomas. Our study clearly provides the rationale and the statistical basis for such a randomised trial. Until these data are available, however, a conservative approach seems reasonable, especially in men aged 65 years or older.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, wider availability and use of cross-sectional imaging has resulted in an increased incidental detection of clinically inapparent adrenal masses. Such adrenal incidentalomas have an increasing age-dependent prevalence, ranging from 3% in adults aged 50 years to 10% in adults older than 70 years.^{1–3}

Most of these tumours are benign non-functioning adrenal adenomas.^{3,4} However, endocrine investigations find biochemical evidence of hypercortisolism in 30–50% of patients without clinically overt glucocorticoid excess, which has historically been described as subclinical Cushing's syndrome. As only very few of these patients progress to having overt Cushing's syndrome,^{5,6} it is currently recommended that patients be categorised by the 0800–0900 h serum cortisol value after an overnight 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test; non-functioning adenoma was defined as less than 50 nmol/L, possible autonomous cortisol secretion as

50–138 nmol/L, and autonomous cortisol secretion as greater than 138 nmol/L.⁷

In 2019, a cohort study reported a slightly increased mortality in 969 patients with adrenal incidentalomas compared with 2907 patients without adrenal incidentalomas, as outlined by a multivariable-adjusted hazard ratio (HR) for mortality of 1.14 (95% CI 1.00–1.29).⁸ Furthermore, several studies have focused on the association between adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH)-independent cortisol autonomy (defined as non-suppressible serum cortisol on dexamethasone suppression testing) and mortality in these patients, but the results are conflicting. Three single-centre studies that included 198–365 patients^{9–11} and one population-based study from Sweden (that included 1048 patients)¹² reported an increased mortality in people who had elevated cortisol after the 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test. By contrast, a systematic review (including 32 studies and 4121 patients) found

cardiovascular and metabolic risk factors (ie, hypertension, any diabetes, dyslipidaemia, and obesity) to be more prevalent in the presence of what the authors termed mild autonomous cortisol excess.⁶ However, mortality was only studied in a subgroup of 1356 patients from nine studies and was similar to that in patients with non-functioning adrenal adenomas. In line with this finding, a population-based study from Minnesota, USA, compared 1004 patients with adrenal incidentalomas to sex-matched and age-matched participants without adrenal tumours and found no difference in mortality.¹³ These discrepancies might be explained in part by the heterogeneity of the criteria used for the definition of cortisol autonomy in these studies.

Taken together, although it is plausible that there is an association between low-grade cortisol excess (as shown by dexamethasone suppression test), comorbidities (including cardiovascular events), and mortality, previously studies were limited by small sample sizes and potential single-centre bias. We aimed to assess all-cause mortality, prevalence of comorbidities, and occurrence of cardiovascular events in patients with adrenal incidentalomas, applying unified diagnostic criteria to define cortisol autonomy.

Methods

Study design

We conducted an international, retrospective, cohort study at 30 centres in 16 countries (NAPACA Outcome). The study was approved by the European Network for the Study of Adrenal Tumours (ENSAT) in December, 2014. Each centre had local ethical approval for pseudonymised, standardised, phenotype recording. All patients provided written informed consent to participate (except for at nine centres where the ethics committees waived this requirement). Centres were asked to report patients in a consecutive manner to minimise selection bias. Retrospective data acquisition was done over a 56-month period (from January, 2015, to August, 2019).

Participants

Patients were eligible for inclusion if they were aged 18 years or older and had an adrenal incidentaloma (unilateral or bilateral with a diameter ≥ 1 cm) detected by cross-sectional imaging between Jan 1, 1996, and Dec 31, 2015, diagnosis of an adrenal adenoma based on typical imaging characteristics⁷ or follow-up imaging excluding malignancy, availability of a 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test result from the time of the initial diagnosis, and follow-up data on survival status and occurrence of cardiovascular events with a follow-up duration of at least 36 months. Exclusion criteria were a confirmed diagnosis of clinically overt Cushing's syndrome (defined according to an established clinical practice guideline¹⁴ as presence of hypercortisolism with specific clinical signs of cortisol excess, such as easy

bruising, facial plethora, and proximal myopathy), ACTH-dependent hypercortisolism, urinary free cortisol greater than or equal to two times the upper limit of normal, pheochromocytoma, primary aldosteronism, surgery within 36 months after initial diagnosis, or any active malignancy (including adrenocortical carcinoma) at the time of primary diagnosis of the adrenal mass. The considerable variation in use of other diagnostic tests at different centres, including plasma ACTH and urinary free cortisol, precluded formal analysis of other tests.

