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Monaldi Archives for Chest Disease

Monaldi Archives for Chest Disease 2026; 96:3238
doi: 10.4081/monaldi.2025.3238

Unveiling the role of cartridge-based nucleic acid amplification test in extrapulmonary tuberculosis diagnosis: insights from a cross-sectional study

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Abstract

Extrapulmonary tuberculosis (EPTB) is a multifaceted disease that could potentially impact nearly all organs. Current global data indicate a significant variation in the proportion of EPTB among all tuberculosis cases, ranging from 15% to 53%. Clinicians in India express concerns about the efficacy of the cartridge-based nucleic acid amplification test (CBNAAT) in EPTB, as its yield frequently does not align with the findings of the World Health Organization meta-analysis. Hence, the present study was conducted to evaluate the diagnostic yield of CBNAAT in EPTB at a tertiary care hospital.

Specifically, the present hospital-based observational cross-sectional study was conducted at the Department of Respiratory Medicine at a tertiary care hospital from February 2024 to April 2024. A total of 52 patients with presumptive EPTB were enrolled. Demographic information, clinical history, and clinical examination findings were recorded with the help of a standard, semi-structured, pre-validated case record proforma. A composite reference standard (CRS), which was defined by clinical, radiological, laboratory, and histopathological findings and treatment response to antitubercular therapy along the course, was considered. The statistical software, namely SPSS 22.0, was used for the analysis of the data.

Among a total of 52 patients, the mean age of patients was 37.42±16.18 years, with the proportion of males being 59.62%. The majority of patients had tuberculosis pleural effusion (63.46%). The pooled diagnostic yield of CBNAAT showed sensitivity and specificity of CBNAAT compared to CRS of 22.22% and 100%, respectively.

Culture had the highest sensitivity in diagnosing EPTB in the study population as compared to CBNAAT, thereby emphasizing the importance of diagnosis by culture method.

Key words: composite reference standard, Xpert MTB/RIF, lymph node TB, TB pleural effusion, abdominal TB, bone and joint TB.

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Introduction

Tuberculosis (TB) is a communicable disease primarily affecting the lungs, caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (MTB) [1]. Historically, it was posited that pulmonary TB accounts for approximately 85% of total TB cases, while the remaining 15% are attributed to extrapulmonary TB (EPTB) cases [2].

EPTB is a multifaceted disease that could potentially impact nearly all organs. It is prevalent among the lower socioeconomic demographic [3]. The impact of TB is more pronounced with increased involvement of extrapulmonary organs in this at-risk population [4,5]. Current global data indicate a significant variation in the proportion of EPTB among all TB cases, ranging from 15% to 53% [6,7].

In April 2017, Indian guidelines for EPTB were established as evidence-based practices for the suspicion, diagnosis, and management of EPTB within medical care services. Cartridge-based nucleic acid amplification test (CBNAAT) (Xpert MTB/RIF) is a commercially accessible assay for the MTB complex that employs polymerase chain reaction to analyze specimens for genetic material specific to MTB while concurrently identifying a gene (*rpoB*) associated with rifampicin resistance [8,9].

In recent years, CBNAAT has become a significant diagnostic instrument due to its superior sensitivity and diagnostic yield. EPTB continues to present a considerable challenge in diagnosis owing to its varied clinical manifestations and the constraints of traditional diagnostic techniques. While microbiological confirmation is essential for TB diagnosis, obtaining a specimen for EPTB is often challenging. As a result, neither CBNAAT nor culture can always serve as the definitive gold standard for diagnosing EPTB. Therefore, the composite reference standard (CRS), which encompasses clinical, radiological, laboratory, and histopathological findings, is utilized for the initiation of antitubercular therapy (ATT). CRS also helps in monitoring response to ATT.

Clinicians in India express concerns about the efficacy of CBNAAT in EPTB, as its yield frequently does not align with the

findings of the World Health Organization (WHO) meta-analysis. Hence, the present study was conducted to evaluate the diagnostic yield of CBNAAT in EPTB at tertiary care hospital.

Materials and Methods

This investigation was designed as a cross-sectional study at a tertiary care hospital's Department of Respiratory Medicine and conducted over 3 months, from February to April 2024. The study aimed to assess the diagnostic accuracy of the CBNAAT in patients suspected of having EPTB.

Study participants

Patients presenting with clinical symptoms indicative of EPTB were included after obtaining informed consent. Participants were selected based on inclusion criteria, such as symptoms suggestive of EPTB, and were excluded if they were already receiving anti-tubercular therapy or declined participation. Ultimately, 52 eligible patients were enrolled.

