



# *NFKB1* variants were associated with the risk of Parkinson's disease in male

Sergio Perez-Oliveira<sup>1,2</sup> · Daniel Vazquez-Coto<sup>1,2</sup> · Sara Pardo<sup>1</sup> · Marta Blázquez-Estrada<sup>2,3</sup> · Manuel Menéndez-González<sup>2,3</sup> · Pablo Siso<sup>2,3</sup> · Esther Suárez<sup>2,3</sup> · Ciara García-Fernández<sup>2,3</sup> · Beatriz de la Casa Fages<sup>4</sup> · Eliecer Coto<sup>1,2</sup> · Victoria Álvarez<sup>1,2</sup>

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## Abstract

The NF- $\kappa$ B pathway is involved in the pathogenesis of neurological disorders that have inflammation as a hallmark, including Parkinson's disease (PD). Our objective was to determine whether common functional variants in the *NFKB1*, *NFKB1A* and *NFKBIZ* genes were associated with the risk of PD. A total of 532 Spanish PD cases (61% male; 38% early-onset,  $\leq 55$  years) and 300 population controls (50%  $\leq 55$  years) were genotyped for the *NFKB1* rs28362491 and rs7667496, *NFKB1A* rs696, and *NFKBIZ* rs1398608 polymorphisms. We compared allele and genotype frequencies between early and late-onset, male and female, and patient's vs. controls. We found that the two *NFKB1* alleles were significantly associated with PD in our population ( $p=0.01$ ; total patients vs. controls), without difference between Early and Late onset patients. The frequencies of the *NFKB1* variants significantly differ between male and female patients. Compared to controls, male patients showed a significantly higher frequency of rs28362491 II ( $p=0.02$ , OR=1.52, 95%CI=1.10–2.08) and rs28362491 C ( $p=0.003$ , OR=1.62, 95%CI=1.18–2.22). The two *NFKB1* variants were in strong linkage disequilibrium and the I-C haplotype was significantly associated with the risk of PD among male ( $p=0.002$ ). In conclusion, common variants in the NF- $\kappa$ B genes were associated with the risk of developing PD in our population, with significant differences between male and female. These results encourage further studies to determine the involvement of the NF- $\kappa$ B components in the pathogenesis of Parkinson's disease.

**Keywords** Parkinson's disease · Genetic susceptibility · Gene polymorphisms · Nuclear-factor kappa-b

## Introduction

The nuclear factor kappa light chain enhancer of activated B cells (NF- $\kappa$ B) comprises a family of transcription factors that drive the expression of many genes which regulate pro-inflammatory responses (Lawrence 2009; Liu et al. 2017). The functional NF- $\kappa$ B transcription factor is a complex of at least one Rel protein (RelA, RelB, or RelC) and the p50 or p52 proteins. The p50 protein is encoded by the *NFKB1* gene and as homo or heterodimer with p52 (encoded by *NFKB2*) acts as repressor of transcription, while as heterodimers with Rel proteins enhances the transcription of many genes by binding to their  $\kappa$ B promoter consensus site (5'-GGGRNYY YCC-3). The NF- $\kappa$ B pathway is regulated through the binding of several inhibitors in the cytoplasm (I $\kappa$ B $\alpha$ , I $\kappa$ B $\beta$ , I $\kappa$ B $\epsilon$ , and Bcl-3) that prevent the translocation of the Rel/p50/p52 complexes to the nucleus. Several stimuli mediate the phosphorylation of these I $\kappa$ Bs and their

Sergio Perez-Oliveira and Daniel Vazquez-Coto contributed equally to this work.

✉ Victoria Álvarez  
victoria.alvarez@sespa.es

- <sup>1</sup> Laboratorio de Genética, Hospital Universitario Central de Asturias, Avd de Roma s/n, Oviedo 33011, Spain
- <sup>2</sup> Instituto de Investigación Sanitaria del Principado de Asturias (ISPA), Oviedo, Spain
- <sup>3</sup> Servicio de Neurología, Hospital Universitario Central de Asturias, Oviedo 33011, Spain
- <sup>4</sup> Servicio de Neurología, Hospital Universitario Gregorio Marañón, Madrid, Spain

dissociation from the complex, that are then translocated into the nucleus. In the nucleus, the NF- $\kappa$ B is also regulated by atypical proteins, such as NFKBIZ/I $\kappa$ B $\zeta$  (Feng et al. 2023). The NF- $\kappa$ B components are highly expressed in immune cells but are also present in most tissues and cell types. The inappropriate activation of NF- $\kappa$ B pathway has been associated with inflammatory diseases, while its persistent inhibition would result in a lack of immune response to infection or delayed cell growth (Park and Hong 2016).

