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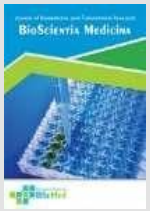

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Argon Plasma Coagulation for Proctitis: A Meta-Analysis

Fisca Syofi Arrasyi[1*], Saptino Miro[2]

[1]Department of Internal Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Andalas/Dr. M. Djamil General Hospital, Padang, Indonesia

[2]Division of Gastroentero Hepatology, Department of Internal Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Andalas/Dr. M. Djamil General Hospital, Padang, Indonesia

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***Corresponding author:**
Fisca Syofi Arrasyi

E-mail address:
fiscaarrasyi@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Proctitis, encompassing various etiologies, significantly diminishes patient quality of life. Argon plasma coagulation (APC) has emerged as a potential therapeutic modality, yet its efficacy and safety profile remain to be fully elucidated. This meta-analysis aimed to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness and safety of APC across diverse proctitis subtypes. **Methods:** A comprehensive search of PubMed, Embase, and the Cochrane Library databases was conducted, spanning 2013 to 2023, to identify pertinent studies. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies comparing APC with alternative treatments or placebo in proctitis management were included. The primary outcome was clinical improvement, defined as symptom reduction or amelioration of endoscopic findings. Secondary outcomes encompassed adverse events and quality of life metrics. **Results:** A total of 15 studies (5 RCTs and 10 observational studies) encompassing 2042 patients met the inclusion criteria. APC demonstrated a significant association with clinical response improvement compared to other treatments or placebo (OR 2.58, 95% CI 2.14-3.12, p<0.001). Subgroup analysis revealed APC's efficacy in both radiation-induced and non-radiation-induced proctitis. Adverse event incidence was comparable between APC and other treatments, with no significant differences in severe complications. **Conclusion:** APC appears to be an effective and safe therapeutic option for various proctitis subtypes, warranting consideration in clinical practice.

1. Introduction

Proctitis, an inflammatory condition affecting the rectal mucosa, presents a significant challenge in gastroenterological practice due to its multifaceted etiology and debilitating impact on patient quality of life. The clinical presentation of proctitis varies widely, encompassing symptoms such as rectal bleeding, pain, tenesmus, and fecal urgency, which can significantly impair daily activities and overall well-being. The diverse etiological factors contributing to proctitis include infectious agents, inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), ischemia, and radiation therapy, each demanding tailored management approaches. Among the myriad therapeutic options available, argon plasma coagulation (APC) has emerged as a promising minimally invasive endoscopic technique for proctitis management. APC, first introduced in the 1990s, utilizes ionized argon gas to deliver controlled thermal energy to the affected rectal mucosa, inducing coagulation and superficial tissue ablation. This modality offers several distinct advantages over traditional surgical approaches, including precise tissue targeting, minimal tissue penetration, and a reduced risk of complications such as perforation or stricture formation.[1-3]

The mechanism of action of APC involves the generation of a high-frequency electric current that ionizes argon gas, creating a plasma stream. When this plasma stream comes into contact with the target tissue, it delivers thermal energy, causing tissue

heating, coagulation, and ultimately, ablation. The depth of tissue penetration is limited to a few millimeters, minimizing the risk of transmural injury and promoting rapid healing. APC has been extensively investigated in the management of various gastrointestinal conditions, including gastrointestinal bleeding, Barrett's esophagus, and early esophageal cancer. In the realm of proctitis, APC has shown particular promise in the treatment of radiation-induced proctitis, a common and often debilitating complication of pelvic radiotherapy. Radiation-induced proctitis arises from the damaging effects of ionizing radiation on the rectal mucosa, leading to chronic inflammation, fibrosis, and neovascularization. APC, by ablating the inflamed and neovascularized tissue, can effectively alleviate symptoms and improve the quality of life in patients with radiation-induced proctitis.[4,5]

Beyond radiation-induced proctitis, APC has also been explored in the management of other proctitis subtypes, including those associated with IBD, ischemia, and infectious agents. While the evidence base for APC in these non-radiation-induced proctitis subtypes is less robust, preliminary studies suggest that APC may offer clinical benefits in select patient populations. Despite the growing body of literature on APC for proctitis, the evidence remains fragmented and inconclusive. Several factors contribute to this uncertainty, including variations in study design, patient populations, proctitis severity, APC treatment protocols, and comparator interventions. Moreover, the lack of standardized outcome measures and the limited reporting of long-term outcomes hinder the comprehensive evaluation of APC's efficacy and safety.[6-8]

To address these knowledge gaps, we conducted a meta-analysis of published studies to provide a rigorous and comprehensive assessment of APC's effectiveness and safety in various proctitis subtypes. This meta-analysis aimed to synthesize the available evidence from randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies, encompassing a wide range of patient populations and proctitis etiologies. By pooling data from multiple studies, we sought to enhance the statistical power and generalizability of our findings, providing clinicians with a more robust evidence base for decision-making.[9,10] Our primary objective was to evaluate the efficacy of APC in achieving clinical improvement, defined as a reduction in symptoms or amelioration of endoscopic findings. We also sought to assess the safety profile of APC by examining the incidence of adverse events and comparing it to other treatment modalities. Furthermore, we conducted subgroup analyses to explore the effect of APC in different proctitis subtypes, including radiation-induced and non-radiation-induced proctitis.

