e-ISSN: 3025-6208

Scientific Journal of Dermatology and Venereology (SJDV)

Journal website: https://phlox.or.id/index.php/sjdv

Effectiveness of Systemic and Topical Combination Therapy for the Treatment of Pustular Psoriasis: A Meta-Analysis Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Combination therapy
Meta-analysis
Pustular psoriasis
Systemic
Topical

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The author has reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

https://doi.org/10.59345/sjdv.v2i1.131

A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Pustular psoriasis is a rare and severe variant of psoriasis, characterized by sterile pustules that appear over erythematous plaques. Treatment is challenging and often requires a combination of systemic and topical therapy. This meta-analysis study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis. **Methods:** Relevant publications were identified through electronic searches in PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. Studies evaluating the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis were included. Data were extracted and analyzed using random effects statistics. **Results:** A total of 10 studies with a total of 324 patients were included in the analysis. Systemic and topical combination therapy demonstrated significant effectiveness in improving pustular psoriasis plaque improvement (PASI 75: 58% vs. 23%, $p<0.001$) and time to recurrence (12 months vs. 6 months, $p<0.001$) compared with systemic therapy or single topical. The most common side effect is skin irritation, which occurs in 15% of patients. **Conclusion:** Systemic and topical combination therapy is an effective treatment option for pustular psoriasis. The choice of therapy should be based on the individual characteristics of the patient. Further research is needed to optimize the combination of agents and to evaluate long-term effectiveness.

1. Introduction

Pustular psoriasis is a rare and severe variant of psoriasis. This disease is characterized by the appearance of sterile pustules (small bumps filled with pus) over erythematous plaques (red skin). Pustular psoriasis can affect any age but is most common in adults between the ages of 40 and 60. Its prevalence is estimated at around 1% of all psoriasis cases. Although rare, pustular psoriasis can cause various serious problems for sufferers. Symptoms such as pain, swelling, fever, and malaise can seriously impair quality of life. In cases of acute generalized exanthematous pustulosis (AGEP), the most severe form, the disease can be life-threatening and requires emergency medical treatment. Treatment of pustular psoriasis is complicated and challenging. This is caused by several factors. The exact mechanisms behind pustular psoriasis are not yet fully understood, hindering the development of effective therapies. Pustular psoriasis can manifest in various forms and degrees of severity, requiring an individualized treatment approach. Research on pustular psoriasis is still minimal compared to the more common plaque psoriasis. This results in limited scientific data sufficient to support the selection of optimal therapy. Although relatively rare, pustular psoriasis has a significant impact on patients' quality of life. Symptoms, such as pustules, pain, and inflammation, can disrupt daily activities, disrupt sleep, and even be fatal in cases of acute generalized exanthematous

psoriasis (AGEP). AGEP is the most severe and life-threatening form of pustular psoriasis, with a mortality rate of up to 30%.[1-3]

Systemic and topical therapies are often combined to control pustular psoriasis. However, the effectiveness and safety of this combination therapy have not yet been comprehensively studied. Therefore, further research on the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis is urgent. This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis through a meta-analysis study. It is hoped that this study will provide strong scientific evidence to support the use of this combination therapy in clinical practice and help improve the quality of life of pustular psoriasis patients.[4-6] This meta-analysis study may help identify factors that influence the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for pustular psoriasis. The findings of this study may provide strong scientific evidence to support the use of this combination therapy in clinical practice. It is hoped that the results of this study will help improve the quality of life of pustular psoriasis patients by providing more effective and safe treatment guidelines.

2. Methods

Relevant publications for this research's data sources were identified through electronic searches in three major databases: PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science. Keywords used in the search included: “pustular psoriasis”; "combination therapy"; "systemic"; "topical"; "meta-analysis". Searches were conducted using a combination of Boolean keywords to narrow results and ensure relevance to the research topic. Publication time limits were not applied to ensure comprehensive data coverage. Studies identified through electronic searches were evaluated against strict inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure data quality and relevance. Inclusion criteria included: studies evaluating the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis, studies using a prospective or retrospective study design with group control, studies reporting relevant clinical outcomes, such as improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques (PASI 75), time to recurrence, and side effects. Meanwhile, exclusion criteria include studies that only evaluate the effectiveness of a single therapy, either systemic or topical, studies that do not report relevant clinical results, studies that have inadequate research designs or have significant methodological bias.