The NF- $\kappa$ B pathway plays a role in the pathogenesis of neurological disorders that have inflammation as a pathological hallmark (Ju Hwang et al. 2017; Kaltschmidt et al. 2022; Singh and Singh 2020). NF- $\kappa$ B has been implicated in processes of synaptic plasticity and memory, and in the development of Parkinson's disease (PD) (Bellucci et al. 2020; Dolatshahi et al. 2021; Kaltschmidt et al. 2022; Kaltschmidt and Kaltschmidt 2015; Mattson & Meffert 2006). The selective inhibition of NF- $\kappa$ B activation prevented dopaminergic neuronal loss in a mouse model of Parkinson's disease (Ghosh et al. 2007). Mice deficient for the c-Rel peptide developed a PD-like phenotype (Bauguera et al. 2012; Parrella et al. 2019). The expression of Parkin (a gene mutated in early-onset recessive PD) could enhance the activation of NF- $\kappa$ B by promoting the phosphorylation of I $\kappa$ Bs and subsequent nuclear translocation of p65 (Wang et al. 2018). In iPSC-derived neurons the silencing of *LRRK2* (a gene mutated in familial PD with dominant inheritance) decreased  $\alpha$ -syn protein levels in mutated neurons and modified NF- $\kappa$ B transcriptional targets (López de Maturana et al., 2016). The NF- $\kappa$ B dysregulation in *LRRK2* mutated neurons was also demonstrated by a protracted recovery of I $\kappa$ B $\alpha$  and a marked impairment in p65 nuclear translocation (Russo 2019). Microglia from *Lrrk2*-null mice showed increased inhibition of nuclear p50 homodimer and attenuated inflammatory response, with markedly reduction of the nuclear inhibitor *NFKBIZ* (Bellucci et al. 2020). The NF- $\kappa$ B pathway also mediated the protective effect of NME1 in *LRRK2* models of PD (Anantha et al. 2022). The above referred studies strengthened the interplay between PD and NF- $\kappa$ B inflammatory pathways. Likewise, pharmacological targeting of the NF- $\kappa$ B pathway may prevent PD progression (Flood et al. 2011).

The association of nucleotide variants in the NF- $\kappa$ B genes has been widely investigated in cancer and several immune-mediated diseases (Baltus et al. 2021; Cambor et al. 2022; Coto et al. 2019; Coto-Segura et al. 2017; Gao et al. 2007, 2012; Lin et al. 2012; López-Mejías et al. 2012; MohdSuzairi et al. 2013; Vogel et al. 2011). The best characterised variant is rs28362491, a biallelic 4-nucleotides indel in the *NFKB1* promoter (-94 delATTG) that has been linked to differences in gene expression. Variants in the *NFKB1A* and *NFKBIZ* genes have been associated with

different transcript expression between the genotypes and the risk for immune mediated diseases (Song et al. 2011; Coto-Segura et al. 2017).

Based on the evidences described above, we hypothesised that gene variants in the genes that encode NF- $\kappa$ B components might be involved in the susceptibility of developing PD or act as modifiers of the age at disease onset.

## Patients and methods

### Study subjects

This study was approved by the Asturias Ethical Committee for Medical Research, and all the participants gave their informed consent. All the patients ( $N=532$ ) and controls ( $N=300$ ) were of European ancestry and from the region of Asturias (Northern Spain, total population approx. 1 million). PD was diagnosed by Neurologists from the Hospital Universitario Central Asturias (HUCA) and Hospital Cabueñes-Gijón according to the UK Parkinson's Disease Society Brain Bank clinical criteria. Patients with disease symptoms at an age  $\leq 55$  years ( $N=201$ , 38%) or  $> 55$  years ( $N=331$ , 62%) were classified as early-onset (EO) and late-onset (LO), respectively (Camerucci et al. 2021).

