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Fecal calprotectin and rectal histologic inflammatory markers in cystic fibrosis

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Complete List of Authors:	<p>Roda, Juliana; Centro Hospitalar e Universitario de Coimbra EPE Hospital Pediátrico de Coimbra, Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit; Universidade de Coimbra Faculdade de Medicina, Clínica Universitária de Pediatria</p> <p>Maia, Carla; Centro Hospitalar e Universitario de Coimbra EPE Hospital Pediátrico de Coimbra, Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit</p> <p>Almeida, Susana; Centro Hospitalar e Universitario de Coimbra EPE Hospital Pediátrico de Coimbra, Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit</p> <p>Oliveira, Rui ; Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra EPE, Pathology Department; Universidade de Coimbra Faculdade de Medicina, Coimbra Institute for Clinical and Biomedical Research (iCBR) Area of Environment Genetics and Oncobiology (CIMAGO)</p> <p>Ferreira, Ricardo; Centro Hospitalar e Universitario de Coimbra EPE Hospital Pediátrico de Coimbra, Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit</p> <p>Oliveira, Guiomar; Centro Hospitalar e Universitario de Coimbra EPE Hospital Pediátrico de Coimbra, Centro de Desenvolvimento da Criança e Centro de Investigação e Formação Clínica; Universidade de Coimbra Faculdade de Medicina, Clínica Universitária de Pediatria</p>
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1
2
3 **Title: Fecal calprotectin and rectal histologic inflammatory markers in cystic fibrosis**
4
5

6 **Authors:**
7

8 **Corresponding author:**
9

10 **Juliana Roda**

11 **MD**

12
13
14
15 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e

16
17
18 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

19
20 Avenida Afonso Romão, 3000-602 Coimbra, Portugal

21
22 Telephone: +351 962748392

23
24 Email: juroda@hotmail.com

25
26
27 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8990-779X>
28
29
30

31 **Carla Maia**

32 **MD**

33
34
35 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e

36
37
38 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

39
40 Email: carla.maia@chuc.min-saude.pt
41
42
43
44

45 **Susana Almeida**

46 **MD**

47
48
49 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e

50
51
52 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

53
54 Email: susana.almeida.coimbra@gmail.com
55
56
57
58
59
60

Rui Caetano Oliveira**MD, PhD**

Pathology Department, Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Portugal; Biophysics Institute, Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, 3000-548, Portugal
Coimbra Institute for Clinical and Biomedical Research (iCBR) Area of Environment Genetics and Oncobiology (CIMAGO), Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, 3000-548, Coimbra, Portugal

Email: ruipedrocoliveira@hotmail.com

Ricardo Ferreira**MD**

Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

Email: ricardo.ferreira@chuc.min-saude.pt

Guiomar Oliveira**MD, PhD**

Centro de Desenvolvimento da Criança e Centro de Investigação e Formação Clínica, Hospital Pediátrico – Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Clínica Universitária de Pediatria, Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal

Email: guiomar@chuc.min-saude.pt

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7049-1277>

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To analyze the association of fecal calprotectin with the genetic and clinical characteristics of pediatric patients with cystic fibrosis (PwCF). In a subset of these patients, we aimed to associate histologic inflammatory features of rectal mucosa to fecal calprotectin levels.

Methods: In a prospective study, fecal calprotectin levels were collected in all 23 PwCF attending our pediatric center, together with demographic and clinical data. Associations between fecal calprotectin and clinical features were determined. In 11 of these patients, endoscopic rectal biopsies were obtained and the association between fecal calprotectin and histologic inflammatory markers was analyzed.

Results: Median age of PwCF was 12 years, 19 had pancreatic insufficiency (PI) (19/23). Seventeen (17/23) had elevated fecal calprotectin, and the median value was 88 $\mu\text{g/g}$ (IQR=178 $\mu\text{g/g}$). Higher fecal calprotectin levels were observed in the PI group (101 vs 30 $\mu\text{g/g}$, $P=0.027$). No significant correlation between elevated fecal calprotectin level and BMI z-score was found. Five patients (22%) reported abdominal pain, three (13%) complained of diarrhea and three (13%) had constipation, but these symptoms were not associated with elevated fecal calprotectin.