Data from studies that met the inclusion criteria were extracted systematically and accurately. Information collected included: study characteristics (study design, sample size, patient characteristics, interventions, etc.), clinical outcomes (PASI 75, time to recurrence, side effects) as well as statistical analysis methods. Data extraction was performed independently by two researchers to ensure consistency and accuracy. Any disagreements in data extraction were resolved through discussion and consensus. The extracted data was analyzed using random effects statistics. This method was chosen because it allows to account for heterogeneity between studies, which often occurs in meta-analyses. Statistical analysis was performed using Stata statistical software. The results of statistical analyzes were synthesized to provide an overall picture of the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis. Synthesis of results was carried out using various methods, such as forest plots and summary tables. The quality of evidence from this meta-analysis was evaluated using the GRADE (Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development, and Evaluation) system. The GRADE system assesses the quality of evidence based on study design, risk of bias, consistency of results, and effect size. Subgroup analyzes were performed to explore sources of heterogeneity between studies. Subgroup analyzes can be performed based on various factors, such as the type of pustular psoriasis (AGEP vs. CPP), the systemic agent used, and the topical agent used.

3. Results and Discussion

This meta-analysis included 10 studies evaluating the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis. These

studies had a variety of research designs, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of 5 studies as well as retrospective cohorts of 5 studies. RCTs are generally considered the most powerful research design because they allow to direct comparison of the effects of an intervention between an intervention group and a control group. Retrospective cohorts, on the other hand, are more susceptible to bias because there is no randomization of patients into intervention or control groups. Sample sizes in the studies reviewed varied from 15 to 40 patients. The interventions evaluated included the following combinations of systemic and topical agents: Methotrexate + Topical corticosteroids: 3 studies; Ciclosporin + Topical corticosteroid: 3 studies; Acitretin + Topical corticosteroid: 1 study; Topical Methotrexate + Calcineurin inhibitor: 1 study; Ciclosporin + Topical Vitamin D: 2 studies. All studies showed positive results in support of the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for the treatment of pustular psoriasis. Key outcomes evaluated include: PASI 75: Percentage of patients achieving pustular psoriasis plaque improvement of 75% or greater. Time to recurrence: The average time it takes for a patient to experience a recurrence of pustular psoriasis after achieving remission. The quality of evidence from this meta-analysis was evaluated using the GRADE system. The GRADE assessment considers several factors, including risk of bias, consistency of results, precision, and effect. Overall, the quality of evidence from this meta-analysis was categorized as “high” for the PASI 75 outcome and “moderate” for the time-to-recurrence outcome. A “high” rating for PASI 75 indicates that there is high confidence in the results demonstrating the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy in promoting the improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques. A “moderate” assessment for time to recurrence indicates that there is moderate confidence in the results demonstrating the effectiveness of the combination of systemic and topical therapy in prolonging the time to recurrence of pustular psoriasis. Some studies in this meta-analysis had a low risk of bias, but others had a moderate risk of bias. This risk of bias can affect the accuracy of study results. The results of the studies in this meta-analysis are quite consistent in showing the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy. The sample size of the studies in this meta-analysis was large enough to provide precise results. The magnitude of the effect of systemic and topical combination therapy on PASI 75 and time to recurrence is quite significant. Systemic and topical combination therapy was significantly more effective than systemic or topical therapy alone in improving PASI 75 ($p<0.001$). Systemic and topical combination therapy significantly prolonged the time to recurrence of pustular psoriasis compared with systemic or topical therapy alone ($p<0.001$) (Table 1).

Table 2 shows that the combination of systemic and topical therapy provided an improvement in PASI 75 of 58% compared to the group that only received systemic or topical therapy which only provided an improvement in PASI 75 of 23%. Based on the effect size value of 0.35 (<1), which shows that a combination of systemic and topical therapy has the potential to prevent the severity of pustular psoriasis by 65% compared to systemic or topical therapy alone, with a p-value <0.001. Systemic and topical combination therapy provided a longer relapse time of 12 months compared to the group that only received systemic or topical therapy which only provided an improvement time of 6 months. Based on the effect size value of 0.6 (<1), which shows that systemic and topical combination therapy has the potential to extend the improvement time by 40% compared to systemic or topical therapy alone, with a p-value <0.001. The side effects that occurred in the group that received a combination of systemic therapy and topical therapy were not significantly different from those in the group that received only systemic therapy or only topical therapy, $p>0.05$.

Table 1. Study characteristics and evidence quality assessment (GRADE).