Procedures

Following the European Society of Endocrinology and ENSAT 2016 Clinical Guidelines on Management of Adrenal Incidentalomas,⁷ patients were categorised according to their first 0800–0900 h serum cortisol result on an overnight 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test after initial diagnosis of the adrenal incidentaloma; less than 50 nmol/L was classed as non-functioning adenoma, 50–138 nmol/L as possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and greater than 138 nmol/L as autonomous cortisol secretion. The conversion factor for serum cortisol in $\mu\text{g/dL}$ is nmol/L divided by 27.59 (hence, important cutoffs for the 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test are 50 nmol/L or 1.8 $\mu\text{g/dL}$, and 138 nmol/L or 5.0 $\mu\text{g/dL}$).

We collected data on age, sex, and BMI from the time of the initial diagnosis of adrenal incidentaloma; tumour characteristics (ie, size and laterality); and medical history (eg, cardiometabolic risk factors and cardiovascular events) both at primary diagnosis and during follow-up. Diagnosis of comorbidities was done according to the existing guidelines available at the time of adrenal tumour diagnosis.

Outcomes

The primary endpoint was all-cause mortality. Prespecified secondary endpoints were prevalence of cardiometabolic comorbidities (hypertension, any diabetes, and dyslipidaemia), occurrence of cardiovascular events, and cause-specific mortality. The primary and secondary endpoints were assessed in all study participants. For cardiovascular morbidity, we defined a composite endpoint of the following major adverse cardiovascular events (MACE): myocardial infarction or coronary revascularisation (either bypass surgery or percutaneous intervention), stroke, or cardiovascular-related death. In addition, we collected data on venous thrombosis and pulmonary embolism.

Statistical analysis

Patients who had surgery after at least 36 months of follow-up were censored, setting the date of surgery as the date of last follow-up. For subgroup analyses, patients were categorised according to their age at diagnosis (<65 years *vs* ≥ 65 years, based on age-dependent thresholds established to assess cardiovascular risk in patients with diabetes or hypertension^{15,16}), with separate analyses by sex.

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Absolute numbers and percentages were calculated for categorical data. Missing values were discounted when calculating proportions. The results for continuous variables are expressed as medians with IQR. The intergroup differences between the different dexamethasone suppression test categories were analysed via χ^2 test. All-cause mortality was calculated as the time between the initial diagnosis of the adrenal incidentaloma and death or last follow-up.

A power analysis was performed on the basis of the assumption of a clinically meaningful HR of at least 1.5 for a two-group comparison and a mortality rate of about 10%. Using a type I error α of 0.05 and a power of 80%, about 2000 patients with 191 deaths would need to be included. Survival curves were constructed using the Kaplan-Meier method, and the log-rank test was used for subgroup analysis. Patients were censored either at the date of last follow-up, adrenalectomy, or death. Relevant prognostic variables were identified by univariable and multivariable analyses, using the Cox proportional hazards model. HRs are provided with 95% CIs. Multivariable Cox analyses included the three dexamethasone suppression test categories (non-functioning adenoma, possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and autonomous cortisol secretion) and known prognostic factors for

all-cause mortality and cardiovascular events (age, sex, any diabetes, hypertension, dyslipidaemia, and any previous cardiovascular event) as covariables. To study the functional forms of a relationship between cortisol after the 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test as a continuous variable and all-cause mortality, we applied restricted cubic splines. For the subgroup analyses by age and sex, we used a formal three-way interaction test, using Cox regression for age (<65 years or \geq 65 years), sex (male or female), and dexamethasone suppression test category (non-functioning adenoma, possible autonomous cortisol secretion, or autonomous cortisol secretion). Time to first MACE was defined as the time between the initial diagnosis of the adrenal incidentaloma and first documentation of any MACE thereafter. As a quality check for data integrity, a completeness index was calculated for each centre: patients with available follow-up data within the previous 12 months on Dec 31, 2018 were counted as complete (ie, centres with an index of \geq 90% qualified for a subgroup analysis), and the results were then compared with those derived from the whole study group. Two-tailed p values of less than 0.05 were deemed significant.