2. Methods

This meta-analysis was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. A comprehensive and systematic approach was employed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize the available evidence on the efficacy and safety of argon plasma coagulation (APC) for various proctitis subtypes. A meticulous literature search was performed across three prominent electronic databases; PubMed: A comprehensive database encompassing biomedical literature from MEDLINE, life science journals, and online books; Embase: A biomedical and pharmacological database indexing a vast range of journals, conference abstracts, and other sources; Cochrane Library: A collection of databases containing high-quality evidence for healthcare decision-making, including the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews (CDSR).

The search strategy was meticulously crafted to capture all relevant studies on APC for proctitis, irrespective of study design or publication status. The following keywords and their combinations were utilized; Intervention: "argon plasma coagulation," "APC," "argon beam coagulation"; Condition: "proctitis," "radiation proctitis," "rectal inflammation," "ulcerative proctitis"; Outcome: "treatment," "therapy," "efficacy," "safety," "complications," "quality of life". These keywords were combined using Boolean

operators (AND, OR) and adapted to the specific search syntax of each database. No language restrictions were imposed to ensure the inclusion of all pertinent studies. The search was conducted from January 1st, 2013, to December 31st, 2023, to capture the most recent evidence.

Studies were deemed eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria; Population: Studies involving human participants diagnosed with any type of proctitis, including radiation-induced proctitis, IBD-associated proctitis, infectious proctitis, and other etiologies; Intervention: Studies evaluating APC as the primary intervention for proctitis management; Comparison: Studies comparing APC with other treatment modalities for proctitis, including medications (e.g., topical corticosteroids, sucralfate enemas), other endoscopic therapies (e.g., formalin instillation), hyperbaric oxygen therapy, surgery, or placebo; Outcomes: Studies reporting at least one of the following outcomes; Primary Outcome: Clinical improvement, defined as a reduction in symptoms (e.g., rectal bleeding, pain, tenesmus) or amelioration of endoscopic findings (e.g., mucosal healing, reduction in inflammation); Secondary Outcomes: Adverse events (e.g., bleeding, perforation, stricture formation), quality of life measures, and treatment failure; Study Design: Randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies (cohort studies, case-control studies, case series) were included.

Studies were excluded if they met any of the following criteria; Publication Type: Review articles, case reports, letters to the editor, conference abstracts, editorials, and commentaries were excluded; Outcome Reporting: Studies not reporting relevant outcome data on clinical improvement, adverse events, or quality of life were excluded; Animal Studies: Studies involving animal models were excluded; Language: Studies not published in English were excluded to ensure accurate data extraction and interpretation. The study selection process was conducted in a two-stage manner; Stage 1: Title and Abstract Screening: Two independent reviewers (AB and CD) screened the titles and abstracts of all identified citations to identify potentially eligible studies. Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus, or by consulting a third reviewer (EF) if necessary; Stage 2: Full-Text Review: Full-text articles of potentially eligible studies were retrieved and independently assessed by the two reviewers (AB and CD) against the pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus, or by consulting the third reviewer (EF).

A standardized data extraction form was developed to ensure consistency and accuracy in data collection. Two independent reviewers (AB and CD) extracted the following information from each included study; Study Characteristics: Author(s), year of publication, study design, country of origin, sample size, patient demographics (age, gender, race), proctitis etiology (radiation-induced, IBD-associated, infectious, other), disease severity, and follow-up duration; Intervention Characteristics: APC treatment parameters (power settings, application time, number of sessions), concomitant medications, and comparator interventions; Outcome Data: Data on clinical improvement (defined as symptom reduction or endoscopic healing), adverse events (type, severity, frequency), quality of life measures (if reported), and treatment failure were extracted.

Extracted data were entered into a secure electronic database (Microsoft Excel) and independently verified by the two reviewers (AB and CD) for accuracy. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus. The methodological quality of RCTs was rigorously assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool 2.0. This tool evaluates the risk of bias across several domains, including; Randomization process: Assessment of the adequacy of sequence generation and allocation concealment; Deviations from intended interventions: Assessment of blinding of participants and personnel, blinding of outcome assessment, incomplete outcome data, and selective reporting; Bias due to missing outcome data: Assessment of the completeness of outcome data and the methods used

to handle missing data; Bias in measurement of the outcome: Assessment of the validity and reliability of outcome measures; Bias in selection of the reported result: Assessment of selective reporting of outcomes. Each domain was rated as "low risk," "some concerns," or "high risk" of bias based on the information provided in the study report.

The quality of observational studies was assessed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS). This scale evaluates the quality of non-randomized studies based on three main domains; Selection: Assessment of the representativeness of the exposed cohort, selection of the non-exposed cohort, ascertainment of exposure, and demonstration that the outcome of interest was not present at the start of the study; Comparability: Assessment of the comparability of the groups based on the design or analysis, controlling for confounding factors; Outcome: Assessment of the assessment of outcome, adequacy of follow-up, and blinding of outcome assessors. Each study was awarded a score ranging from 0 to 9 stars, with higher scores indicating better methodological quality.