Unspecific focal rectal inflammation was found in four patients (4/11). An association between rectal mucosa inflammation and elevated fecal calprotectin was found ($p=0.015$).

Conclusions: In our PwCF, elevated fecal calprotectin was frequent, particularly if PI, and it was not related to gastrointestinal symptoms or malnutrition. Elevated fecal calprotectin was present in patients with histologic evidence of rectal inflammation. Fecal calprotectin may be a good indicator of asymptomatic rectal inflammation in PwCF.

Keywords: intestinal inflammation, rectal biopsies, pancreatic insufficiency

List of abbreviations:

BMI - Body mass index

CF - Cystic fibrosis

CFTR - Cystic Fibrosis Transmembrane conductance Regulator

IQR – Interquartile range

PERT - pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy

PI - Pancreatic insufficiency

PS - pancreatic sufficient

Confidential: For Review Only

BACKGROUND

Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a severe autosomal recessive disease that results from mutations in a gene encoding the cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) protein, a chloride channel [1]. It is the most common life-limiting genetic disease among Caucasians, occurring in 1 of 2500 live births worldwide. In Portugal, a prevalence of 0.27 per 10,000 inhabitants and an incidence of 1 per 7500 newborns have been estimated [2, 3].

CF is also the most common cause of pancreatic insufficiency (PI) in children [4]. Historically, CF children died in infancy from severe malnutrition and later from respiratory failure, but due to improved clinical care, including pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT), currently, a majority of them reach adulthood [5]. Approximately 85% of CF patients have impaired digestion due to PI and despite adequate PERT, several CF patients still have malabsorption, growth impairment and gastrointestinal problems, including abdominal pain, steatorrhea, and altered motility [4, 5]. It has been suggested that digestive symptoms are attributable not only to PI but also to intestinal inflammation. However, the pathogenesis and nutritional implications of this finding remains unclear [5].

Studies, in both animals and humans, have reported evidence of intestinal inflammation in CF. In the mouse model of CF, the most common manifestation is intestinal obstruction resulting from inflammatory enteropathy, leading to perforation [6]. Furthermore, abnormal mucus accumulation in the intestines of murine models predisposes them to gut dysmotility, creating a niche for bacterial overgrowth and dysbiosis [7].

In humans, the presence of inflammatory biomarkers, including fecal calprotectin, eosinophil cationic protein, interleukin-1B and interleukin-8, was reported, suggesting that intestinal inflammation is a feature of CF [5, 8]. Videocapsule endoscopic studies elicited mucosal ulceration, erythema and mucosal breaks in the small bowel of CF patients, particularly those with PI [4]. Calprotectin is a neutrophil secretory product, and elevated fecal levels are well correlated with colonic inflammation in inflammatory bowel disease [9–11]. Dysbiosis may be

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3 associated with intestinal inflammation as reflected by increased levels of fecal calprotectin
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5 that respond to antibiotic treatment [12]. CFTR modulators may potentially improve dysbiosis
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7 and inflammation, for example ivacaftor has been associated with a decrease in calprotectin
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9 levels[13].
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12 However, to our knowledge, there are no studies characterizing intestinal histological
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14 inflammatory findings in CF patients and, particularly, studies analysing the relationship
15
16 between elevated fecal calprotectin and these histologic inflammatory findings.
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19 The aim of the present study was to analyze, in a cohort of pediatric CF patients, the
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21 association between fecal calprotectin levels and genetic and clinical characteristics, including
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23 nutritional status and gastrointestinal symptoms. In a subset of this cohort, we also aimed to
24
25 characterize histological inflammatory features of rectal mucosa and relate it to fecal
26
27 calprotectin levels.
28