Controls were a total of 300 individuals randomly selected from the general population of Asturias, without other inclusion or exclusion criteria. They were studied with the only purpose of determining allele and genotype frequencies of the NF- $\kappa$ B in the general population in the context of a case-control study.

### NF- $\kappa$ B variants genotyping

The DNA of all the participants was obtained from blood leukocytes. We studied the *NFKB1* rs28362491, *NFKB1* rs7667496, *NFKB1A* rs696 and *NFKBIZ* rs1398608 variants. The four polymorphisms were selected based on their reported functional effects on the NF- $\kappa$ B expression and signaling, their previous association to immune-mediated and inflammatory diseases, or the significant effect on gene expression according to the GTEX Portal (<https://gtexportal.org/>) (suppl. Figure 1).

The *NFKB1* rs28362491 and *NFKB1A* rs696 were genotyped with TaqMan probes (assays id. C\_61632788\_30 for rs28362491 and id. C\_145669\_30 for rs696). DNAs were amplified in 96 well qPCRs plates with a 7500 Fast Real-Time PCR System and following the manufacturer protocol (Thermo Fisher Scientific).

The *NFKB1* rs28362491 and *NFKBIZ* rs1398608 were genotyped by digestion of PCR fragments with the

restriction enzymes MspI or TaqI, as previously reported (Coto et al. 2018) (suppl. Figure 2).

**LRRK2 mutation analysis**

Pathogenic mutations in the leucine-rich repeat kinase 2 gene (*LRRK2*; PARK8) have been implicated in autosomal dominant parkinsonism. Two *LRRK2* pathogenic variants are the most common cause of familial PD among Europeans: p.R1441G (c.4321 C>G, SNP rs33939927) and p.G2019S (c.6055G>A, SNP rs34637584). (Mata et al. 2006) All the patients were genotyped for the two variants by real-time PCR with Taqman probes (assays C\_63497391\_10 and C\_63498123\_10; ThermoFisher Scientific).

**Statistical analysis**

All the values were collected in an Excel file (available as reasonable request to the corresponding author). The statistical analyses were performed in R ([www.r-project.org](http://www.r-project.org)). Chi-squared tests were done to compare genotype and allele frequencies between groups. Odds Ratio (OR) values and their 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) were determined by logistic regression (generalized linear model). A  $p < 0.05$  was taken as the cutoff for significance.

Haplotype frequencies were calculated online with CubeX program (<http://apps.biocompute.org.uk/cubex/>) (Gaunt et al. 2007).

**Results**

The main values in our PD patients and their age-matched controls are summarised in Table 1. There were no difference in sex frequencies between early and late onset cases. A total of 10% of the patients were carriers of one of the *LRRK2* pathogenic variants, 13% of the EO-PD and 8% of the LO-PD.

The genotype frequencies for three *NFKB1A* and *NFKB1* polymorphisms did not deviate from the Hardy-Weinberg equilibrium in the total patients and controls. For the controls the observed frequencies were close to the reported among Europeans (suppl. Figure 2). We did not find significant differences between population controls aged  $\leq 55$  and  $> 55$  years for the four gene variants, or between patients with early and late-onset PD (Table 1). We compared the allele frequencies between total patients and controls. The *NFKB1* rs28362491 Insertion (I) and rs28362491 C alleles were significantly more frequent in the patients ( $p = 0.018$  and  $p = 0.013$ , respectively). In reference to the genotypes, in our population the *NFKB1* rs28362491 II genotype and

**Table 1** Main values in the early and late-onset PD and the age matched controls. *LRRK2+*: carriers of pathogenic variants, p.Arg1441Gly or p.Gly2019Ser. MAF: minor allele frequency