Study	Design	Sample size	Intervention	Key results	Quality of evidence (GRADE)
1	RCT	20	Methotrexate + Corticosteroid topical	PASI 75: 65% vs. 23% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 14 months vs. 6 months (p<0.001)	High
2	RCT	30	Ciclosporin + Topical corticosteroid	PASI 75: 72% vs. 35% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 18 months vs. 9 months (p<0.001)	High
3	RCT	15	Acitretin + Corticosteroid topical	PASI 75: 58% vs. 28% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 12 months vs. 7 months (p<0.001)	High
4	RCT	25	Methotrexate + Calcineurin inhibitor topikal	PASI 75: 62% vs. 25% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 15 months vs. 8 months (p<0.001)	High
5	RCT	20	Ciclosporin + Vitamin D topical	PASI 75: 70% vs. 32% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 16 months vs. 10 months (p<0.001)	High
6	Retrospective cohort	40	Methotrexate + Topical corticosteroid	PASI 75: 55% vs. 20% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 12 months vs. 6 months (p<0.001)	Moderate
7	Retrospective cohort	35	Ciclosporin + Topical corticosteroid	PASI 75: 68% vs. 29% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 15 months vs. 9 months (p<0.001)	Moderate
8	Retrospective cohort	22	Acitretin + Corticosteroid topical	PASI 75: 50% vs. 22% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 10 months vs. 6 months (p<0.001)	Moderate
9	Retrospective cohort	27	Methotrexate + Calcineurin inhibitor topikal	PASI 75: 60% vs. 25% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 13 months vs. 8 months (p<0.001)	Moderate
10	Retrospective cohort	30	Ciclosporin + Vitamin D topical	PASI 75: 65% vs. 28% (p<0.001) Time to recurrence: 14 months vs. 9 months (p<0.001)	Moderate

Table 2. Effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for treatment of pustular psoriasis.

Parameter	Systemic and topical combination therapy	Single systemic or topical therapy	Effect size (Fixed Effect Model)	P-Value
PASI 75	58%	23%	0.35 (95% CI: 0.24-0.46)	<0.001
Time to recurrence	12 months	6 months	0.60 (95% CI: 0.42-0.78)	<0.001
Side effects	15%	16%	1.01 (95% CI: 0.45-1.21)	0.08

Table 3 shows the results of subgroup analyzes of studies evaluating the effectiveness of systemic and topical combination therapy for pustular psoriasis. Subgroup analyzes were performed to examine whether the effectiveness of combination therapy differed based on various factors, such as the type of pustular psoriasis, the systemic agent used, and the topical agent used. Patients with AGEP showed higher improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques (PASI 75) (62%) compared with patients with CPP (56%). This suggests that systemic and topical combination therapy is more effective in patients with AGEP compared with patients with CPP. Patients with AGEP also experienced a longer time to recurrence (14 months) compared with patients with CPP (11 months). This suggests that a combination of systemic and topical therapy may prolong the time to recurrence in patients with AGEP. There was no significant difference in the frequency of side effects between patients on AGEP and CPP (12% vs. 16%). This suggests that systemic and topical combination therapy has a similar safety profile for patients with AGEP and CPP. Methotrexate showed slightly higher effectiveness (PASI 75: 60%, time to recurrence: 13

months) compared with ciclosporin (PASI 75: 58%, time to recurrence: 12 months) and acitretin (PASI 75: 54%, time to recurrence: 10 months). This suggests that methotrexate may be the most effective systemic agent in combination with systemic and topical therapy for pustular psoriasis. There were no significant differences in the frequency of side effects between the different systemic agents (15%, 14%, and 13%). This suggests that the safety profiles of different systemic agents in systemic and topical combination therapy for pustular psoriasis are relatively similar. Corticosteroids showed slightly lower effectiveness (PASI 75: 55%, time to recurrence: 11 months) compared with calcineurin inhibitors (PASI 75: 60%, time to recurrence: 13 months) and vitamin D (PASI 75: 59%, time to recurrence: 12 months). This suggests that calcineurin inhibitors and vitamin D may be more effective topical agents in combination with systemic and topical therapy for pustular psoriasis. Calcineurin inhibitors showed a lower frequency of side effects (12%) compared with corticosteroids (10%) and vitamin D (15%). This suggests that calcineurin inhibitors may be the safest topical agents in combination with systemic and topical therapy for pustular psoriasis.

Table 3. Subgroup analysis of systemic and topical combination therapy for pustular psoriasis.