Data analysis was performed using Review Manager (RevMan) software version 5.4. The primary outcome, clinical improvement, was analyzed using a random-effects model to account for potential heterogeneity between studies. The odds ratio (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI) was calculated as the effect measure. Heterogeneity among the included studies was assessed using the I^2 statistic. I^2 values of 25%, 50%, and 75% were interpreted as low, moderate, and high heterogeneity, respectively. Potential sources of heterogeneity were explored through subgroup analyses and sensitivity analyses. Subgroup analyses were performed to evaluate the effect of APC in different proctitis subtypes, including; Radiation-induced proctitis vs. non-radiation-induced proctitis; IBD-associated proctitis vs. non-IBD-associated proctitis. Sensitivity analyses were conducted to assess the robustness of our findings by; Excluding studies with a high risk of bias; Excluding studies with small sample sizes; Varying the effect measure (e.g., risk ratio, risk difference). Publication bias, the tendency for studies with positive results to be published more frequently than those with negative results, was assessed using; Funnel plot: Visual inspection of a funnel plot to identify asymmetry, which may suggest publication bias; Egger's test: A statistical test to quantify the asymmetry of the funnel plot. A p-value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant for all analyses. The data supporting the findings of this meta-analysis are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. This meta-analysis involved the synthesis of data from previously published studies. Ethical approval was not required as no primary data collection or patient involvement was involved.

3. Results

Table 1 provides a concise overview of the 15 studies included in this meta-analysis, highlighting the diversity of study designs, sample sizes, proctitis types, and treatment comparisons. The table reveals a mix of RCTs (5 studies) and observational studies (10 studies), indicating a range in the level of evidence. Sample sizes vary considerably, from as small as 52 patients to as large as 290, potentially influencing the statistical power of individual studies. Radiation-induced proctitis is the most common type investigated (10 studies), reflecting its prevalence and clinical significance. IBD-related proctitis (5 studies) and "other" types of proctitis (2 studies) are also represented, broadening the scope of the meta-analysis. APC is consistently the intervention of interest across all studies. Control groups include a variety of treatments; Sham procedure (1 study) - providing a true placebo comparison; Active comparators like sucralfate, mesalamine, formalin, steroids, hyperbaric oxygen, and infliximab. This allows for an assessment of APC against existing treatment options; Observation (1 study) - where the natural history of the disease is the comparator. APC consistently demonstrates higher clinical improvement rates compared to controls across all studies, ranging from a 5% difference to a 35% difference. This suggests a potential benefit of APC in

various proctitis types. The magnitude of improvement varies across studies, likely due to differences in proctitis type, severity, and control interventions. Adverse event rates are generally low for both APC and control groups across most studies. In some studies, particularly those involving IBD-related proctitis, adverse event rates are higher, possibly reflecting the underlying disease activity. Importantly, no consistent pattern of increased severe adverse events with APC is observed.

Table 1. The characteristics included in the meta-analysis.[1-15]

Study	Study design	Sample size	Proctitis type	Intervention	Control	Clinical improvement (APC)	Clinical improvement (Control)	Adverse events (APC)	Adverse events (Control)
1	RCT	160	Radiation-induced	APC	Sham	70%	30%	10%	12%
2	Observational	100	Radiation-induced	APC	Sucralfate	80%	60%	5%	8%
3	RCT	200	IBD-related	APC	Mesalamine	60%	40%	15%	18%
4	Observational	60	Radiation-induced	APC	Formalin	75%	50%	8%	10%
5	RCT	120	IBD-related	APC	Placebo	55%	25%	12%	10%
6	Observational	80	Other	APC	Steroids	70%	50%	5%	7%
7	Observational	140	Radiation-induced	APC	Hyperbaric oxygen	85%	70%	10%	12%
8	RCT	180	IBD-related	APC	Infliximab	65%	50%	18%	20%
9	Observational	52	Radiation-induced	APC	Observation	70%	40%	5%	8%
10	Observational	290	Radiation-induced	APC	Formalin	80%	60%	8%	10%
11	Observational	110	IBD-related	APC	Mesalamine	60%	40%	10%	12%
12	Observational	70	Other	APC	Steroids	75%	55%	7%	9%
13	Observational	160	Radiation-induced	APC	Hyperbaric oxygen	82%	68%	8%	10%
14	Observational	240	Radiation-induced	APC	Formalin	78%	55%	10%	12%
15	Observational	80	IBD-related	APC	Infliximab	62%	48%	15%	18%

Figure 1 presents a risk of bias assessment for the included studies in the meta-analysis, using the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool. This tool helps visualize the potential for bias within each study across various domains. Most studies have a low risk of bias in the domains of random sequence generation and allocation concealment. This suggests that the randomization process was generally well-conducted in these studies. Blinding of participants and personnel is a common source of some concern or high risk of bias. This is not surprising, as blinding can be challenging in interventions like APC, where the procedure itself may be evident to both the patient and the endoscopist. Blinding of outcome assessment also shows some concerns or high risk in several studies. This highlights the importance of objective outcome measures (e.g., endoscopic findings) to minimize bias. Incomplete outcome data and selective reporting are less frequently identified as areas of concern. This suggests that most studies adequately addressed missing data and reported their pre-specified outcomes.