Data collection and processing

Demographic details, clinical history, and physical examination findings were systematically recorded using a validated proforma. Biological specimens, such as pleural fluid, lymph node aspirates, and bone biopsy tissues, were collected based on the suspected site of disease. These samples underwent CBNAAT testing alongside acid fast bacilli (AFB) culture and other diagnostic procedures like histology.

Diagnostic framework

The diagnostic performance of CBNAAT was evaluated against a CRS. A CRS typically integrates several diagnostic components, including: i) clinical evaluation – comprehensive assessment of patient symptoms and medical history like cough, evening rise of temperature, night sweats, weight loss; ii) radiological imaging – use of imaging techniques like X-rays and ultrasonography to detect signs indicative of EPTB; iii) laboratory investigations – analysis of biological samples for markers associated with TB infection, like adenosine deaminase levels of pleural fluid; iv) histopathological examination – microscopic evaluation of tissue samples to identify pathological changes consistent with TB, like necrotizing granulomas, caseous necrosis, giant cells, *etc*.; v) microbiological tests – procedures such as culture and staining to detect the presence of MTB like Ziehl-Neelson staining, solid media or liquid culture methods; vi) therapeutic response – monitoring patient response to anti-tubercular therapy in terms of symptomatic or radiological improvement, which can support the diagnosis when other evidence is inconclusive.

A CRS serves as a surrogate benchmark in the absence of a definitive "gold standard" test, combining multiple diagnostic methods to establish a more accurate reference.

Laboratory analysis

All diagnostic tests were conducted in National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories-accredited facilities. The CBNAAT analyses were performed using the GeneXpert MTB/RIF platform, ensuring strict adherence to quality control protocols. AFB culture was done by either a BACTEC mycobacterial growth indicator tube or solid media (Lowenstein-Jensen) according to resource availability. In the case of pleural TB, our methodology was limited by the inability to perform parietal pleura biopsy due to resource constraints at our center. Consequently, we were unable to perform histologic assessments or rapid molecular tests recommended by the WHO.

Ethical approval and statistical analysis

The study protocol received approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee (approval number: NKPSIMS & RC and LMH/IEC/1/2024). Participant confidentiality was maintained throughout, with data anonymized before analysis. Statistical evaluations were conducted using SPSS version 22.0 (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics summarized the data, while sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), and negative predictive value (NPV) were calculated to compare CBNAAT with CRS. Associations were tested using chi-squared analysis, with significance set at $p<0.05$.

Results

Demographic characteristics

This research included 52 individuals who were suspected to have EPTB. The participants had an average age of 37.42 years (±16.18), with the largest proportion (48.08%) being between 31 and 50 years of age. Age-wise, 15.38% were in the 18-30 years category, 30.77% were between 51 and 70 years, and 5.77% were older than 70 years. Males represented 59.62% (n=31) of the study group, while females accounted for 40.38% (n=21) (Table 1).

Comorbidities and medical history

Diabetes mellitus emerged as the most prevalent comorbidity, affecting 17.31% of the participants, followed by hypertension at 11.54%. A history of TB was reported by 7.69% of the individuals, and one participant (1.92%) tested positive for HIV. The vast majority (98.07%) tested negative for HIV infection (Table 1).

Distribution of extrapulmonary tuberculosis cases

Pleural effusion was the most frequently diagnosed type of EPTB, affecting 63.46% (n=33) of the patients. Other types included bone and joint TB (15.38%, n=8), abdominal TB (13.46%, n=7), lymph node TB (5.77%, n=3), and endometrial TB (1.92%, n=1) (Table 2).

Diagnostic performance and yield

The diagnostic capabilities of CBNAAT and culture were assessed in comparison to the CRS. CBNAAT exhibited a sensitivity of 22.22% and a specificity of 100%, indicating its ability to correctly identify all positive cases without any false positives. The PPV for CBNAAT was 100%, though its NPV was lower at 16.67%. Culture showed a sensitivity of 33.33% and a specificity of 85.71%, with a PPV of 93.75% and an NPV of 16.67%. While culture identified a greater number of true positives than CBNAAT, it had a slightly higher incidence of false positives (Table 3).

