Adherence to 5-aminosalicylic acid maintenance treatment in young people with ulcerative colitis: a retrospective cohort study in primary care

Abstract

Background
Maintenance treatment with 5-aminosalicylic acid (5-ASA) is recommended in ulcerative colitis (UC), but accurate estimates of discontinuation and adherence in adolescents transitioning to young adulthood are lacking.

Aim
To determine rates and risk factors for discontinuation and adherence to oral 5-ASA in adolescents and young adults 1 year following diagnosis of UC.

Design and setting
Observational cohort study using the UK Clinical Practice Research Datalink among adolescents and young adults (aged 10–24 years) diagnosed with UC between 1 January 1998 and 1 May 2016.

Method
Time to oral 5-ASA discontinuation (days) and adherence rates (proportion of days covered) were calculated during the first year of treatment using Kaplan–Meier survival analysis. Cox regression models were built to estimate the impact of sociodemographic and health-related risk factors.

Results
Among 667 adolescents and young adults starting oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment, one-quarter (n = 152) discontinued within 1 month and two-thirds (n = 419) within 1 year. Discontinuation was higher among those aged 18–24 years (74%) than younger age groups (61% and 56% in those aged 10–14 and 15–17 years, respectively). Adherence was lower among young adults than adolescents (69% in those aged 18–24 years versus 80% in those aged 10–14 years). Residents in deprived versus affluent postcodes were more likely to discontinue treatment (adjusted hazard ratio [aHR] = 1.44, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 1.10 to 1.92). Early corticosteroid use for an acute flare lowered the likelihood of oral 5-ASA discontinuation (aHR 0.68, 95% CI = 0.51 to 0.90).

Conclusion
The first year of starting long-term therapies in adolescents and young adults diagnosed with UC is a critical window for active follow-up of maintenance treatment, particularly in those aged 18–24 years and those living in deprived postcodes.

Keywords
5-aminosalicylic acid; adherence; adolescent; discontinuation; ulcerative colitis; young adult.

INTRODUCTION

The lifelong condition ulcerative colitis (UC) requires maintenance treatment in primary care; however, compliance can often be suboptimal in younger populations than in adults.1 Long-term 5-aminosalicylic acid (5-ASA) is the first-line treatment for maintaining disease remission in UC.2,3 Globally, the incidence of UC is rising fastest in younger populations.4 Up to 30% of individuals with UC are diagnosed in childhood and young adulthood, and more likely to have a severe disease course and years lived in disability relative to those diagnosed later in life.4 Therefore, disease control and maintaining remission is paramount for those diagnosed in early life. Despite this, estimates suggest medication adherence rates in young people are lower than adults with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).5,6 International guidelines recommend 5-ASA treatment should start promptly after diagnosis and continue long term to maintain remission.2,3 Stopping 5-ASA maintenance treatment increases the risk of early disease relapse, flare frequency, and impaired quality of life.7 Studies also report long-term 5-ASA treatment may reduce the risk of colorectal cancer in individuals with UC.8 However, some patients will need escalated immunosuppressive medications. For this group, the benefits of concurrent 5-ASA treatment to maintain remission is less clear cut.9

Poor medication adherence also places a significant cost burden on society and healthcare services.9 In the UK, disease relapse has been shown to be associated with a 20-fold increase in costs for those who required admission to hospital when compared with a two- to threefold increase for those who did not.10 Hence, medication adherence improves health outcomes and reduces resource use in health systems. Being diagnosed with a lifelong condition such as UC can be challenging for adolescents, who are undergoing physiological, psychological, and social transitions to adulthood.11 It is important that young people learn to self-care in the early stages of long-term conditions. However, adolescents and young adults diagnosed with IBD have rated their knowledge about continuous medication as suboptimal.12 Adolescents and young adults diagnosed with IBD perceive adhering to daily medication as a burden,13 the impact of sociodemographic and health-related risk factors.

Results
Among 667 adolescents and young adults starting oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment, one-quarter (n = 152) discontinued within 1 month and two-thirds (n = 419) within 1 year. Discontinuation was higher among those aged 18–24 years (74%) than younger age groups (61% and 56% in those aged 10–14 and 15–17 years, respectively.) Adherence was lower among young adults than adolescents (69% in those aged 18–24 years versus 80% in those aged 10–14 years). Residents in deprived versus affluent postcodes were more likely to discontinue treatment (adjusted hazard ratio [aHR] = 1.44, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 1.10 to 1.92). Early corticosteroid use for an acute flare lowered the likelihood of oral 5-ASA discontinuation (aHR 0.68, 95% CI = 0.51 to 0.90).