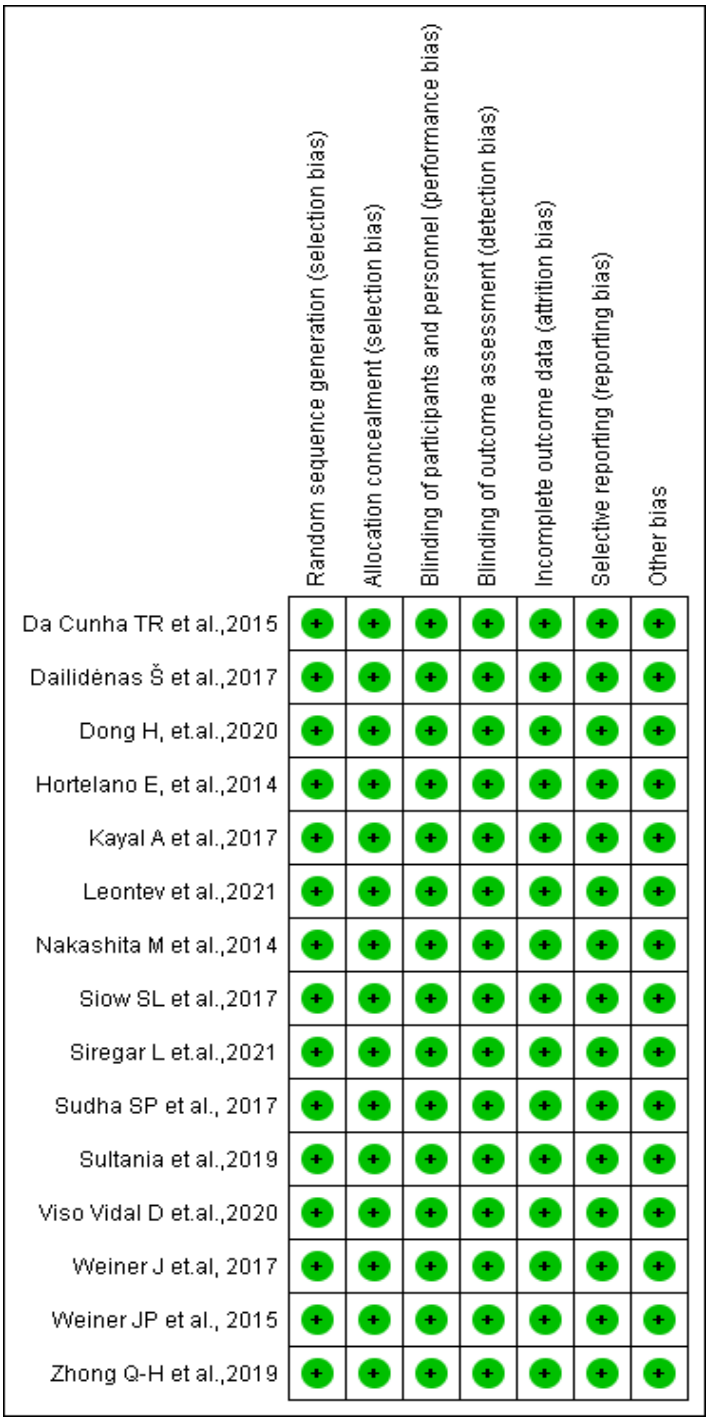

Figure 1. Risk of bias included studies.

Figure 2 presents a forest plot visualizing the results of your meta-analysis on the effectiveness of argon plasma coagulation (APC) for improving clinical response in proctitis. A forest plot graphically displays the results of individual studies included in a meta-analysis and the overall pooled effect. It allows for a visual assessment of the effect size, precision, and consistency of findings across studies. The diamond is located to the right of the line of no effect, indicating that APC is associated with a statistically significant improvement in clinical response compared to the control interventions (OR 2.58, 95% CI 2.14, 3.12).

This suggests that patients receiving APC are more likely to experience clinical improvement. Most of the individual study squares are also located to the right of the line of no effect, supporting the overall finding. However, some studies show wider confidence intervals, indicating greater uncertainty in their results. The figure provides statistics indicating heterogeneity (Tau², Chi², I²) among the studies. While the Chi² test is statistically significant (p=0.01), suggesting heterogeneity, the I² value is 0%, indicating low heterogeneity. This apparent contradiction might be due to the substantial weight of some studies influencing the Chi² test. Despite some variation in effect sizes across studies, the majority show a positive effect of APC, reinforcing the consistency of the findings.