Following the cutoff criteria of a study published in 2021,¹² we performed a post-hoc analysis where we divided our study cohort into four groups on the basis of

	All patients (n=3656)	Non-functioning adenoma (n=2089)	Possible autonomous cortisol secretion (n=1320)	Autonomous cortisol secretion (n=247)
Sex				
Women	2350 (64.3%)	1321 (63.2%)	860 (65.2%)	169 (68.4%)
Men	1306 (35.7%)	768 (36.8%)	460 (34.8%)	78 (31.6%)
Age, years	61 (53–68)	60 (52–67)	63 (56–70)	63 (55–70)
Age <65 years	2264 (61.9%)	1404 (67.2%)	726 (55.0%)	134 (54.3%)
Follow-up, years	7.0 (4.7–10.2)	7.2 (4.8–10.5)	6.9 (4.7–10.0)	6.9 (4.5–10.0)
BMI, kg/m ² *	28.1 (25.0–32.3)	28.6 (25.4–32.6)	27.8 (24.6–31.9)	27.7 (24.3–31.9)
Tumour characteristics†				
Left side	1497 (44.6%)	946 (49.8%)	468 (38.1%)	83 (36.2%)
Right side	1093 (32.6%)	646 (34.0%)	385 (31.4%)	62 (27.1%)
Bilateral	764 (22.8%)	306 (16.1%)	374 (30.5%)	84 (36.7%)
Maximum tumour diameter, mm	22 (15–30)	20 (15–25)	26 (19–33)	29 (20–37)
1 mg dexamethasone suppression test serum cortisol result, nmol/L	47 (30–72)	33 (28–50)	72 (61–94)	190 (157–253)
Comorbidities				
Hypertension‡	2309 (65.3%)	1186 (58.6%)	944 (74.0%)	179 (75.2%)
Dyslipidaemia§	1394 (40.0%)	724 (36.2%)	547 (43.8%)	123 (51.9%)
Any diabetes¶	715 (20.5%)	365 (18.2%)	288 (23.0%)	62 (26.7%)
Previous cardiovascular events				
Myocardial infarction or coronary intervention, or both	199 (6.0%)	87 (4.6%)	96 (8.0%)	16 (7.1%)
Stroke**	70 (2.1%)	31 (1.6%)	27 (2.3%)	12 (5.3%)
Deep vein thrombosis or pulmonary embolism, or both††	62 (1.9%)	31 (1.7%)	26 (2.2%)	5 (2.2%)
At least one cardiovascular event‡‡	319 (9.3%)	150 (7.6%)	139 (11.4%)	30 (13.2%)

Data are n (%) or median (IQR). Centre-specific data on ethnicity are shown in the appendix (p 2). *n=3216. †n=3354. ‡n=3537. §n=3486. ¶n=3484. ||n=3306. **n=3299. ††n=3293. ‡‡n=3415.

Table 1: Patient characteristics at initial diagnosis of the adrenal incidentaloma

dexamethasone suppression test result (ie, serum cortisol <50 nmol/L, 50–80 nmol/L, 81–138 nmol/L, and >138 nmol/L).

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS (version 28.0), and R (version 4.0.2) using the survival (version 3.2-13) and smoothHR (version 1.0.3) packages.

Role of the funding source

The funders of the study had no role in study design, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, or writing of the report.

Results

Of 4374 potentially eligible patients, 3656 from 28 centres in 15 countries were included in the study cohort for mortality analysis (appendix pp 2, 8). In 131 (3.6%) patients, adrenalectomy was performed later than 36 months after initial diagnosis (appendix p 3); these patients were censored at the time of surgery. Median age at initial diagnosis was 61 years (IQR 53–68), and 2350 (64.3%) patients were women and 1306 (35.7%) were men. According to the result of the first dexamethasone suppression test, 2089 (57.1%) of 3656 patients had non-functioning adenoma, 1320 (36.1%) had possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and 247 (6.8%) had autonomous cortisol secretion. Bilateral tumours were most frequent in patients with autonomous cortisol secretion, and this group also had the largest median tumour diameter (table 1). Serum cortisol after the 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test increased with age (appendix p 9). None of the patients developed overt Cushing's syndrome during follow-up.

During a median follow-up of 7.0 years (IQR 4.7–10.2), 352 (9.6%) of 3656 patients died. Figure 1A shows the crude overall survival of the three dexamethasone suppression test groups. Compared with patients with non-functioning adenoma, the proportion of patients who died was higher in those with possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion (143 [6.8%] of 2089 patients vs 168 [12.7%] of 1320 and 41 [16.6%] of 247, respectively). After multivariable Cox analysis adjusting for age, sex, hypertension, any diabetes, dyslipidaemia, and previous cardiovascular events, all-cause mortality was significantly higher in patients with possible autonomous cortisol secretion (HR 1.52, 95% CI 1.19–1.94; $p=0.001$) and autonomous cortisol secretion (1.77, 1.20–2.62; $p=0.004$) than in patients with non-functioning adenoma (figure 1B). Bilateral adenomas had a greater association with possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion (table 1), but presence of bilateral adenomas was itself not an independent risk factor for death (data not shown).