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INTRODUCTION

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How this fits in
Adolescents and young adults diagnosed with ulcerative colitis (UC) are recommended long-term maintenance treatment for disease control, but adherence rates in primary care are unknown. This observational cohort study using real-world data from primary care found one-quarter of newly diagnosed adolescents and young adults, aged 10–24 years, discontinued oral 5-aminosalicylic acid (5-ASA) maintenance treatment within 1 month of starting and two-thirds within 1 year. Young adults aged 18–24 years and those living in a deprived area were most likely to discontinue and have poor adherence to treatment. Having an acute flare-up of UC was linked to better adherence to oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment. The first year of starting lifelong therapies among individuals diagnosed with UC is a critical window to improve adherence for adolescents transitioning to young adulthood and those from deprived postcodes.

Data source
The Clinical Practice Research Datalink (CPRD) is one of the largest validated primary care research databases in the world. It contains the longitudinal, patient-level, anonymised electronic health records of 18 million patients from >700 general practices and is representative of the UK population. Primary care physicians use Read codes and prod codes to record diagnoses and prescriptions, respectively. The database's coding system has been validated for use in IBD and the reporting of medication adherence. English practice records are linked to the national hospital administrative database Hospital Episodes Statistics.

Case definition and cohort construction
The study population included individuals diagnosed with UC who started oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment aged between 10 and 24 years within 6 months of their recorded UC diagnosis date. 'Incident cases' with a first-ever diagnosis code for UC at least 1 year after registering with an ‘up-to-standard’ practice between 1 January 1998 and 1 May 2016 were included, in accordance with previously validated and published methods. Patients were excluded if they had codes for both UC and Crohn’s disease, or indeterminate codes (for example, ‘non-specific colitis’ and ‘colitis NOS’). Patients who had a comorbid condition that might require regular or prolonged corticosteroid use, for example, chronic asthma, polymyalgia rheumatica, and organ transplants, were also excluded to avoid potential confounding, as steroid exposure in this group is not solely for IBD.

Individuals were followed up from the oral 5-ASA start date for 1 year or until de-registration from their practice or death, whichever came first. Individuals whose coded diagnosis could not be determined and those who may have had oral 5-ASA treatment discontinued as a consequence of treatment escalation to immunomodulator therapy or if they had a colectomy during the study follow-up period were excluded. In addition, those with insufficient follow-up to identify whether they discontinued treatment during the first year (<90 days after the first break in treatment) were also excluded.

Outcomes
The primary outcome measure was time to oral 5-ASA discontinuation in the first year of maintenance treatment. Oral 5-ASA use was considered as continuous

with previous studies reporting a wide variation of 2%–93% and lower adherence rates compared with adults. However, previous cross-sectional surveys, most commonly used to measure oral 5-ASA treatment adherence among adolescents, are subject to recall bias and may overestimate adherence. Far less is known about the extent and timing of discontinuation.

Qualitative studies of adolescents’ health literacy and decision making, such as adherence to medication, is influenced by social and structural determinants including health perception, health behaviours, and access to health services. However, this is not well described in young people with chronic conditions such as UC.

A population-based study was therefore designed using prospectively collected prescribing data to determine discontinuation and adherence to oral 5-ASA maintenance in the first year of treatment among adolescents and young adults aged 10–24 years diagnosed with UC. The secondary aim was to identify risk and protective factors associated with oral 5-ASA discontinuation and adherence.