Diagnostic yields by extrapulmonary tuberculosis type

The effectiveness of CBNAAT and culture varied significantly among different forms of EPTB. For lymph node TB, both tests yielded a diagnostic success rate of 66.67%. For bone and joint TB,

CBNAAT identified 25% of cases, whereas culture was more effective, detecting 75%. In cases of pleural effusion, CBNAAT diagnosed 15.15% while culture detected 9.09%. Similarly, abdominal TB showed higher diagnostic success with culture at 57.14% compared to CBNAAT's 14.29% (Table 4). Neither CBNAAT nor culture was able to detect endometrial TB. These variations underline the site-specific differences in test performance and the necessity of combining diagnostic methods for improved accuracy.

Comparative diagnostic yields

Lymph node TB had the highest diagnostic yield using CBNAAT (66.67%), followed by bone and joint TB (25%). Pleural effusion and abdominal TB demonstrated lower diagnostic yields with CBNAAT. Culture, on the other hand, showed superior performance for bone and joint TB (75%) and abdominal TB (57.14%), underscoring its importance in diagnosing these specific forms of EPTB (Table 4).

Table 1. Demographic distribution among patients.

Demographic characteristics		Frequency (n=52)	Percentage
Age (years)	18-30	8	15.38
	31-50	22	48.08
	51-70	14	30.77
	>70	3	5.77
Gender	Male	31	59.62
	Female	21	40.38
Comorbidity	Diabetes Mellitus	9	17.31
	Hypertension	6	11.54
	Past history of tuberculosis	4	7.69
HIV status	Positive	1	1.92
	Negative	51	98.07

Table 2. Type of extrapulmonary tuberculosis distribution among patients.

Type of extrapulmonary tuberculosis	Frequency (n=52)	Percentage
Tuberculosis pleural effusion	33	63.46
Bone and joint	8	15.38
Abdominal tuberculosis	7	13.46
Lymph node	3	5.77
Endometrial tuberculosis	1	1.92
Total	52	100

Table 3. Diagnostic yield of cartridge-based nucleic acid amplification test and culture in extrapulmonary tuberculosis among study population.

Diagnostic test		CRS-EPTB		Total
		Positive (n=45), n (%)	Negative (n=7), n (%)	
CBNAAT	Positive	10 (22.22)	0 (0)	10 (19.23)
	Negative	35 (77.78)	7 (100)	42 (80.77)
Culture	Positive	15 (33.33)	1 (14.29)	16 (30.77)
	Negative	30 (66.67)	6 (85.71)	36 (69.23)

CBNAAT, cartridge-based nucleic acid amplification test; EPTB, extrapulmonary tuberculosis; CRS, composite reference standard.

Table 4. Type of extrapulmonary tuberculosis and yield by various modalities among patients.

Type of extrapulmonary tuberculosis	CBNAAT (%)	AFB culture (%)
Tuberculosis pleural effusion (n=33)	5 (15.15)	3 (9.09%)
Bone and joint (n=8)	2 (25.00)	6 (75.00)
Abdominal tuberculosis (n=7)	1 (14.29)	4 (57.14)
Lymph node (n=3)	2 (66.67)	2 (66.67)
Endometrial tuberculosis (01)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total (n=52)	10 (22.22)	15 (33.33)

CBNAAT, cartridge-based nucleic acid amplification test; AFB culture, acid fast bacilli culture.

Discussion

The current observational cross-sectional study aimed to assess the diagnostic yield of CBNAAT in EPTB at a tertiary care hospital. The study included 52 patients with suspected EPTB.

Among the 52 participants, the majority (48.08%) were between 31 and 50 years of age, with an average age of 37.42±16.18 years. Male patients constituted 59.62% of the study population. Studies often indicate that EPTB is more common in females, especially among younger women. Lymph node TB is commonly reported in females, whereas pleural TB has a higher prevalence in males. Diabetes mellitus emerged as the most common comorbidity, present in 17.31% of cases. Studies indicate that in settings with lower HIV prevalence, diabetes mellitus often emerges as the leading comorbidity due to its global prevalence and its impact on immune function. Similar demographic patterns were observed in studies by Nishal *et al*. and Rao *et al*. [10,11].

In this study, the most prevalent form of EPTB was tuberculous pleural effusion (63.46%), followed by bone and joint TB (15.38%). This finding contrasts with the studies conducted by Nishal *et al*. and Rao *et al.* [10,11], where lymph node TB was the predominant form of EPTB. This disparity may be attributed to certain limitations in the current study, such as its setting at a tertiary care center. Patients presenting with cervical swelling often consult the ENT outpatient department initially and are subsequently referred to the surgery department for excision procedures, likely resulting in a smaller sample size for lymph node TB.