Information on the individual causes of death was available in 306 (86.9%) of 352 patients who died (figure 2). The two most frequent causes of death were cancer (98 patients) and cardiovascular-related events (95 patients; appendix p 6).

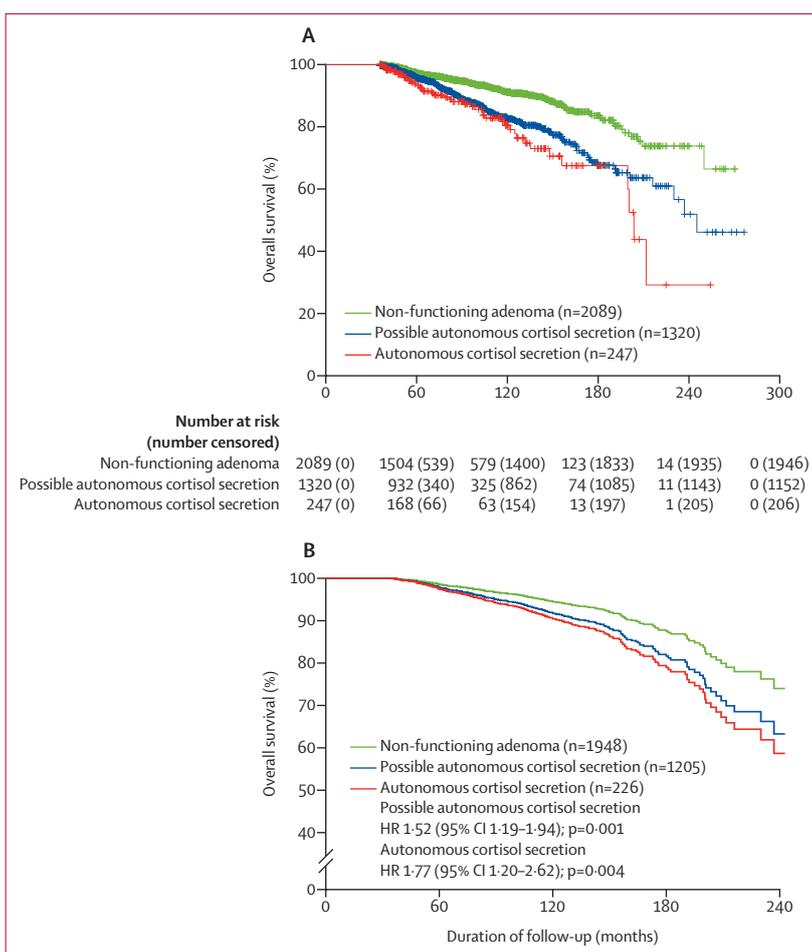


Figure 1: Overall survival in the entire cohort

(A) Kaplan-Meier curves (n=3656); ticks indicate censored patients; median overall survival was not reached in the non-functioning adenoma group, 246 months in the possible autonomous cortisol secretion group, and 206 months (95% CI 187–209) in the autonomous cortisol secretion group; overall log-rank $p<0.001$ (non-functioning adenoma group vs possible autonomous cortisol secretion group, $p<0.001$; non-functioning adenoma group vs autonomous cortisol secretion group, $p<0.001$; possible autonomous cortisol secretion group vs autonomous cortisol secretion group, $p=0.10$). (B) Multivariable Cox regression analysis (n=3379; adjusted for sex, age, hypertension, dyslipidaemia, any diabetes, and previous cardiovascular events); patients with missing data for these variables were excluded from the analysis. HR=hazard ratio.

In the post-hoc analysis when we divided the study cohort into four groups, we found that all-cause mortality in the 766 patients with a serum cortisol of 50–80 nmol/L was not significantly higher than in the less than 50 nmol/L non-functioning adenoma group (HR 1.29, 95% CI 0.97–1.71; $p=0.085$; appendix p 4). Furthermore, when we studied serum cortisol after the dexamethasone suppression test as a continuous variable in relation to all-cause mortality, although there was no significant linear relationship in the entire cohort, we found a linear increase in the HR for death in patients with serum cortisol of 138 nmol/L or less (appendix p 10).