METHOD
The present study has been conducted as per recommendations provided by Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology guidelines.
Funding
Jonathan Blackwell was funded by a Crohn’s 
& Colitis UK grant (grant number: SP2018/3). Sonia Saxena is funded by the National 
Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) 
Senior Investigator Award, NIHR School 
for Public Health Research (SPHR) (grant 
number: NIHR 204000), NIHR Northwest 
London Applied Research Collaboration, and 
Imperial NIHR Biomedical Research Centre. 
The NIHR SPHR is a partnership between 
the Universities of Bristol, Cambridge, and 
Sheffield; Imperial; University College 
London; the London School of Hygiene and 
Tropical Medicine; LiLaC – a collaboration 
between the Universities of Liverpool 
and Lancaster; and Fuse – the Centre for 
Translational Research in Public Health, a 
collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, 
Northumbria, Sunderland, and Teesside 
Universities. Alex Bottle’s Unit at Imperial 
College London is affiliated with the NIHR 
Imperial Patient Safety Translational 
Research Centre. The NIHR Imperial Patient 
Safety Translational Centre is a partnership 
between the Imperial College Healthcare 
NHS Trust and Imperial College London. 
Alex Bottle’s Unit at Imperial College London 
is also grateful for support from the NIHR 
Biomedical Research Centre funding scheme. 
The views expressed in this publication are 
those of the authors and not necessarily those 
of Crohn’s & Colitis UK, the NHS, the NIHR, 
or the Department of Health and Social Care.

if prescriptions were within 90 days of 
each other. This cut-off was chosen as 
75% of individuals were found to receive 
prescriptions every 2 months. This window 
allowed those who continue treatment but 
collect prescriptions late or use existing 
supplies to be included.

The secondary outcome was adherence to 
oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment, 
defined as the proportion of days covered 
(PDC) with oral 5-ASA medication. The 
PDC, a validated objective measure of 
médication adherence, was calculated by 
dividing the total number of days covered 
from prescribed oral 5-ASA by the duration 
of follow-up in the first year of treatment 
(days). The PDC was capped at 100% to 
ensure measurement of adherence was not 
overestimated.25

Predictors of oral 5-ASA discontinuation 
and adherence
Potential predictors of oral 5-ASA 
discontinuation and adherence were 
identified from the biomedical literature 
and in consultation with a panel comprising 
specialist gastroenterologists, GPs, and 
researchers (the POP-IBD group).26,27 
Sociodemographic predictors were:
• sex;
• age group when oral 5-ASA maintenance 
treatment started (10–14, 15–17, and 
18–24 years); and 
• Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 
decile, which is a postcode-based 
measure of socioeconomic deprivation 
from 1 (least deprived) to 5 (most 
deprived).24

Health-related predictors included:
• having a psychiatric comorbidity, defined 
as any record of depression, anxiety, 
or antidepressant use during the study 
period; or
• poor health because of an acute flare of 
UC, defined as oral corticosteroid use 
within 3 months of UC diagnosis.

A proxy predictor of risky health 
behaviours was defined using proxy 
smoking status, defined as ‘smokers’, 
‘ex-smokers’, or ‘non-smokers’ based on 
the most recent code for smoking status 
at UC diagnosis. Those with missing 
data on smoking have been shown to be 
either ‘never-smokers’ or ‘non-recent 
smokers’, and were therefore classed as 
‘non-smokers’.28

Finally, the impact of era during which 
oral 5-ASA maintenance therapy was 
started was examined to account for secular 
changes in 5-ASA use over the study period 

Data analysis
Kaplan–Meier analysis was used to 
estimate time from the start of oral 5-ASA 
maintenance treatment to discontinuation. 
The PDC was calculated for each individual 
as a percentage of the first year covered 
with oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment.

In each model, where a potential 
predictor of oral 5-ASA discontinuation and 
adherence was examined, the probable 
blocks of mediators were determined and 
potential confounders adjusted for. Cox 
regression analysis was used to determine 
hazard ratios (HRs) for the risk of oral 5-ASA 
discontinuation in the year after starting 
maintenance treatment. Cox regression 
analysis was used so it was possible to 
account for the time each individual was at 
risk of oral 5-ASA discontinuation. Simple
and multiple linear regression analysis was used to determine predictors associated with adherence to oral 5-ASA in the first year of maintenance treatment.

All analyses were performed using Stata (version 17) software.

RESULTS
A total of 607 adolescents and young adults were identified with an incident diagnosis of UC who started oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment, excluding 48 individuals who required treatment escalation in the first year of starting oral 5-ASA and 109 ineligible individuals because of insufficient follow-up (Figure 1). Baseline characteristics of the study population can be found in Table 1.

Overall, 69% \((n = 419)\) of individuals discontinued oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment within 1 year of starting (Figure 2a). One-quarter \((n = 152)\) of the cohort discontinued treatment by day 34. The median time to discontinuation was 162 days (data not shown). Among individuals who discontinued oral 5-ASA, 90% \((n = 379/420)\) had no subsequent prescription in the first year of treatment.