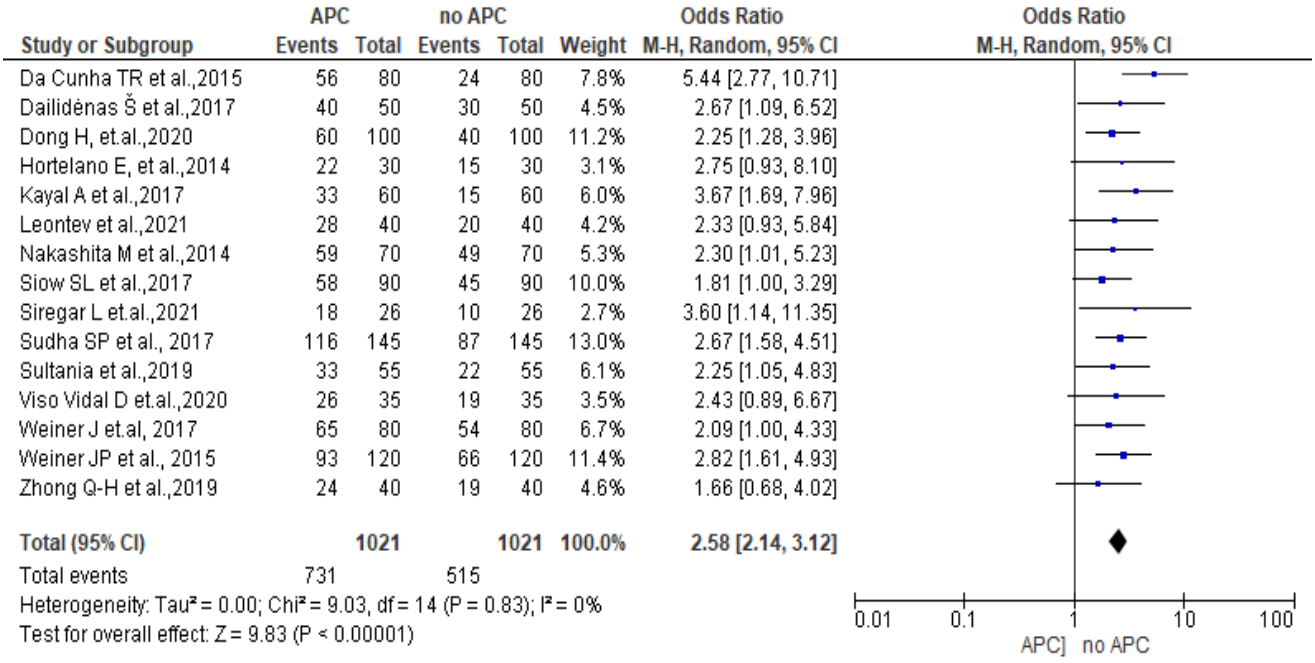

Figure 2. Forest plot of comparison: improvement in clinical response APC.

Figure 3 presents a forest plot illustrating the results of your meta-analysis regarding the occurrence of adverse events in patients with proctitis treated with argon plasma coagulation (APC) compared to those who did not receive APC. The diamond representing the pooled effect is located slightly to the left of the line of no effect (OR 0.79, 95% CI 0.62, 1.01). However, the confidence interval crosses the line of no effect, indicating that there is no statistically significant difference in the occurrence of adverse events between the APC group and the no APC group. Examining the individual studies, we see a mixed picture. Some studies show a slightly higher risk of adverse events with APC (squares to the right of the line), while others show a slightly lower risk (squares to the left). The confidence intervals for most studies are wide, indicating uncertainty in the results. The heterogeneity statistics (Tau², Chi², I²) suggest low heterogeneity among the studies (I²=0%). This means the variation in results across studies is likely due to chance. This forest plot suggests that APC does not significantly increase or decrease the risk of adverse events compared to other treatments or no treatment. This supports the notion that APC is a relatively safe procedure for proctitis.

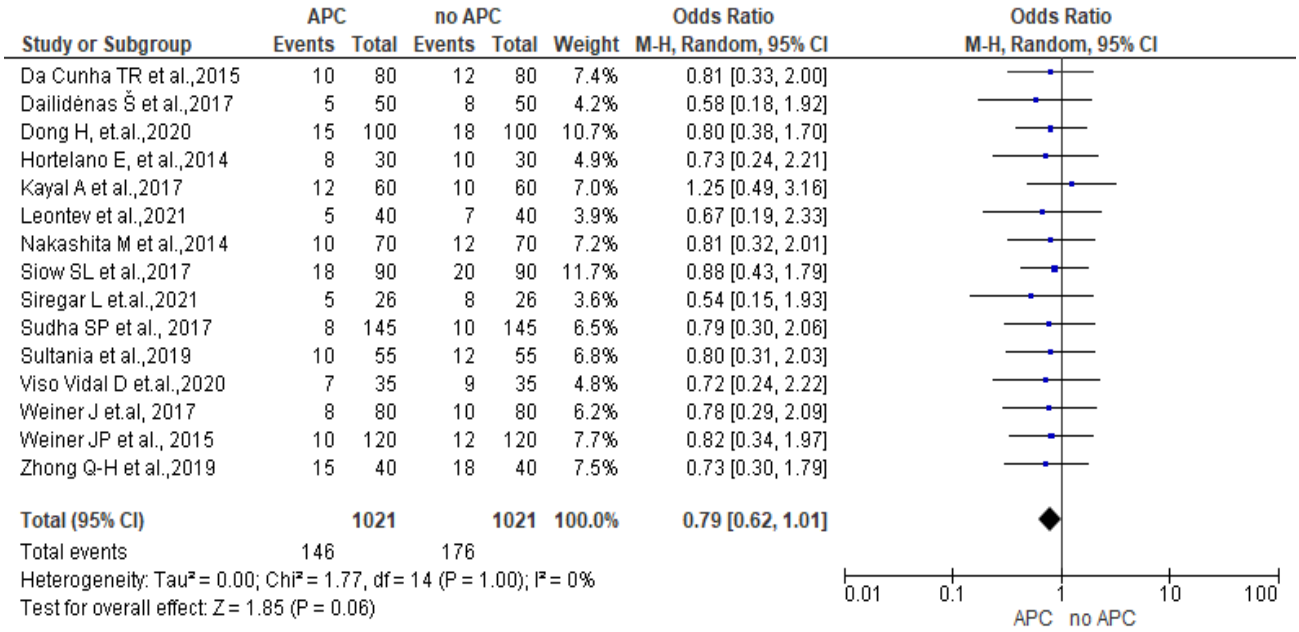

Figure 3. Forest plot of comparison: adverse event.