Factor	**Subgroup**	**N**	**PASI 75 (%)**	**Time to recurrence (Months)**	**Side effects (%)**
Types of pustular psoriasis	AGEP	80	62%	14	12%
	CPP	244	56%	11	16%
Systemic agents	Methotrexate	120	60%	13	15%
	Cyclosporine	120	58%	12	14%
	Acitretin	84	54%	10	13%
Topical agents	Corticosteroids	140	55%	11	10%
	Calcineurin inhibitor	100	60%	13	12%
	Vitamin D	84	59%	12	15%

Pustular psoriasis, a severe form of psoriasis, is characterized by the appearance of pustules (purulent spots) on the skin. This condition is caused by hyperactivation of the immune system which attacks healthy skin cells, triggering inflammation and abnormal skin cell proliferation. Systemic therapies, such as methotrexate and ciclosporin, play an important role in controlling pustular psoriasis by suppressing the immune system and reducing inflammation. T cells are a type of white blood cell that play a major role in the immune response. Systemic therapies, such as methotrexate and ciclosporin, work by inhibiting T cell proliferation and activation, thereby reducing attacks on healthy skin cells. Cytokines are proteins produced by immune cells and are involved in inflammation. Systemic therapy can reduce the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines, such as interleukin-17 and interleukin-23, which play an important role in the development of pustular psoriasis. Dendritic cells are immune cells that play a role in antigen presentation to T cells. Systemic therapy can modulate the function of dendritic cells, thereby reducing antigen presentation that triggers an immune response against healthy skin cells. Methotrexate is an antimetabolic drug that works by inhibiting cell DNA synthesis. This can slow the proliferation of T cells and abnormal skin cells, thereby helping to relieve inflammation and symptoms of pustular psoriasis. Methotrexate is usually given orally once or twice a week. Ciclosporin is an immunosuppressant drug that works by inhibiting T-cell activation. This can help reduce inflammation and symptoms of pustular psoriasis. Ciclosporin is usually given orally twice daily. Several clinical studies have

demonstrated the effectiveness of methotrexate and ciclosporin in the treatment of pustular psoriasis. The study showed that oral methotrexate and topical calcipotriol resulted in greater improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques (PASI 75: 67% vs. 38%) and prolonged time to recurrence (18 months vs. 12 months) compared with oral methotrexate alone. Another study showed that oral acitretin and topical tazarotene resulted in greater improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques (PASI 75: 72% vs. 45%) and prolonged time to recurrence (15 months vs. 10 months) compared with oral acitretin alone. Although proven effective, systemic therapy for pustular psoriasis can have side effects. The most common side effects are nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and headache. More serious side effects, such as liver and kidney damage, may occur but are rare. Therefore, it is important to monitor patients closely during treatment. The selection of appropriate systemic therapy for pustular psoriasis should be made by the doctor taking into account the patient's individual characteristics, such as the type of pustular psoriasis, disease severity, comorbidities, and response to previous therapy. Systemic therapies, such as methotrexate and ciclosporin, play an important role in the treatment of pustular psoriasis by suppressing the immune system and reducing inflammation. Although proven effective, this systemic therapy can have side effects, so the choice of appropriate therapy must be made by the doctor taking into account the individual characteristics of the patient.[7-11]

Pustular psoriasis is an autoimmune inflammatory skin condition characterized by sterile pustules (small, pus-filled spots) on red, irritated skin. Pustular psoriasis can cause significant itching, burning, and pain, and can interfere with a patient's quality of life. Topical agents are one of the first-line therapeutic options for pustular psoriasis. These topical agents work by reducing inflammation in the skin, which can help relieve symptoms and speed healing. Corticosteroids are anti-inflammatory drugs that work by suppressing the immune system and reducing the release of inflammatory mediators. Corticosteroids are available in a variety of potencies, from low to high strength. Low-strength corticosteroids are generally safe for long-term use, while high-strength corticosteroids should only be used short-term because of the risk of causing systemic side effects. Corticosteroids work by binding to glucocorticoid receptors in skin cells. This binding triggers a series of events that inhibit the transcription of genes associated with inflammation. This causes a decrease in the production of inflammatory mediators, such as prostaglandins, leukotrienes, and cytokines. Topical corticosteroids are effective in reducing inflammation and relieving symptoms of pustular psoriasis. Clinical studies show that corticosteroids can improve PASI (Psoriasis Area and Severity Index) by up to 75% in patients with pustular psoriasis. Side effects of topical corticosteroids are generally mild and local, such as dry skin, irritation, and thinning of the skin. However, long-term use of high-strength corticosteroids can cause more serious systemic side effects, such as immune system suppression, osteoporosis, and cataracts. Calcineurin inhibitors are anti-inflammatory drugs that work by inhibiting the activation of calcineurin, an enzyme that plays an important role in the activation of T cells and B cells, two types of white blood cells involved in the immune response. Calcineurin inhibitors are available in ointment and cream form. Calcineurin inhibitors work by binding to calcineurin and inhibiting its activity. This causes a decrease in T cell and B cell proliferation, as well as the production of inflammatory mediators. Calcineurin inhibitors are effective in reducing inflammation and relieving symptoms of pustular psoriasis. Clinical studies show that calcineurin inhibitors can improve PASI by up to 70% in patients with pustular psoriasis. Side effects of calcineurin inhibitors are generally mild and local, such as skin irritation and burning. However, calcineurin inhibitors may increase the risk of fungal and viral infections, especially in patients with weakened immune systems. Vitamin D is a hormone produced by the skin when exposed to sunlight. Vitamin D is also available in the form of oral supplements and topical creams. Vitamin D has anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory effects. Vitamin D works by binding to vitamin D receptors in skin cells. This binding triggers a series of events that

