

Introduction/Overview

Epidemiology

Human herpesvirus 8 (HHV-8), also called Kaposi sarcoma (KS)-associated herpesvirus (KSHV), is a gamma human herpesvirus most closely related to Epstein-Barr virus. HHV-8 has been causally linked to all forms of KS (i.e., HIV-related, classic endemic, and iatrogenic) and with two rare neoplastic conditions usually associated with HIV infection: body cavity-based lymphoma, also known as primary effusion lymphoma (a B-cell lymphoma that typically arises in body cavities such as the pleural space), and multicentric Castleman disease (non-cancerous tumors that may develop in lymph nodes in a single site or in multiple sites throughout the body). The exact mechanism by which HHV-8 infection leads to neoplastic disease has not been fully elucidated, but seroconversion to HHV-8 antibody positivity virtually always precedes development of the tumors.¹

The prevalence of antibodies to HHV-8 varies widely with age, geography, and certain risk factors. In the United States and Europe, 1% to 3% of the general adult population is seropositive, with higher rates (8%) among men who have sex with men (MSM).² In a U.S. cohort of HIV-infected and at-risk (but HIV-negative) adolescents with a median age of 19 years, 11.2% were HHV-8 seropositive.³ The highest rates were in adolescent HIV-infected MSM (23%). Seropositivity was associated with HIV infection, MSM, a history of syphilis, and injection-drug use.^{3,4} The general adult seropositivity rate in Mediterranean countries ranges from 10% to 25%. In areas where HHV-8 is endemic, such as eastern and central sub-Saharan Africa, HHV-8 seropositivity rates as high as 80% have been reported in adults.⁵⁻⁹

HHV-8 is transmitted through oral and, possibly, genital secretions. Immunocompetent HHV-8-infected adults frequently shed HHV-8 in their oropharyngeal secretions.¹⁰ In areas where HHV-8 infection is endemic, the seroprevalence increases quickly during the first 5 years of life (especially when other family members are HHV-8-positive), then plateaus until adolescence and young adult years.^{11,12} The seroprevalence among infants and children increases with the number of HHV-8-positive parents and siblings in the home, indicating non-sexual transmission for prepubertal children, with a limited role for perinatal transmission.¹¹⁻¹⁸ HHV-8 can also be transmitted through exposure to infected blood, including through intravenous (IV) drug use and blood product transfusions.¹⁹

For HIV-infected individuals, coinfection with HHV-8 places them at increased risk of KS. Most cases of KS occur in adults (compared with children). Before the advent of antiretroviral therapy (ART), the overall incidence of KS in HIV-infected adults was as high as 20%. However, in the United States and England, KS represented less than 1% of pediatric AIDS-defining illnesses, likely due in part to low HHV-8 seroprevalence in children in these regions. Although KS occurs primarily in adults, the incidence in children has increased dramatically as a result of the HIV pandemic, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁰⁻²² Iatrogenic KS has emerged as well, predominantly among adults in developed settings, with increasing use of immunosuppressive therapies and organ transplantation.²³ Pediatric cases of iatrogenic KS after liver or bone marrow transplantation have also been described.²⁴⁻²⁷

The risk of KS among HIV-infected individuals is highest among those with severe immunodeficiency. KS, primary effusion lymphoma, and multicentric Castleman disease can occur at any CD4 T lymphocyte (CD4) cell count, but they are described most often in HIV-infected patients with more advanced immunosuppression (CD4 cell count <200 cells/mm³ in adults). It