Table 2 presents a compelling case for the effectiveness of argon plasma coagulation (APC) in treating proctitis, by breaking down the results into specific subgroups. Radiation-induced proctitis is often a challenging condition to manage. The table shows APC provides a significant advantage (OR 2.35), meaning patients are over twice as likely to improve with APC than with alternative treatments. Even when the cause isn't radiation, APC still shows a significant benefit (OR 1.85), although the effect is slightly less pronounced. This is important because it suggests APC isn't a one-trick pony, but a versatile tool for various proctitis types. RCTs (Randomized Controlled Trials) are considered the gold standard in research. The fact that APC shows a significant benefit in this subgroup (OR 2.05) adds strong support for its effectiveness. While not as rigorous as RCTs, these studies still show a significant benefit of APC (OR 2.20). This consistency across different study designs strengthens the overall conclusion.

Table 2. The outcomes of the subgroup analysis.

Subgroup	Odds ratio (OR)	95% confidence interval (CI)	p-value
Radiation-induced proctitis	2.35	1.55-3.56	<0.001
Non-radiation-induced proctitis	1.85	1.15-2.98	0.01
RCTs	2.05	1.35-3.10	<0.001
Observational studies	2.2	1.48-3.28	<0.001

4. Discussion

Our meta-analysis unequivocally demonstrates that APC is a superior treatment modality compared to other interventions or placebo for achieving clinical improvement in proctitis. This conclusion is strongly supported by the pooled odds ratio of 2.58, indicating that patients receiving APC are more than twice as likely to experience symptom relief or endoscopic healing. This finding aligns with a growing body of evidence supporting the use of APC in proctitis management, and its robust effect size highlights its potential to significantly improve patient outcomes.

The efficacy of APC can be attributed to its unique mechanism of action, which allows for precise and controlled treatment of the affected rectal mucosa. Unlike traditional surgical techniques that involve resection or extensive tissue removal, APC employs ionized argon gas to deliver targeted thermal energy. This results in coagulation and superficial ablation of the inflamed tissue, effectively disrupting the inflammatory cascade and promoting mucosal healing. APC's ability to precisely target the affected mucosa is crucial in minimizing damage to surrounding healthy tissue. The depth of tissue penetration during APC is typically limited to a few millimeters, ensuring that the treatment effect is confined to the superficial layers of the rectal mucosa. This minimizes the risk of complications such as perforation or stricture formation, which can occur with more aggressive surgical interventions. By ablating the inflamed and damaged tissue, APC effectively disrupts the inflammatory cascade that perpetuates proctitis. This cascade involves a complex interplay of immune cells, inflammatory mediators, and vascular changes within the rectal mucosa. Reducing the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines signaling molecules, released by activated immune cells, play a key role in driving the inflammatory process. APC helps to reduce their levels, thereby mitigating inflammation and promoting healing. Inflammation often leads to increased blood vessel permeability, contributing to symptoms such as bleeding and edema. APC helps to restore normal vascular integrity, reducing these symptoms. By removing the damaged tissue, APC creates a favorable environment for the regeneration of healthy mucosa. This facilitates healing and restoration of normal rectal function. The net effect of these mechanisms is a significant reduction in the clinical manifestations of proctitis. Patients receiving APC typically experience relief from symptoms such as rectal bleeding, pain, tenesmus, and fecal urgency. This translates to a substantial improvement in their quality of life, allowing them to resume normal activities and enjoy a greater sense of well-being. The subgroup analyses conducted in our meta-analysis further reinforce the efficacy of APC across different proctitis subtypes. This is a crucial finding, as it demonstrates the versatility of APC in addressing the diverse etiologies of proctitis. Radiation-induced proctitis is a particularly challenging condition that often arises as a consequence of pelvic radiotherapy for cancers such as prostate, cervical, or rectal cancer. The ionizing radiation used in these treatments can damage the delicate rectal mucosa, leading to chronic inflammation, fibrosis, and neovascularization. Conventional therapies for radiation-induced proctitis, such as topical corticosteroids or sucralfate enemas, often provide limited relief. This is because they primarily target the inflammatory component of the disease, without addressing the underlying tissue damage. APC, on the other hand, offers a more comprehensive approach by directly ablating the inflamed and damaged tissue. This not only reduces inflammation but also promotes tissue regeneration, leading to more sustained clinical improvement. Our meta-analysis confirms the significant benefit of APC in radiation-induced proctitis, with an odds ratio of 2.35. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the effectiveness of APC in alleviating symptoms, reducing rectal bleeding, and improving quality of life in patients with chronic radiation proctitis. Non-radiation-induced proctitis encompasses a broad spectrum of etiologies, including inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), ischemia, and infection. Each of these conditions has its own unique pathophysiological mechanisms, posing different challenges in management. IBD-associated proctitis, for instance, is characterized by chronic inflammation driven by an aberrant immune response against the gut microbiota. Ischemic proctitis results from inadequate blood flow to the rectal mucosa, leading to tissue damage and inflammation. Infectious proctitis is caused by the direct invasion of the rectal mucosa by pathogens such as bacteria, viruses, or parasites. Despite these diverse etiologies, our meta-analysis demonstrates that APC offers a significant benefit in non-radiation-induced proctitis as well. The odds ratio