In sensitivity analyses, 10-year overall survival was heterogeneous among centres (ranging from 69% to 100%). In the analysis restricted to the 21 centres with more reliable follow-up (completeness index score $\geq 90\%$),

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overall survival of the 2730 patients was not changed in a relevant manner compared with the entire study cohort (appendix p 5). Accordingly, we decided not to exclude any centre from the analysis. The association between mortality and the degree of cortisol autonomy was age-dependent; in patients younger than 65 years, all-cause mortality was significantly higher in the autonomous cortisol secretion group than in the non-functioning adenoma group (adjusted HR 3.16, 95% CI 1.65–6.05), whereas there was no significant difference in patients aged 65 years or older (1.43, 0.87–2.33). The association between mortality and serum cortisol after the dexamethasone suppression test was much stronger in women than in men (autonomous cortisol secretion vs non-functioning adenoma; adjusted HR 2.50 [95% CI 1.45–4.31] in women vs 1.19 [0.67–2.10] in men). The combined analysis of age-specific and sex-specific mortality is presented in table 2 and figure 3. This analysis revealed a significant interaction of age, sex, and dexamethasone suppression test category ($p < 0.01$). It is important to note, however, that the number of patients in each of these groups meant that a separate formal analysis group by group was underpowered.

Data on cardiometabolic morbidity and cardiovascular events were available in 3484 (95.3%) of 3656 patients (2002 with non-functioning adenoma, 1250 with possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and 232 with autonomous cortisol secretion). Overall, hypertension was the most

frequent comorbidity at initial diagnosis (2309 [65.3%] of 3537 patients), followed by dyslipidaemia (1394 [40.0%] of 3486), and any diabetes (715 [20.5%] of 3484). The prevalence of each of these comorbid conditions by group increased sequentially from lowest in the non-functioning adenoma group to highest in the autonomous cortisol secretion group (table 1).

With regard to cardiovascular endpoints, 319 (9.3%) of 3415 patients had experienced at least one cardiovascular event by the time of the initial diagnosis of the adrenal incidentaloma (table 1). During follow-up, a total of 476 non-fatal cardiovascular events occurred in 375 patients, with more cardiovascular events occurring in patients with possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion than in patients with non-functioning adenoma. Overall, 297 (8.9%) of 3325 patients with available data experienced a MACE (145 [7.3%] patients in the non-functioning adenoma group, 130 [10.3%] in the possible autonomous cortisol secretion group, and 22 [9.4%] in the autonomous cortisol secretion group; appendix p 7). However, after adjusting for cardiometabolic comorbidities, compared with patients with non-functioning adenoma, time to the first MACE was only significantly shorter in women aged 65 years or older with autonomous cortisol secretion (table 3).

Discussion

To our knowledge, this study is the largest retrospective analysis on mortality and cardiovascular morbidity in patients with adrenal incidentalomas performed to date. By contrast with a meta-analysis from 2019,⁶ but similar to a study from Sweden published in 2021,¹² we found that all-cause mortality was increased in patients with possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion compared with patients with non-functioning adenoma. Because of our large sample size (>3600 patients), we were able to reliably analyse effects of age and sex on mortality. Our findings show that, compared with patients with non-functioning adenoma, autonomous cortisol secretion in women younger than 65 years was associated with a four-times increase in adjusted all-cause mortality, whereas all-cause mortality in the autonomous cortisol secretion group was only moderately increased in women aged 65 years or older

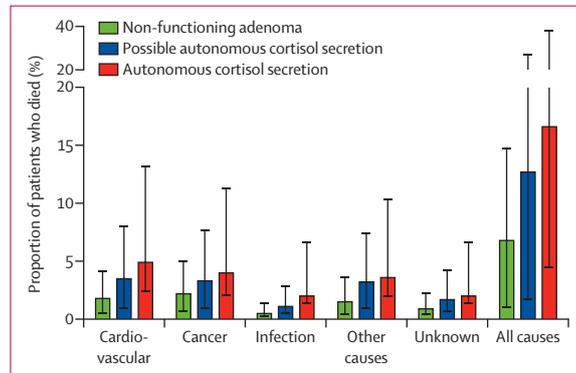


Figure 2: Mortality and causes of death
Error bars are 95% CI.

	Age, years	All patients, n	All events, n	Possible autonomous cortisol secretion				Autonomous cortisol secretion			
				Patients, n	HR	95% CI	p value	Patients, n	HR	95% CI	p value
Women	<65	1424	51	472	1.82	0.99–3.31	0.052	96	4.39	1.93–9.96	<0.001
	≥65	723	108	302	1.99	1.31–3.01	0.001	57	1.80	0.86–3.76	0.12
Men	<65	734	43	222	1.35	0.70–2.59	0.37	34	1.77	0.59–5.33	0.31
	≥65	479	94	200	1.26	0.81–1.97	0.31	36	1.09	0.55–2.16	0.81

The analysis was adjusted for hypertension, any diabetes, dyslipidaemia, and previous cardiovascular events. Patients with missing data for these variables were excluded from the analysis. Patients with non-functioning adenoma were the reference cohort. HR=hazard ratio.