The diagnostic performance of CBNAAT in this study revealed a sensitivity of 22.22% and a specificity of 100% compared to the CRS. The highest diagnostic yield was observed for lymph node TB (66.67%), followed by bone and joint TB (25%).

A study by Jose *et al*. [12], in North Kerala (n=1145), reported a CBNAAT sensitivity of 12.6%. In contrast, Vadwai *et al*. (n=283) reported a sensitivity of 81% against CRS [13], while Suzana *et al.* (n=494) found a sensitivity of 62% [14]. Krishna *et al*. [15] observed a CBNAAT sensitivity of 68.5% in their study. A meta-analysis conducted by the WHO on the use of Xpert MTB/RIF for lymph node aspirates in diagnosing EPTB reported pooled sensitivity and specificity values of 83.7% and 99.2%, respectively. The variability in CBNAAT sensitivity for EPTB stems from multiple factors. These include differences in the types of samples collected, as pleural fluid and cerebrospinal fluid often have lower bacterial loads compared to lymph node aspirates, impacting detection rates. Additionally, studies have shown significant heterogeneity in sample processing techniques, such as whether concentration steps are employed. Variations in reference standards, with some using CRS and others relying solely on culture, further contribute to this inconsistency. The heterogeneity in study designs, including differences in smear positivity, sample freshness, and the proportion of HIV-positive patients, also influences sensitivity outcomes [16].

In the present study, CBNAAT demonstrated higher diagnostic efficacy for lymph node aspirates and pus, whereas it failed to detect EPTB in pleural fluid, cerebrospinal fluid, and peritoneal fluids. This phenomenon could be explained by the limited bacterial load in pleural spaces, reflecting a hypersensitivity reaction mediated by cell-mediated immunity. Previous studies have shown that pleural fluid cultures yield positive results in only 20-40% of patients with confirmed tuberculous pleuritis [17,18]. Since our study relied solely on pleural fluid for diagnosing suspected TB pleural effusion, the sensitivity of molecular and microbiologic methods may have been lower than if biopsy specimens had been included, potentially impacting diagnostic accuracy.

The WHO recommends the use of nucleic acid amplification tests, such as Xpert MTB/RIF and Xpert Ultra, as initial diagnostic tools for TB. These tests are strongly recommended for both pulmonary and EPTB due to their high specificity and ability to simultaneously detect rifampicin resistance. They are particularly beneficial in resource-limited settings and offer faster results compared to traditional culture-based methods. These recommendations extend to patients of all ages and include individuals with HIV [19].

One of the major limitations of this study was the absence of a definitive gold standard for EPTB diagnosis, which could have led to false positive or false negative results within the study cohort. This inherent challenge affects not only this study but also any research focused on EPTB diagnosis. Additionally, the small sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings to the larger population. Also, some forms of EPTB were not included in the analysis, further limiting the scope of the study.

Conclusions

This study underscores the critical role of CBNAAT in diagnosing EPTB, particularly due to its high specificity and utility in resource-limited settings. Although CBNAAT's sensitivity is modest, its integration with complementary methods like culture and histopathology significantly enhances diagnostic accuracy.

A notable strength of this research is its evaluation of CBNAAT across various EPTB forms, offering insights into its site-specific efficacy. Despite a limited sample size, the findings contribute valuable data supporting a multimodal diagnostic approach. Future studies on larger populations are recommended to validate these results and improve diagnostic sensitivity. CBNAAT remains a vital component in the framework for effective EPTB diagnosis.

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Received: 26 October 2024; Accepted: 27 February 2025; Early view: 6 March 2025.

Contributions: Anil Sontakke: this author takes responsibility for the content of the manuscript, including the data and analysis, and the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis; Rajasi Bundale, Sagar Kolte, Nidhi Girdhar: study design, data analysis and interpretation. Rajasi Bundale, Sagar Kolte, Nidhi Girdhar, Hrishikesh Gaikwad, Harshal Ital: writing of the manuscript. Anil Sontakke: drafting of the article and critical revision for important intellectual content. All the authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflict of interest: the authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: ethical approval (office letter no. NKPSIMS & RC and LMH/IEC/1/2024) has been obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee.

Informed consent: written informed consent was obtained from a legally authorized representative(s) for anonymized patient information to be published in this article.

Patient consent for publication: obtained.

Availability of data and materials: all data generated or analysed during this study are included in this published article.

Declaration of generative artificial intelligence and artificial intelligence-assisted technologies in the writing process: the authors declare that no generative artificial intelligence or artificial intelligence-assisted technologies were used in the writing process of this manuscript.