29 30 31 **METHODS**

32
33 This prospective study included children and adolescents aged 0 to 18 years followed in the
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35 Pediatric Unit of the Cystic Fibrosis Reference Centre of the Centro Hospitalar e Universitário
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37 de Coimbra, Portugal, in the year 2019. The criteria for the diagnosis of CF were: clinical
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39 characteristics compatible with CF, a positive sweat test and a genetic study with the
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41 identification of two disease-causing mutations, according to the latest consensus [14]. All
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43 patients willing to participate were included. Exclusion criteria included recent respiratory
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45 exacerbation/infection or ingestion of steroids or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, both
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47 in the previous 4 weeks.
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51 In all participants, demographic data, genotype and clinical data, including nutritional status
52
53 and PERT medication, were collected at the time of the appointment where stool sample was
54
55 obtained. Nutritional status was assessed according to the z-score of weight, height, and body
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57 mass index (BMI). Patients were asked whether they had experienced gastrointestinal
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3 symptoms (abdominal pain, constipation or diarrhea) in the two weeks preceding the
4
5 calprotectin measurement.
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8 Exocrine pancreatic function was assessed using fecal elastase levels. PI was considered when
9
10 the fecal elastase level was under 200 µg/g; above that, they were classified as pancreatic
11
12 sufficient (PS).
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14

17 **Fecal calprotectin measurement**

19 Stool samples were collected at home or at the CF Reference Centre. Calprotectin level in the
20
21 fecal samples were measured using EliA Calprotectin® (reagents from Thermo Fisher
22
23 Scientific®). Fecal calprotectin concentration was considered normal up to 50 µg/g stool, as
24
25 was considered in previous studies with CF patients [4] and as it has been shown to be
26
27 sensitive for detecting inflammation in children with inflammatory bowel disease [15].
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33 **Rectal biopsies**

35 Rectal biopsies were obtained, from patients already enrolled in another study from our
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37 center, which aimed to test CFTR modulator responses in intestinal organoids from patients
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39 with rarer mutations (data not yet published; *UID/MULTI/04046/2019*). As a consequence,
40
41 most of these patients had less common mutations. Time between fecal calprotectin
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43 measurement and rectal biopsies was a maximum of two days.
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46 Rectal mucosa specimens (3-4 mm in diameter) were obtained from eleven patients, with or
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48 without sedation (depending on individuals will or collaboration) using a colonoscope and
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50 colon forceps (Endoflex®, diameter 2.8 mm). Samples were immediately stored in formalin.
51
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53 One pathologist with experience in gastrointestinal pathology from the Pathology Department,
54
55 Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Portugal performed the histologic analysis.
56
57 Samples were blinded to the clinical information and were analyzed under an optical
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3 microscope (Nikon Eclipse 50i®). Pictures were taken with a Nikon-Digital Sight DS-Fi1® digital
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5 camera.
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7 Since the diagnosis of CF is based mainly on bioelectrical/biochemical analyses, there are no
8
9 defined standard histological classification score. Therefore, the evaluation took into
10
11 consideration the density of mononucleated inflammatory population, on a semi quantitative
12
13 approach: none, mild, moderate and severe.
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15

16 17 18 **Statistical Analysis**

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20 Statistical analyses were performed with SPSS software (v.19; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA), and
21
22 a p value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Descriptive statistics were presented
23
24 according to the normality of the data distribution using Shapiro-Wilk test. Spearman's
25
26 correlation coefficient, Mann-Whitney and Exact Fisher tests were used between patient
27
28 groups to evaluate correlation, differences and associations, respectively.
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34 **Ethics Approval**

35
36 The present study was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved
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38 by the board of the Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra (Portugal) after a favorable
39
40 report by the Health Ethics Committee (Ref. CHUC-080-16). Informed consent was obtained by
41
42 all participants aged over 16 years or by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.
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48 **Patient involvement**

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50 Patients were not directly involved in setting the research question, the design or in the
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52 implementation of the project.
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RESULTS