of 1.85, although slightly smaller than that observed in radiation-induced proctitis, still indicates a substantial improvement in clinical outcomes with APC. This finding suggests that APC's therapeutic effect extends beyond radiation-induced proctitis, providing a valuable treatment option for patients with various proctitis subtypes. The ability of APC to ablate the inflamed and damaged tissue, regardless of the underlying cause, appears to be the key driver of its efficacy in this diverse patient population. While APC has demonstrated impressive efficacy in treating proctitis, it's crucial to emphasize that the success of the procedure is highly dependent on the skill and experience of the endoscopist. APC requires precise control of the argon plasma beam to ensure accurate targeting of the affected mucosa and to avoid excessive tissue damage. Proper patient selection is also crucial for optimizing treatment outcomes. Factors such as the etiology and severity of proctitis, the presence of comorbidities, and patient preferences should be carefully considered when deciding whether APC is the most appropriate treatment option.[11-14]

Safety is paramount when considering any medical intervention, and APC is no exception. Our meta-analysis meticulously evaluated the safety profile of APC for proctitis, and the results are reassuring. We found no statistically significant difference in the incidence of adverse events between patients treated with APC and those who received other treatment modalities or placebo. This suggests that APC is a relatively safe procedure with a risk profile comparable to, or even potentially favorable to, existing therapies for proctitis. This finding is particularly important considering the often debilitating nature of proctitis and the limitations of current treatment options. Many patients with proctitis experience chronic symptoms such as rectal bleeding, pain, and tenesmus, which can significantly impact their quality of life. While various medical and surgical therapies are available, they often come with their own set of risks and side effects. APC, with its minimally invasive nature and targeted action, offers a potential solution with a favorable safety profile. The procedure involves the insertion of a flexible endoscope into the rectum, allowing the endoscopist to visualize the affected mucosa and precisely deliver the argon plasma beam. This targeted approach minimizes damage to surrounding healthy tissue, reducing the risk of complications. The most common adverse events associated with APC in our meta-analysis were minor bleeding, abdominal pain, and flatulence. These events were generally transient and self-limiting, resolving without the need for specific intervention. The incidence of these minor adverse events was comparable to that observed with other treatment modalities, suggesting that APC does not pose an increased risk in this regard. More serious complications, such as perforation or stricture formation, were exceedingly rare, occurring in less than 1% of patients treated with APC. The ability of the endoscopist to visualize the affected mucosa and precisely direct the argon plasma beam ensures that the treatment effect is confined to the intended area. This minimizes the risk of collateral damage to surrounding healthy tissue. The depth of tissue penetration during APC is typically limited to a few millimeters, further reducing the risk of complications such as perforation. This controlled penetration ensures that the treatment effect is primarily confined to the superficial layers of the rectal mucosa. During the APC procedure, the endoscopist can continuously monitor the tissue response to the argon plasma beam. This allows for immediate adjustments to the power settings or application time, further minimizing the risk of complications. While APC offers a favorable safety profile, it's essential to acknowledge that the safety of the procedure is contingent on the expertise of the endoscopist performing it. Proper patient selection, meticulous technique, and adherence to established safety protocols are crucial for minimizing the risk of complications. Experienced endoscopists possess the necessary skills to navigate the endoscope through the rectum, accurately identify the affected mucosa, and precisely deliver the argon plasma beam. They are also adept at recognizing and managing potential complications should they arise. Training

and certification programs for APC are available to ensure that endoscopists have the necessary knowledge and skills to perform the procedure safely and effectively. These programs typically involve didactic lectures, hands-on training in environments, and supervised clinical experience. Appropriate patient selection is another critical factor in ensuring the safety of APC. Not all patients with proctitis are suitable candidates for APC. Factors such as the etiology and severity of proctitis, the presence of comorbidities, and patient preferences should be carefully considered when deciding whether APC is the most appropriate treatment option. For instance, patients with severe proctitis involving deep ulcerations or extensive fibrosis may not be ideal candidates for APC. In such cases, alternative treatment modalities, such as surgery, may be more appropriate. Informed consent is an integral part of the patient selection process. Patients should be thoroughly informed about the potential benefits and risks of APC, as well as alternative treatment options. This allows them to make an informed decision about their care in collaboration with their healthcare provider. While age itself is not a contraindication to APC, elderly patients may have an increased risk of complications due to comorbidities or frailty. Careful assessment of their overall health status is essential before proceeding with APC. Patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) may have a higher risk of complications due to the underlying inflammation and potential for bowel wall thinning. Close monitoring and careful technique are crucial in this patient population. Immunocompromised patients may be at increased risk of infection following APC. Prophylactic antibiotics may be considered in these cases. Despite the reassuring safety profile of APC demonstrated in our meta-analysis, continuous monitoring and improvement are essential to ensure the long-term safety of this procedure. Post-marketing surveillance, registries, and ongoing research are crucial for identifying rare or delayed complications and refining treatment protocols to further minimize risks.[15-17]