	PD $\leq 55$ N=201	PD $> 55$ N=331	TOTAL Patients N=532	Controls $\leq 55$ N=150	Controls $> 55$ N=150	TOTAL controls N=300
<b>FEMALE</b>	79 (39%)	128 (39%)	207 (39%)	69 (46%)	68 (45%)	137 (46%)
<b>MALE</b>	122 (61%)	203 (61%)	325 (61%)	81 (54%)	82 (55%)	163 (54%)
<b>ONSET AGE RANGE years</b>	20–55	56–88	20–88	18–55	56–85	18–85
<b>ONSET AGE MEDIAN years</b>	48	66	62	49	63	60
<b>LRRK2+</b>	26 (13%)	28 (8%)	54 (10%)	-	-	-
<b>LRRK2 R1441G</b>	10 (5%)	14 (4%)	24 (5%)	-	-	-
<b>LRRK2 G2019S</b>	16 (8%)	14 (4%)	30 (6%)	-	-	-
<b>NFKB1A rs696</b>	0.43	0.39	0.39	0.38	0.36	0.37
<b>MAF T</b>						
<b>NFKB1 rs28362491</b>	0.33	0.32	0.32	0.38	0.39	0.38
<b>MAFD</b>						
<b>NFKB1 rs7667496</b>	0.30	0.29	0.30	0.36	0.35	<b>0.38</b>
<b>MAFT</b>						
<b>NFKBIZ rs1398608</b>	0.25	0.27	0.27	0.23	0.24	0.24
<b>MAF G</b>						

Total patients vs. total controls

*NFKB1A* rs696 C vs. T:  $p = 0.44$

*NFKB1* rs28362491 I vs. D:  $p = 0.018$ , OR = 1.29, 95%CI = 1.04–1.59

*NFKB1* rs7667496 C vs. T:  $p = 0.013$ , OR = 1.31, 95%CI = 1.06–1.62

the rs28362491 CC were non significantly increased among the patients (suppl Table 1). The *NFKBIA* and *NFKBIZ* allele and genotype frequencies did not differ between patients and controls.

There were significant differences between total male and female patients for the two *NFKBI* polymorphisms (Table 2). The rs28362491 II and rs28362491 CC genotypes were significantly more frequent in the male patients ( $p=0.002$  and  $p=0.005$ , respectively). The difference was significant after applying the Bonferroni's correction for multiple testing ( $p<0.01$ ). Moreover, for  $p<0.05$  and the frequencies found of the risk genotypes, the post hoc statistical power of the sample size (male vs. female) was 84%, above the recommended 80%.

Compared to controls, male patients showed a significantly higher frequency of rs28362491 II ( $p=0.02$ , OR=1.52, 95%CI=1.10–2.08) and rs28362491 C ( $p=0.003$ , OR=1.62, 95%CI=1.18–2.22). There were no differences between female patients and controls. The *NFKBIA* rs696 and *NFKBIZ* rs1398608 allele and genotype frequencies did not differ between the patients groups.

The two *NFKBI* polymorphisms were in strong linkage disequilibrium in our population ( $D'=0.98$ ,  $r^2=0.85$ ) (suppl. Tables 2 and 3). Haplotype rs28362491 I - rs28362491 C

was significantly more frequent among male patients compared to female, and compared to total controls ( $p=0.002$ , OR=1.56, 95%CI=1.17–2.07) (Fig. 1).

In reference to the *LRRK2* variants, 13% of the patients  $\leq 55$  years and 8% of the patients  $> 55$  years were carriers of p.R1441G or p.G2019S. We compared the *NFKBI*, *NFKBIA* and *NFKBIZ* frequencies between carriers and non-carriers of the *LRRK2* variants. No significant difference was observed between the groups (suppl. Table 4).