Fecal calprotectin was measured in all 23 PwCF followed in our center during one year. The median age was 12 years, aged from 2 months to 18 years old. Twelve were male. All patients with PI (19/23, 83%) were taking PERT. The F508del mutation was present in all patients in at least one allele. Fifteen (65%) patients were F508del homozygous, and the others carried one of the following mutations: R334W (n=3), 711+ 1G->T (n=2), and 2184insA (n=1), P5L (n=1) and a novel mutation, c.3321dup (n=1) (Table 1). Only two patients were taking CFTR modulator lumacaftor/ivacaftor (patient 15 and patient 20, presenting fecal calprotectin level of 347 and 142 $\mu\text{g/g}$, respectively). Sweat test of these patients did not improve with modulator drug. Seventeen of the 23 patients (74%) had an elevated fecal calprotectin measurement, and the median value was 88 $\mu\text{g/g}$ (IQR=178 $\mu\text{g/g}$). Most patients (16/19) with PI had elevated fecal calprotectin (84%). The PI group had higher fecal calprotectin levels than in the PS group (101 $\mu\text{g/g}$; IQR=234 vs 30 $\mu\text{g/g}$; IQR=53; $p=0.0027$).

A moderate positive correlation was found between fecal calprotectin and sweat test values (from the time of diagnosis) ($r=0.46$; $p=0.029$). No correlation was found between age and fecal calprotectin ($r=-0.3$; $p=0.14$). Also meconium ileus past history was not associated with elevated calprotectin (Table 2).

Comparing the median BMI z-score in patients with normal and elevated fecal calprotectin, no significant difference was found (-0.58 kg/m^2 ; IQR= 2.8 vs 0.1 kg/m^2 ; IQR=1.08; $p=0.09$). No significant correlation between fecal calprotectin level and BMI z-score was found ($r=0.19$; $p=0.36$).

All 15 patients homozygous for the F508del mutation had elevated fecal calprotectin. These PwCF have a statistically significant higher fecal calprotectin than F508del heterozygous patients (110 $\mu\text{g/g}$; IQR=217 vs 40 $\mu\text{g/g}$; IQR=54, $p=0.003$).

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3 Some CF patients reported digestive symptoms: five patients (22%) reported abdominal pain,
4 three (13%) complained of diarrhea, and three (13%) had constipation (Table 1).
5
6 Gastrointestinal symptoms were not associated with elevated fecal calprotectin (Table 2).
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10

11 **Histologic features**

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13 Rectal biopsies were obtained from 11 of the 23 PwCF. Eight patients had the rarer mutations
14 R334W (n=3), 711+1G-T (n=2), P5L (n=1), c.3321dup (n=1) and 2184insA (n=1), and three
15
16 patients were homozygous for the F508del mutation.
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19
20 Unspecific mild focal inflammation was found in the three F508del homozygous patients, all of
21
22 which had elevated fecal calprotectin (Table 1). Inflammatory features were characterized as
23
24 small lymphocyte and plasma cell infiltrates distributed in a vaguely nodular pattern between
25
26 colonic crypts (Figure 1 – B, C and D).
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29
30 Mild to moderate focal inflammation composed of plasma cells and small lymphocytes in the
31
32 mucosa was found in the patient carrying F508del in one allele and the new mutation
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34 c.3321dup in the other allele (Figure 1 – A). This patient had significantly elevated fecal
35
36 calprotectin (341 µg/g) (patient 7; Table 1).
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40 There was an association between elevated fecal calprotectin levels and the presence of
41
42 inflammation in rectal biopsies (Table 3). Mean calprotectin was higher in PwCF with
43
44 histological inflammatory alterations comparing with PwCF with normal histology (143 µg/g;
45
46 IQR=249 vs 19 µg/g; IQR=30; p=0.024). None of the mucosal samples had architectural
47
48 changes, which are a major sign of chronic inflammation.
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50