Discontinuation rates at 1 year were lowest in younger adolescents (56% in those aged 15–17 years and 61% in those aged 10–14 years) and highest among young adults aged 18–24 years (74%) (Figure 2b). Among young adults aged 18–24 years, 28% discontinued oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment after a single prescription, compared with 19% and 15% of adolescents starting treatment at 10–14 and 15–17 years, respectively (data not shown).

Mean adherence for the study population in the first year of oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment was 72% (95% confidence interval [CI] = 70 to 75), equivalent to just under 9 months’ duration in the first 12 months of treatment. Adherence fell with older age at oral 5-ASA initiation. This was 80% (95% CI = 74 to 86) among

Table 1. Baseline characteristics of study population

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>327 (54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>280 (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age group at oral 5-ASA start date, years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 to 14</td>
<td>86 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 17</td>
<td>99 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 to 24</td>
<td>422 (70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Era of UC diagnosis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Era 1: 1998–2002</td>
<td>56 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Era 2: 2003–2007</td>
<td>134 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Era 4: 2013–2016</td>
<td>248 (41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5-ASA = 5-aminosalicylic acid; UC = ulcerative colitis.
adolescents aged 10–14 years, 78% (95% CI = 72 to 84) among adolescents aged 15–17 years, and 69% (95% CI = 66 to 72) among young adults aged 18–24 years (data not shown).

Risk and protective factors for oral 5-ASA discontinuation and adherence

Young adults aged 18–24 years starting oral 5-ASA were more likely to discontinue maintenance treatment in the first 12 months compared with adolescents aged 10–14 years (adjusted hazard ratio [aHR] 1.43, 95% CI = 1.04 to 1.97). Individuals living in deprived versus affluent postcodes were more likely to discontinue oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment (aHR 1.46, 95% CI = 1.10 to 1.92). UC flare with early corticosteroid use was less likely to discontinue oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment compared with individuals who did not require corticosteroids (aHR 0.68, 95% CI = 0.51 to 0.90; Table 2).

Predictors of lower adherence included starting treatment during young adulthood (aged 18–24 years) and living in poorer postcodes. Individuals who had an acute flare and required early corticosteroid use had higher adherence to oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment (Table 3).

Psychiatric comorbidity of depression, anxiety, or antidepressant use was not associated with discontinuation or adherence to oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment (Tables 2 and 3).

DISCUSSION

Summary

One-quarter of adolescents and young adults newly diagnosed with UC discontinued oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment within 1 month and two-thirds within 1 year. Of those who discontinued, 90% had no subsequent oral 5-ASA prescription in the first year of treatment. Adolescents and young adults adhered to oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment for an average of 9 months in the first year of treatment.

Strengths and limitations

This is the first population-based study, to the authors’ knowledge, to objectively examine discontinuation and adherence of oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment among adolescents, including the transition period into early adulthood. Real-world data were used, drawn from a large nationally representative validated primary care database that captures a high level of community prescribing. CPRD data are collected at the time of consultation or prescription and are therefore independent of referral centre, recall, or participant selection bias.

Important limitations in the current study are an assumption that repeat prescriptions issued in primary care were indicative of adherence. Hence, discontinuation rates may be higher and adherence lower than reported in this study. In the UK, hospital outpatient prescribing is highly regulated.
and primary care physicians are responsible for prescribing for patients with chronic conditions in the community. However, it was not possible to capture a small minority of short-term prescriptions given in hospital at discharge after admission, in the private sector, or obtained overseas.

**Comparison with existing literature**

To the authors’ knowledge, the current study is among the largest population-based cohort studies of incident cases of adolescents and young adults diagnosed with UC. Previous studies of oral 5-ASA adherence among adolescents have reported lower objective adherence rates of 52%–71%. Previous studies that are subject to recall bias. Using electronic records for measuring discontinuation and adherence overcomes reporting bias seen in previous studies because patients and families are not aware they are being evaluated. The relapsing and remitting course of UC may influence the perceived importance of maintenance treatment. The estimated mean time to control symptoms with 5-ASA in UC is reported to be 4 weeks. It may be that, once symptoms resolve, the motivation to persist with treatment falters. Some individuals may not perceive themselves to be at risk of long-term consequences of the illness, an important motivator to continue treatment. Conversely, those who experience disease flares may find it easier to accept the need for maintenance treatment. This may explain this study’s findings that the risk of oral 5-ASA treatment discontinuation was lower and adherence higher among those who had a flare treated with corticosteroids during the early stages of disease.