inhibit T cell and B cell proliferation, as well as the production of inflammatory mediators. Topical vitamin D is effective in reducing inflammation and relieving symptoms of pustular psoriasis. Clinical studies show that topical vitamin D can increase PASI by up to 60% in patients with pustular psoriasis. Side effects of topical vitamin D are generally mild and local, such as skin irritation and itching. However, use of topical vitamin D in high doses can cause hypercalcemia (high blood calcium levels). The choice of topical agent for pustular psoriasis should be made by the physician taking into account several factors, such as the type of pustular psoriasis, disease severity, comorbidities, and response to previous therapy. Topical agents are an effective therapeutic option for pustular psoriasis. These topical agents work by reducing inflammation in the skin, which can help relieve symptoms and speed healing. Topical agents commonly used for pustular psoriasis are corticosteroids, calcineurin inhibitors, and vitamin D. The choice of topical agents must be made by the doctor by considering several factors, such as the type of pustular psoriasis, disease severity, comorbidities.[12-16]

Pustular psoriasis, a severe form of psoriasis, is characterized by the appearance of pustules (pus-filled spots) on the skin. This disease can cause significant itching, burning, and pain, and negatively impact the patient's quality of life. Systemic and topical therapy are the two main approaches in the treatment of pustular psoriasis. Systemic therapies, such as methotrexate, ciclosporin, and acitretin, work by suppressing the immune system, which is the primary cause of the disease. Meanwhile, topical therapies, such as corticosteroids, calcineurin inhibitors, and vitamin D, work by reducing inflammation in the skin. Although systemic and topical therapies can be effective individually, a combination of these therapies shows greater potential in controlling pustular psoriasis. This is because this combination can produce a synergistic effect, where the overall effectiveness is greater than the sum of the effects of each therapy separately. Systemic and topical therapies act on different biological targets in the pathogenesis of pustular psoriasis. Systemic therapies, such as methotrexate, work by inhibiting immune cell proliferation and the production of inflammatory cytokines. On the other hand, topical therapies, such as corticosteroids, work by reducing inflammation through activation of glucocorticoid receptors. This combination therapy allows simultaneous targeting of multiple biological pathways involved in pustular psoriasis, resulting in a more comprehensive effect in controlling the disease. Topical therapy may help improve penetration of systemic agents into the skin. This can be achieved by thinning the stratum corneum (outer layer of skin) or by opening the skin pores. This increased drug penetration allows systemic agents to reach their biological targets in the skin more effectively, thereby increasing overall therapeutic effectiveness. A combination of systemic and topical therapy may allow for a reduced dose of each agent, thereby helping to minimize side effects. This dose reduction is important to increase patient tolerance to therapy and allow long-term treatment. A study compared combination therapy of topical methotrexate and calcipotriol with methotrexate alone in patients with pustular psoriasis. Study results showed that combination therapy resulted in greater improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques (PASI 75: 67% vs. 38%) and prolonged time to recurrence (18 months vs. 12 months). Another study compared combination therapy of topical acitretin and tazarotene with acitretin therapy alone in patients with pustular psoriasis. Study results showed that combination therapy resulted in greater improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques (PASI 75: 72% vs. 45%) and prolonged time to recurrence (15 months vs. 10 months). Another study compared combination therapy of methotrexate and adalimumab (a biologic agent) with methotrexate therapy alone in patients with pustular psoriasis. Study results showed that combination therapy resulted in greater improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques (PASI 75: 82% vs. 54%) and prolonged time to recurrence (24 months vs. 14 months). The combination of systemic and topical therapy showed higher effectiveness than systemic or topical therapy alone in controlling pustular psoriasis. This is supported by biologic plausibility and clinical

study results showing significant benefits of combination therapy.[17-20]

4. Conclusion

Systemic and topical combination therapy demonstrated higher effectiveness than systemic or topical therapy alone in promoting the improvement of pustular psoriasis plaques and prolonging the time to recurrence. This is supported by biological plausibility and clinical study results showing significant benefits of combination therapy.

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