51 **DISCUSSION**

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53 Most patients from this study (78%) had an elevated fecal calprotectin level, some reaching a
54
55 maximum level of more than 300 µg/g. This is consistent with previous studies and suggests
56
57 the presence of intestinal inflammation in PwCF [4, 5, 16]. The pathophysiology of intestinal
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3 inflammation may be explained by the same triad of obstruction by mucus accumulation,
4
5 inflammation and infection that causes disease in the airways of PwCF [17]. The *CFTR* gene is
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7 strongly expressed all along the intestinal tract in a cephalad-caudal gradient, *CFTR* messenger
8
9 RNA levels are highest in the duodenum and levels decrease distally along the small intestine
10
11 to the large intestine [17]. This “CF enteropathy” may be an independent entity in the disease
12
13 process or may be due to other factors. High doses of PERT can cause inflammation and
14
15 fibrosing colonopathy[18]. Inspissated intestinal secretions, mucus accumulation, constipation,
16
17 slow intestinal motility, the use of proton pump inhibitors and frequent courses of antibiotics
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19 are multiple risk factors for small bowel bacterial overgrowth in CF patients, which can cause
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21 inflammation, mucosal damage and aggravate maldigestion [16]. An unfavorable intestinal
22
23 microbiome may also be a stimulus for inflammation [19], and one trial with probiotics
24
25 supported this hypothesis, as the use of *Lactobacillus rhamnosus GG* reduced calprotectin
26
27 concentrations in CF children [19].
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33 In our study, lower fecal calprotectin levels were found in PS patients. Elevated fecal
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35 calprotectin only in PI patients has also been reported by Dhaliwal *et al* [5]. On the other hand,
36
37 sixteen of nineteen patients with PI had elevated fecal calprotectin, and the difference in fecal
38
39 calprotectin levels between the PI and PS groups was impressive (101 vs 30 µg/g). This means
40
41 that either PI by itself or PERT may be responsible for intestinal inflammation in these
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43 patients[18]. However, there has been reported a lack of correlation between PERT and fecal
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45 calprotectin[20]. As reported by Dumoulin *et al.*, calprotectin is subject to proteolysis by tripsin
46
47 activity, which is virtually absent in PI PwCF. As a result, calprotectin proteolysis is also
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49 reduced. Therefore, calprotectin levels detected in stools of PI patients may be higher, and this
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51 may not be exclusively attributed to intestinal inflammation[21]. Perhaps, in PI PwCF, the
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53 upper limit of the considered “normal” fecal calprotectin should be higher than the value
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55 considered for inflammatory bowel disease, as no association was found with digestive
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57 symptoms [21].
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3 Another interesting finding was that PwCF F508del homozygous have significantly higher
4 calprotectin levels in comparison to heterozygotes. This genotype may be associated with an
5 increased risk of more significant intestinal inflammation.
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10 Overall, only a small number of patients complained of gastrointestinal symptoms, and no
11 association between elevated calprotectin and digestive symptoms could be found. The same
12 conclusion has been reported even in studies where digestive symptoms were much more
13 frequent[20].
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18
19 In contrast to previous studies [5], no relationship could be found between fecal calprotectin
20 and nutritional status or growth parameters. However, interestingly, a positive correlation was
21 found between fecal calprotectin and sweat test values, which may be indicative of the
22 presence of significant intestinal inflammation in patients with a more severe phenotype.
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28 Historically, distinct histological changes, which have been interpreted as signs of mucus
29 hypersecretion, have been reported in light microscopic studies of large intestinal mucosa
30 from CF patients. "Hypertrophic" or enlarged goblet cells and crypts distended by accumulated
31 mucus were described, and these changes were considered useful in the diagnosis of CF by
32 some authors [22]. However, to our knowledge, this is the first study to specifically look for
33 histologic evidence of inflammation in CF patients and try to associate it to fecal calprotectin.
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41 Four out of the eleven patients to whom rectal biopsies were performed had histologic
42 inflammatory alterations. Interestingly, all the three patients homozygous for F508del
43 mutation had histological signs of inflammation and this may be related to the severe
44 phenotype associated to this common mutation.
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50
51 Elevated calprotectin level was associated with histologic inflammation in the rectal mucosa
52 (Table 3) and PwCF with rectal inflammation had a significantly higher calprotectin level. This
53 allows us to conclude that fecal calprotectin may be a good indicator of rectal inflammation in
54 PwCF. However, the clinical meaning of this finding remains to be explained, as this did not
55 translate into more frequent gastrointestinal symptoms or influenced nutritional status.
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3 We are aware that our study had several limitations: it is a small and unicentric study, and
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5 biopsies were performed on a subset of our patients and limited to the rectum. Larger
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7 multicenter studies with the aim of determining serial and longitudinal studies of calprotectin
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9 levels and biopsies of the upper and lower gastrointestinal tract may help to determine clinical
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11 relevance.