Table 2: Multivariable Cox regression analysis of all-cause mortality by sex and age

and men younger than 65 years, and was not affected in men aged 65 years or older.

We found that possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion were associated with an increased frequency of cardiometabolic comorbidities. In particular, hypertension had a higher prevalence in both the possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion groups than in the non-functioning adenoma group, and any diabetes and dyslipidaemia showed progressively increased frequencies in the non-functioning adenoma, possible autonomous cortisol secretion, and autonomous cortisol secretion groups, reflecting a continuum in metabolic disturbance, as shown previously.^{17,18} Furthermore, cardiovascular events occurring either before or after the initial diagnosis of the adrenal tumour were more frequently observed in patients with possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion than in patients with non-functioning adenoma. However, after adjusting for cardiometabolic comorbidities, a significant increase in MACE was only observed in women aged 65 years or older with autonomous cortisol secretion, suggesting that glucocorticoid-related cardiovascular events might not be the main drivers of overall mortality in this cohort, as has been suggested previously.^{9,10,12} This finding is in line with the reported causes of death, which indicated there were few cardiovascular-related deaths in women younger than 65 years with cortisol autonomy. In our study, we found a relative increase in cardiovascular-related mortality, which paralleled that for other causes of death in patients with autonomous cortisol secretion. Another study pointed to cancer as the leading cause of death in the presence of autonomous cortisol secretion;¹¹ we could only partly confirm this observation in our large cohort in which cardiovascular-related and cancer-related deaths were almost equal in patients with cortisol autonomy (appendix p 6). In line with other studies, however, our findings suggest that cortisol autonomy might have systemic detrimental effects.^{18–20} Nevertheless, we are aware that a retrospective study can by definition never confirm any causal relationship.

The finding that the association between autonomous cortisol secretion and mortality appeared to be clinically relevant mostly in younger women has not yet been described by other studies and might suggest that autonomous cortisol secretion is a prognostic factor that has greater influence at younger ages, when other age-related comorbidities are less prominent. Although a different clinical presentation was observed for men and women with overt Cushing's disease,²¹ less is known about sex-specific organ effects by hypercortisolism. Studies on stress associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have shown that younger and middle-aged women were more susceptible to stress than men, and displayed an increased vascular reactivity to glucocorticoids.²² Besides, it has been shown that women with any diabetes or coronary heart disease were likely to receive less aggressive medical

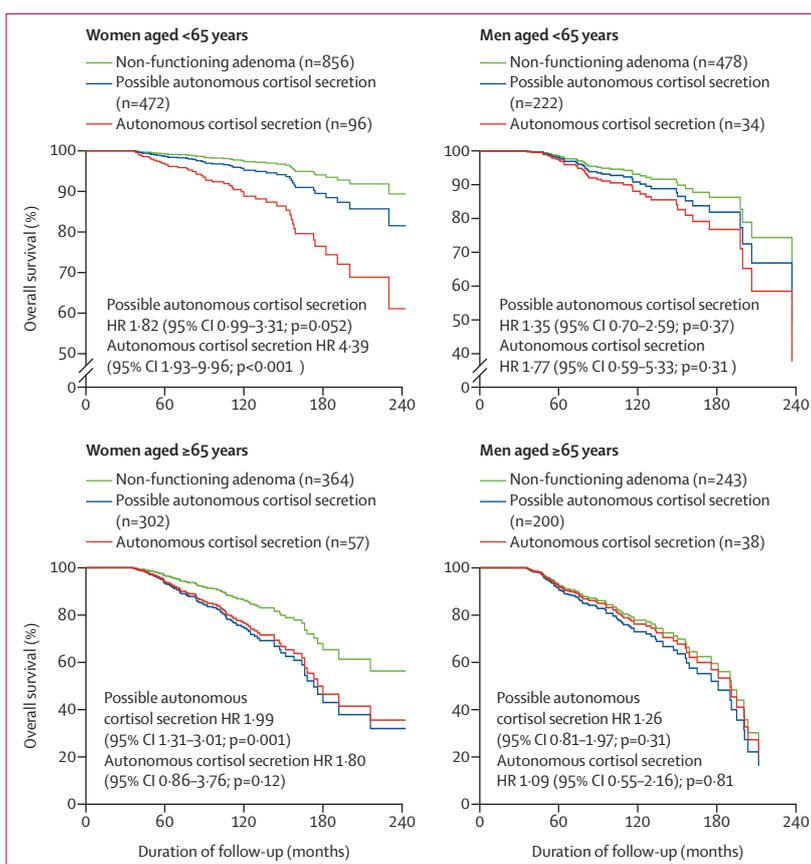


Figure 3: Overall survival by sex and age

Multivariable Cox regression analysis adjusted for hypertension, dyslipidaemia, any diabetes, and previous cardiovascular events. Patients with missing data for these variables were excluded from the analysis. HR=hazard ratio.