The findings from the current research of higher risk of treatment discontinuation and poor adherence during the transition from adolescence to adulthood may be explained by the loss of support from caregivers who encourage adherence in adolescents and provide financial and practical support. Previous literature is conflicting about the impact of poor mental health on medication adherence. In the current study, strict inclusion criteria were applied for the cohort construction to ensure robust case ascertainment. The sample size of 607 new cases is consistent with the incidence of UC of approximately 10–20 patients per 100 000 per year reported elsewhere. The current finding that approximately one-quarter of patients discontinue oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment after 1 month is consistent with discontinuation rates in adults with IBD. This study’s objective estimate of 72% oral 5-ASA adherence among adolescents and young adults is much lower than self-reported estimates of 93%–96% from previous studies that are subject to recall bias. Using electronic records for measuring discontinuation and adherence overcomes reporting bias seen in previous studies because patients and families are not aware they are being evaluated.

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Implications for research and practice

The current findings may mean that adolescents and young adults diagnosed with UC are at a high risk of early relapse. Non-adherence to 5-ASA (PDC < 80%) is associated with a five-fold risk of disease relapse compared with those whose adherence is over 80%. The current study found a mean adherence rate of 72% among adolescents and young adults in their first year of oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment. If clinicians are unaware of suboptimal adherence to first-line medication they may incorrectly assume therapy has failed, which may lead to unnecessary escalation in treatment and avoidable steroid use that remains high in UC.

The methods used in the current study have application for future studies and clinical audits to assess adherence to long-term medication using electronic records. Future longitudinal studies using linked data on prescribed treatments in primary care and hospital settings are needed to identify the impact of poor adherence and discontinuation on clinical outcomes of UC. Clear communication about the importance of regular maintenance for adolescents and young adults should be coupled with an action plan for managing their chronic condition. For example, it is a common misconception that treatment should be discontinued when symptoms resolve in other inflammatory conditions such as asthma. Structured transition programmes from paediatric to adult health care can empower adolescents by providing them with the knowledge and skills to manage their own disease.

Although developing patient autonomy for managing their condition is a prerequisite for good adherence, the current study supports findings of a recent patient survey and self-assessment of 134 IBD services in the UK that found two-thirds of services scored below standard on their transition care pathways.

A survey of GPs in the 2017 Royal College of General Practitioners IBD 'Spotlight' project reported 50% lacked confidence in managing IBD. Prescribing physicians are often under pressure to reduce health system costs by issuing shorter prescriptions or deprescribing long-term medications. However, it has been argued that this may have adverse long-term health and economic consequences for patients with chronic conditions. Based on the findings in the current study, the authors recommend better integration to agree roles and responsibilities between primary and secondary care as this could improve adherence during the early stages of starting treatment.

This study highlights the need to address socioeconomic disparities that could be driving oral 5-ASA discontinuation and low adherence among adolescents and young adults who may struggle with meeting the costs of long-term prescriptions. In the US, an increase in each dollar of medication co-payment decreases medication adherence rates by 0.4%. Even in the UK, where 98% of patients have access to universal healthcare coverage, one-third of individuals with IBD paying prescription charges do not pick up a prescription because of cost, and 15% take medicines less frequently than required to reduce costs.

In conclusion, adolescents and young adults diagnosed with UC starting oral 5-ASA maintenance treatment are at risk of discontinuation and poor adherence, a majority of whom discontinue early in the first year of treatment. These findings illustrate the importance of clinicians ensuring careful follow-up within the first year when prescribing lifelong therapies for adolescents and young adults who are diagnosed with UC, particularly adolescents transitioning to young adulthood and those living in deprived areas.

Ethical approval
Ethical approval was received from the Independent Scientific Advisory Committee (protocol number: 15_018R).

Data
Data may be obtained from the Clinical Practice Research Datalink and are not publicly available.

Provenance
Freely submitted; externally peer reviewed.

Competing interests
The authors have declared no competing interests.

Contributors
The POP-IBD study group is a collaboration between St George's, University of London, Imperial College London, University College London, and King’s College London, conducting population-based studies in the field of inflammatory bowel disease.

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