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13
14 However, the finding of abnormal calprotectin levels and inflammatory alterations in the
15
16 intestinal mucosa in the pediatric population raises questions about the early detection of CF
17
18 enteropathy.

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20
21 In conclusion, there is increasing evidence that intestinal inflammation is part of CF and is
22
23 present early in life, particularly in childhood and adolescence. The additional contribution of
24
25 low trypsin activity, chronic enzyme dosage, dysmotility, bacterial overgrowth, dysbiosis and
26
27 other unidentified factors may play a role in its multifactorial cause. Fecal calprotectin seems
28
29 to be an important noninvasive biomarker of intestinal inflammation in CF patients since a
30
31 relationship with histologic evidence of rectal mucosa inflammation was found. Further and
32
33 larger studies need to be performed to confirm and explain the mechanisms and clinical
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35 relevance of these findings.
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3 **Ethics approval and consent to participate:** The present study was performed in accordance
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5 Universitário de Coimbra (Portugal) after a favorable report by the Health Ethics Committee
6 (Ref. CHUC-080-16). Informed consent was obtained by all participants aged over 16 years or
7 by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.
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11
12 **Consent for publication:** Informed consent for publication was obtained by all participants
13 aged over 16 years or by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.
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15

16
17 **Availability of data and materials:** The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study
18 are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.
19
20

21
22 **Competing interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
23
24

25
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27
28

29
30 **Authors' contributions:**

31
32 **JR** conceived and designed the study, collected, analyzed and interpreted the data and wrote
33 the first draft of the manuscript.
34
35

36
37 **CM** interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript

38
39 **SA** interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript.
40

41
42 **RCO** prepared Figure 1 and analyzed and interpreted the data

43
44 **RF** analyzed and interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript.
45

46
47 **GO** critically reviewed the manuscript
48

49
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3 What is already known on this topic:
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- 5 • There is increasing evidence of intestinal inflammation in cystic fibrosis (CF)
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- 7 • Elevated fecal calprotectin has been found in CF patients
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13 What this study adds:
14

- 15 • Focal inflammation in rectal biopsies was found in CF patients and it is associated to
- 16 elevated fecal calprotectin
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- 18 • Fecal calprotectin may be a good indicator of intestinal inflammation in CF
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Table 1. Genotype, body mass index, gastrointestinal symptoms, fecal calprotectin and rectal histology of patients with cystic fibrosis.