management of their cardiovascular risk factors, which might have contributed to sex differences in cardiovascular mortality.^{23,24} In the present study, however, we adjusted our survival analysis for comorbidities to mitigate the risk of such a confounder. Interestingly, a large, prospective, multicentre study in 1305 patients with adrenal adenomas showed an increased risk and severity of hypertension and type 2 diabetes in patients with cortisol autonomy and, similar to our findings, showed an increasing proportion of affected women with increasing cortisol after a 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test.²⁵ Although it would be important to screen for (and treat) autonomous cortisol secretion in young (and presumably otherwise more healthy) patients, it is probably less relevant to do so in frail older patients. However, only a large, randomised, intervention trial would provide a definitive answer, and such a trial is not yet available. Thus, for the time being, our study suggests that any decision on initiating cortisol-lowering treatment or surgery should be made with care, and on an individual basis.

We also observed that serum cortisol after the dexamethasone suppression test increased with age. A retrospective study, however, cannot establish whether

	Age, years	All patients, n	All events, n	Possible autonomous cortisol secretion				Autonomous cortisol secretion			
				Patients, n	HR	95% CI	p value	Patients, n	HR	95% CI	p value
Women	<65	1377	75	466	1.20	0.74-1.95	0.46	94	1.61	0.71-3.61	0.25
	≥65	705	92	296	1.33	0.84-2.06	0.22	56	2.09	1.08-4.05	0.028
Men	<65	694	91	218	1.05	0.67-1.63	0.83	33	0.73	0.29-1.85	0.51
	≥65	466	89	193	1.10	0.70-1.72	0.69	36	1.04	0.48-2.24	0.92

The analysis was adjusted for hypertension, any diabetes, dyslipidaemia, and previous cardiovascular events. Patients with missing data for these variables were excluded from the analysis. Patients with non-functioning adenoma were the reference cohort. HR=hazard ratio. MACE=major adverse cardiovascular event.

Table 3: Multivariate Cox regression analysis of MACE by sex and age

this association might also reflect chronic stress associated with age-related illnesses. Future studies will have to confirm this finding and clarify if this is a hallmark of the brain aging process affecting the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis,²⁶ reduced cortisol inactivation due to a reduced activity of 11 β -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase type 2 as a consequence of a lower nephron mass in ageing,²⁷ increasing adrenal tumour mass with age,¹⁸ or potentially accelerated metabolism of dexamethasone (eg, CYP3A4 induction due to polypharmacy in older patients).²⁸ Overall, these data raise questions as to the clinical importance of elevated serum cortisol after the 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test in older patients. Besides, as has been reported previously,¹² we could not find any clear relationship between cortisol after the dexamethasone suppression test as a continuous variable and all-cause mortality in the entire cohort. However, there was a nearly linear relationship when serum cortisol was 138 nmol/L or less. For higher values, the accuracy of the results was likely to be limited by the low number of patients.

This study has several limitations. First, a retrospective design is prone to bias, including heterogeneous or possibly inaccurate capture of relevant clinical information. Nevertheless, we tried to minimise such an impact by requesting consecutively recruited patients, a minimum number of included patients per centre, and did a sensitivity analysis focusing on centres with a follow-up rate of more than 90%. Second, the number of patients with the highest serum cortisol after the 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test (ie, the autonomous cortisol secretion group) was small compared with the number in the possible autonomous cortisol secretion and non-functioning adenoma groups, which might have weakened the statistical power of some of our analyses. However, the 247 patients in the autonomous cortisol secretion group exceeded the total number of patients included in all previous studies on this topic (n=154).⁹⁻¹² Third, we relied on a single 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test only, with variability in the performance of the cortisol assays used between centres over time, and without availability of dexamethasone serum concentrations.²⁹ However, the biochemical tests used to assess for cortisol autonomy

have not been changed over the last 25 years. Fourth, it is possible that the inclusion criterion of a 1 mg dexamethasone suppression test result in itself leads to some bias, because some patients with adrenal incidentaloma might not have undergone testing. However, this bias is not resolvable, as shown by a population-based study in which only few patients with adrenal incidentalomas had some type of endocrine screening.¹³ In addition, we acknowledge that all participating institutions are tertiary care centres and our sample might not be representative of patients seen in the community. Finally, the diagnostic criteria of the comorbidities were not uniform across centres and have changed over the study period of 23 years.