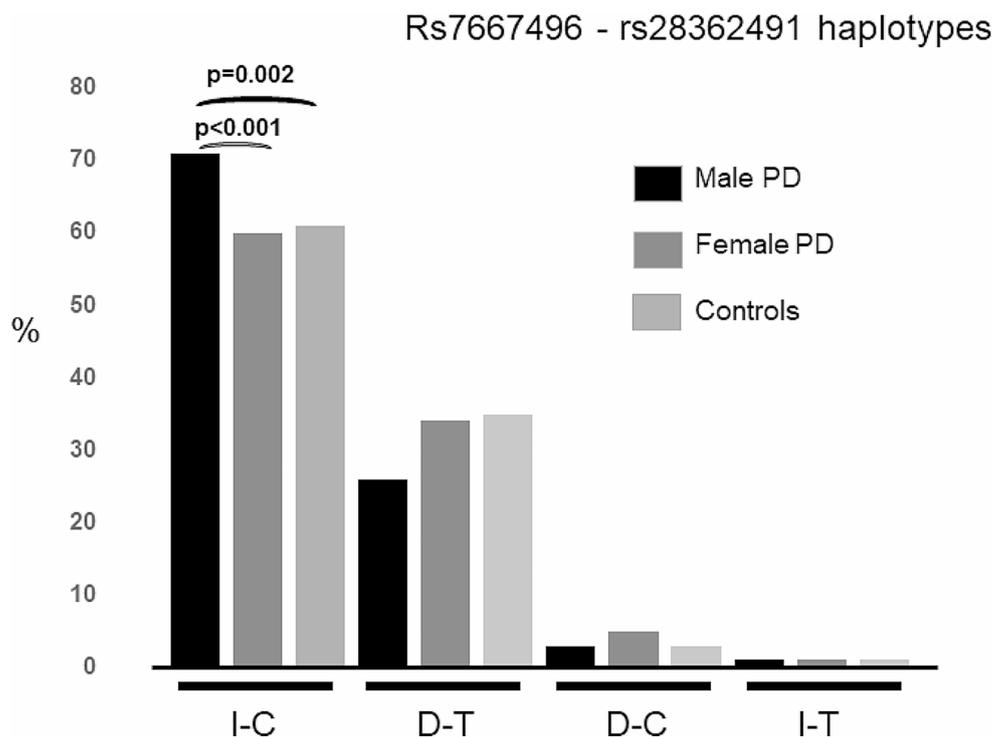
## Discussion

The main finding of our study was a significant association between common functional variants in the *NFKBI* gene and the risk of developing PD. This agreed with studies that reported a functional effect of the NF-Kb pathway in dopaminergic neurons of patients with PD (Hunot et al. 1997). We also found that the association was mainly due to a significant difference between male and female patients. Several studies showed that the NF- $\kappa$ B components might be differentially activated in male and female patients with Parkinson's disease. A transcriptome meta-analysis in brain

**Table 2** Allele and genotype frequencies in early and late onset male and female patients

	EO- Male N=122	LO- Male N=203	EO-Female N=79	LO- Female N=128	TOTAL MALE N=325	TOTAL FEMALE N=207
<b><i>NFKBIA</i></b>						
<b>rs696</b>						
CC	45 (37%)	80 (39%)	22 (28%)	45 (35%)	125 (38%)	67 (32%)
CT	53 (43%)	95 (47%)	41 (52%)	62 (48%)	148 (46%)	103 (41%)
TT	24 (20%)	28 (14%)	16 (20%)	21 (17%)	52 (16%)	37 (18%)
T	0.41	0.37	0.46	0.41	0.39	0.44
					C vs. T: $p=0.19$	
<b><i>NFKBI</i> rs28362491</b>						
II	62 (51%)	98 (48%)	27 (34%)	47 (37%)	160 (49%)	74 (36%)
ID	51 (42%)	94 (46%)	41 (52%)	65 (51%)	145 (45%)	106 (51%)
DD	9 (7%)	11 (6%)	11 (14%)	16 (13%)	20 (6%)	27 (13%)
D	0.28	0.29	0.40	0.37	0.29	0.34
					I vs. D: $p=0.001$	
					II vs. ID + DD: $p=0.002$	
<b><i>NFKBI</i> rs7667496</b>						
CC	64 (52%)	108 (53%)	31 (39%)	53 (41%)	172 (53%)	84 (41%)
CT	52 (43%)	85 (42%)	40 (51%)	60 (47%)	137 (42%)	100 (48%)
TT	6 (5%)	10 (5%)	8 (10%)	15 (12%)	16 (5%)	23 (11%)
T	0.26	0.26	0.35	0.33	0.26	0.34
					C vs. T: $p=0.001$	
					CC vs CT + TT: $p=0.005$	
<b><i>NFKBIZ</i> rs1398608</b>						
AA	66 (54%)	112 (55%)	43 (55%)	67 (52%)	178 (55%)	110 (53%)
AG	51 (42%)	75 (37%)	33 (42%)	47 (37%)	126 (39%)	80 (39%)
GG	5 (4%)	16 (8%)	3 (3%)	14 (8%)	21 (6%)	22 (11%)
G	0.25	0.26	0.25	0.29	0.26	0.29

**Fig. 1** Frequency of the NFKB1 haplotypes, rs76675496 ID – rs28362491 CT. Haplotype I-C was significantly more frequent in male patients vs. female ( $p < 0.001$ ) and male patients vs. controls ( $p = 0.002$ ). Haplotype frequencies were calculated with CubeX (<http://apps.biocompute.org.uk/cubeX/>) from the genotype combinations (**suppl table**)



found significant disease-associated sex differences in several pathways, including NF- $\kappa$ B genes (Tranchevent et al. 2023). In particular, *NFKB1* was among the top enriched transcription factors.