no.	Genotype	BMI z-score kg/m ²	Pancreatic function	Abdominal pain	Diarrhea	Constipation	Calprotectin (µg/g)	Histology
1	F508del/R334W	-0,42	PS	yes	no	no	19	normal
2	F508del/R334W	1,18	PS	no	no	no	15	normal
3	F508del/R334W	0,94	PS	yes	no	yes	79	normal
4	F508del/711+1G-T	-0,74	PI	no	no	yes	9	normal
5	F508del/711+1G-T	-1,99	PI	no	no	no	19	normal
6	F508del/2184insA	-4,95	PI	yes	yes	no	45	normal
7	F508del/c.3321dup	-0,22	PI	no	no	no	341	inflammation
8	F508del/P5L	-0,3	PS	no	no	no	40	normal
9	F508del/F508del	-2,37	PI	no	no	no	223	inflammation
10	F508del/F508del	-2,6	PI	no	no	no	62	inflammation
11	F508del/F508del	-0,3	PI	yes	no	yes	63	inflammation
12	F508del/F508del	-0,64	PI	no	no	no	55	-
13	F508del/F508del	0,3	PI	no	no	no	90	-
14	F508del/F508del	0,1	PI	no	no	no	352	-
15	F508del/F508del	-0,27	PI	no	yes	no	347	-
16	F508del/F508del	-0,13	PI	no	no	no	116	-
17	F508del/F508del	0,1	PI	no	no	no	101	-
18	F508del/F508del	0,55	PI	yes	yes	no	104	-
19	F508del/F508del	1,42	PI	no	no	no	88	-
20	F508del/F508del	-1,16	PI	no	no	no	142	-
21	F508del/F508del	0,03	PI	no	no	no	55	-
22	F508del/F508del	1,1	PI	no	no	no	330	-
23	F508del/F508del	1,2	PI	no	no	no	289	-

BMI – Body mass index; m- months; PI – pancreatic insufficiency; PS-pancreatic sufficiency

Table 2. Association between gastrointestinal symptoms and meconium ileus past history and normal or elevated fecal calprotectin.

n=23	Normal calprotectin (n=6)		Elevated calprotectin (n=17)		p#
	yes	no	yes	no	
Abdominal pain	2	4	3	14	0.58
Diarrhea	0	6	3	14	1
Constipation	2	4	1	16	1
Meconium ileus	1	5	4	13	1