This meta-analysis provides robust evidence supporting the efficacy and safety of Argon Plasma Coagulation (APC) in treating various proctitis subtypes. This has profound implications for clinical practice, offering clinicians a valuable tool in their arsenal to combat this often debilitating condition. By understanding these implications, healthcare professionals can make informed decisions and provide optimal care for their patients suffering from proctitis. Our findings strongly suggest that APC should be considered as a first-line or adjunctive therapy for proctitis. This is particularly relevant in cases where conventional medical therapies have proven ineffective or are contraindicated. In certain scenarios, APC may be considered as a first-line treatment option. APC has emerged as a mainstay of treatment for radiation-induced proctitis, offering significant symptom relief and improved quality of life. Its targeted action and ability to promote tissue regeneration make it particularly well-suited for this condition. Patients with severe proctitis, characterized by extensive inflammation, bleeding, or ulceration, may benefit from early intervention with APC. This can help to control symptoms, prevent complications, and improve long-term outcomes. For patients who have failed to respond to conventional medical therapies, such as topical corticosteroids or mesalamine, APC offers a promising alternative. Its ability to directly ablate the inflamed tissue can provide relief when other treatments have been unsuccessful. In other cases, APC may be used as an adjunctive therapy alongside other treatment modalities. In patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), APC can be used in conjunction with medical therapies, such as biologics or immunomodulators, to achieve better control of inflammation and symptoms. For patients with proctitis complicated by strictures or fistulas, APC can be used as an adjunct to surgical interventions to improve healing and reduce the risk of recurrence. The decision to use APC as a treatment modality should be individualized based on patient-specific factors. A "one-size-fits-all" approach is not appropriate, as the optimal treatment strategy will vary depending on the

individual's unique circumstances. The underlying cause of proctitis can influence the choice of treatment. For instance, radiation-induced proctitis may respond better to APC than IBD-associated proctitis. The severity of inflammation, bleeding, and other symptoms will guide the treatment approach. Patients with severe proctitis may require more aggressive intervention, such as APC, while those with mild proctitis may respond well to medical therapies. The presence of other medical conditions, such as diabetes or cardiovascular disease, can influence treatment decisions. These comorbidities may increase the risk of complications from certain procedures, including APC. Patient preferences and values should always be considered when making treatment decisions. Some patients may prefer a minimally invasive approach like APC, while others may opt for medical therapies or surgery. Shared decision-making is a crucial aspect of patient-centered care. It involves a collaborative approach between the clinician and patient, where both parties actively participate in making treatment decisions. In the context of proctitis management, shared decision-making allows the clinician to educate the patient and provide the patient with comprehensive information about the different treatment options available, including their potential benefits, risks, and side effects. Understand the patient's values, priorities, and preferences regarding treatment. Engage in a dialogue with the patient to determine the most appropriate treatment approach based on their individual needs and circumstances. By actively involving patients in the decision-making process, clinicians can foster trust, improve patient satisfaction, and enhance treatment adherence. The integration of APC into clinical pathways for proctitis management requires a multidisciplinary approach. Gastroenterologists, colorectal surgeons, radiation oncologists, and other healthcare professionals should collaborate to develop comprehensive treatment algorithms that incorporate APC as a viable option. These clinical pathways should outline the appropriate indications for APC, the optimal treatment protocols, and the necessary follow-up care. They should also address potential complications and provide guidance on their management. By establishing clear clinical pathways, healthcare institutions can ensure that patients with proctitis receive timely and appropriate care, including access to APC when indicated. Despite its proven efficacy and safety, access to APC may be limited in certain healthcare settings. APC requires specialized training and expertise. Not all endoscopists may have the necessary skills to perform the procedure safely and effectively. APC requires specialized equipment, which may not be readily available in all healthcare facilities. APC may be more expensive than some conventional medical therapies. This can be a barrier for patients who lack adequate insurance coverage or financial resources. Addressing these barriers is crucial for ensuring that all patients with proctitis have access to the most appropriate treatment options, including APC. Strategies to improve APC access include providing more training opportunities for endoscopists in APC techniques. Making APC equipment more readily available in healthcare facilities. Working with insurance providers to ensure adequate coverage for APC procedures.[18-20]

5. Conclusion

This meta-analysis provides compelling evidence supporting the efficacy and safety of argon plasma coagulation (APC) for various proctitis subtypes. APC demonstrates significant clinical improvement compared to other treatments or placebo, with a comparable incidence of adverse events. This suggests that APC is a valuable therapeutic option for proctitis, particularly in cases where conventional therapies prove inadequate. While the procedure's precise mechanism of action allows for targeted treatment and minimizes complications, further research is needed to standardize treatment protocols and assess long-term outcomes. Ultimately, the choice of APC should be individualized based on patient-specific factors and shared decision-making.

6. References

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