The *NFKB1* rs28362491 insertion allele that was significantly more frequent in the male patients has been associated with a decreased basal expression of NFKB1/p50. The increased risk among *NFKB1* II was in agreement with the reported decreased levels of *NFKB1*/p50 in the pars compacta of the substantia nigra of cases with dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB) compared to controls (Saldaña et al. 2007). The decreased basal expression of the p50 subunit in the substantia nigra could increase the vulnerability of the dopaminergic neurons to a possible neurotoxic effect of the p65 subunit. In this way, the lower expression of *NFKB1* (p50 subunit) among rs28362491-II and rs28362491-CC carriers could increase the risk of a toxic effect of p65 in neurons.

The reduction of NF- $\kappa$ B/p50 function in mice would result in augmented peripheral/microglial pro-inflammatory responses and neuroinflammation signalling mechanisms (Taetzsch et al. 2019). Mice lacking p50 treated with LPS showed different degree of neuroinflammation and microglia morphology compared to normal mice, and the loss of p50 function could thus result in increased microglial pro-inflammatory responses.

Recent studies gave some clues about the involvement of *NFKBIZ* in neurodegeneration. In human induced pluripotent stem cell-derived microglia *NFKBIZ* and *NFKBIA*

regulated the iron-induced neurotoxicity and iron overload, with a marked shift in the microglial transcriptional profile that overlapped with the transcriptomic signature found in microglia from PD postmortem brain (Ryan et al., 2023). Other study reported that microglia from PD brains were enriched for *NFKBIZ* (Zhu et al., 2022). The two *NFKBIA* and *NFKBIZ* in our study have been described as eQTLs associated with significantly different gene expression in several tissues (suppl. Figure 1). Moreover, *NFKBIA* rs696 is in the 3' non translated region of the mRNA and the reduction of expression among carriers of the G-allele could be explained by an increased affinity for micro-RNAs that bind to this mRNA sequence. Thus, the G allele would result in reduced basal levels of the NFKBIA protein (Song et al. 2011). In our study we did not find significant difference for the two *NFKBIZ* and *NFKBIA* frequencies between the groups.

Several studies have reported a significant interaction between LRRK2 and the NF- $\kappa$ B pathway. Among others, the downregulation of LRRK2 could result in inhibition of p50 dimerization and reduced expression of NFKBIZ (Bellucci et al. 2020). We did not find significant *NFKB1*, *NFKBIZ* and *NFKBIA* allele and genotype frequencies between patients with and without one of the two LRRK2 variants. However, the comparison was based on only 54 LRRK2-positive patients and thus underpowered for this comparison.

Our study has several limitations that could condition the conclusions. First, it was based on a limited number of PD patients. Second, it was based on a single population and

would thus require replication in different cohorts. Third, although the association of the studied variants with PD is plausible, functional studies to determine the different effect of the variants on gene expression from brains of PD patients are also necessary.

In conclusion, we report a significant association between common *NFKB1* variants and PD. We also found a different degree of association of the *NFKB1* variants in male and female. In particular, variants associated with decreased basal expression of *p50/NFKB1* could increase the risk of developing PD. These results encourage further studies to determine the involvement of the NF- $\kappa$ B components in the pathogenesis of PD.

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**Author contributions** All the authors contributed to this work by recruiting the patients and controls (MBE, MMG, PS, ES, CGF, BCF), performing the genetic study (SPO, DVC, SP, EC, VA), and/or the statistical analysis (EC, VA). E.C. and V.A. wrote the ms. All the authors have revised the text and approved the submission.

**Data availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. An Excel file with the raw data would be available for meta-analysis research.

## Declarations

**Ethics and consent to participate** This study was approved by the clinical research ethics committee of Hospital Universitario Central Asturias (HUCA). All the participants gave written or verbal consent. Data were handled in observance of Spanish legislation on data protection. The study complies with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (“Recommendations guiding doctors in biomedical research involving human subjects”).

**Competing interests** None of the authors have competing interests related to this work.

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