In conclusion, this large, retrospective, international, cohort study provides additional strong evidence for an overall association between possible autonomous cortisol secretion and autonomous cortisol secretion and increased all-cause mortality (although causality cannot be confirmed due to the retrospective study design). However, this risk was not equally distributed. Women younger than 65 years with autonomous cortisol secretion had the highest relative risk, whereas men aged 65 years or older did not appear to be at increased risk (irrespective of the degree of cortisol autonomy). Although several studies have claimed benefits of adrenalectomy in patients with autonomous cortisol secretion, all of these studies were prone to bias and had small sample sizes.³⁰ Randomised interventional trials are needed to determine whether intervention (either medical or surgical) is able to mitigate the cardiometabolic morbidity and mortality in patients with adrenal adenomas. On the basis of our findings, and until results from such trials are available, we suggest that a conservative approach might be prudent, in particular in men aged 65 years or older with cortisol autonomy.

Contributors

TDe, GR, MT, and MF designed the study. Except for UM, all authors collected samples and clinical data from patients. UM, TDe, GR, MT, and MF had full access to all the data in the study and performed the statistical analyses. TDe, GR, MT, and MF wrote the first draft of the manuscript and JN-P conducted extensive content and language editing. All authors contributed to writing the manuscript and approved the final version to be published. All authors had full access to all the data in the

study and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication.

Declaration of interests

IB has served as a consultant for Corcept Therapeutics, Sparrow Pharmaceuticals, and Spruce Biosciences; was as a member of advisory or data safety monitoring boards for Adrenas Therapeutics, Recordati, and Strongbridge Biopharma (in all cases, institution fees were provided); and reports personal honoraria from Elsevier ClinicalKey. IC reports consulting fees and honoraria from HRA Pharma Rare Diseases and Recordati; was a member of advisory or data safety monitoring boards for HRA Pharma Rare Diseases and Recordati; and has participated in clinical studies from Corcept Therapeutics. ACh reports personal support for attending meetings or travel from Sanofi; personal honoraria from Ipsen; and was a member of advisory or data safety monitoring boards for Ipsen. TDe reports personal consulting fees for being a member of advisory or data safety monitoring boards for HRA Pharma Rare Diseases and Recordati; personal honoraria from Novartis; and has participated in clinical studies from Corcept Therapeutics and HRA Pharma Rare Diseases (for these, institution fees were provided). MF has participated in clinical studies from Corcept Therapeutics and HRA Pharma Rare Diseases (for these, institution fees were provided). LM was a member of the expert panel “Focus Area Adrenal and Cardiovascular Endocrinology” from the European Society of Endocrinology, and led the working group 5 of the project “CA20122—Harmonizing clinical care and research on adrenal tumours in European countries” from the European Cooperation in Science in Technology. JN-P reports grants from Diurnal Group; and has served as a consultant for and received honoraria from HRA Pharma Rare Diseases, Crinetics Pharmaceuticals, and Recordati (in all cases, institution fees were provided). CS reports consulting fees and honoraria from HRA Pharma Rare Diseases and Recordati; was a member of advisory or data safety monitoring boards for HRA Pharma Rare Diseases and Recordati; and has served as coordinator of the Pituitary Club of the Italian Society of Endocrinology. MT reports personal consulting fees (for being a member of advisory or data safety monitoring boards for Corcept Therapeutics and HRA Pharma Rare Diseases); and has participated in clinical studies from HRA Pharma Rare Diseases (for which institution fees were provided). ST reports personal support for attending meetings or travel from Ipsen, Pfizer, and Recordati; personal honoraria from Recordati; and has participated in clinical studies from Crinetics Pharmaceuticals, Novartis, and Strongbridge Biopharma. All other authors declare no competing interests.

Data sharing

We will consider sharing deidentified, individual participant-level data that underlie the results reported in this Article on receipt of a request detailing the study hypothesis and statistical analysis plan. All requests should be sent to the corresponding author. The corresponding author and lead investigators of this study will discuss all requests and make decisions about whether data sharing is appropriate based on the scientific rigour of the proposal. All applicants will be asked to sign a data access agreement.

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