#Fisher exact test

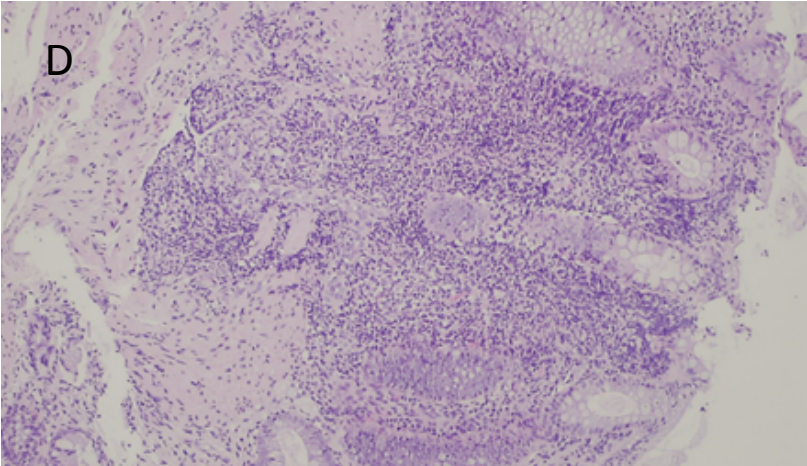
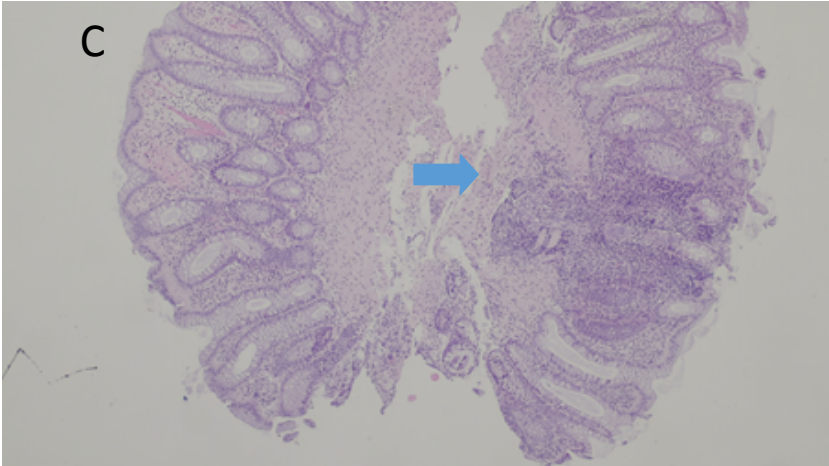
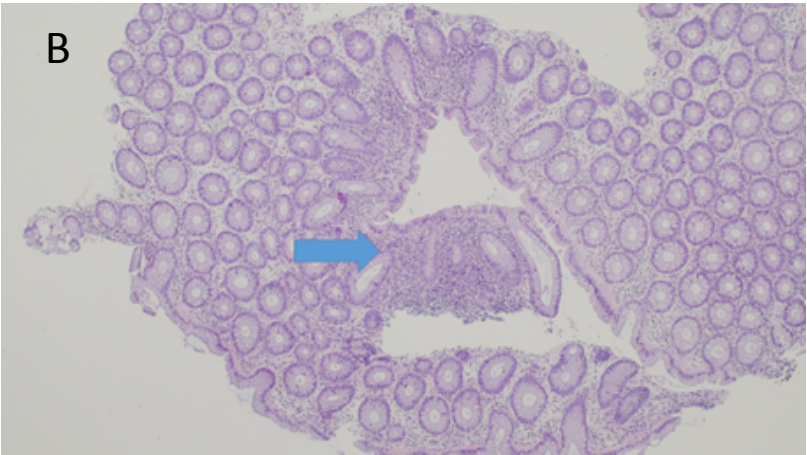
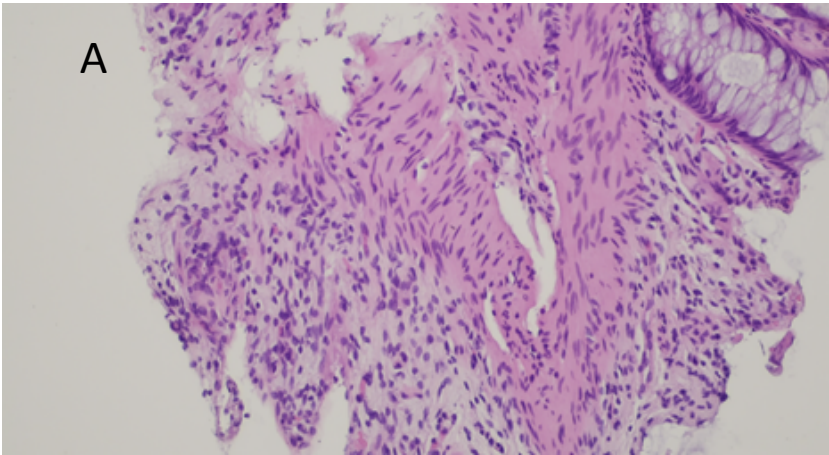
Table 3. Comparison of histologic rectal inflammation presence between patients with normal or elevated fecal calprotectin.

(n=11)	Normal calprotectin n=6		Elevated calprotectin n=5		p#
	yes	no	yes	no	
Mucosal inflammation	0	6	4	1	0.015

#Fisher exact test

Figure 1 – A - Histologic features of patient 8 (F508del/c.3321dup) showing mild to moderate focal inflammation, composed of plasma cells and small lymphocytes, in the mucosa, H&E 200x. **B** - Histologic features of patient 9 (F508del/F508del) showing mild focal inflammation of mononucleated cells of the mucosa in a vaguely nodular pattern (blue arrow), H&E 40x; **C** - Histologic features of patient 10 (F508del/F508del) showing mild focal inflammation of the mucosa, with small lymphocytes and plasma cells, between colonic crypts (blue arrow), H&E 40x, highlighted in higher magnification **D**, H&E 200x.

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Fecal calprotectin and rectal histologic inflammatory markers in cystic fibrosis - single centre study

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5 2 **single centre study**
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8 3 **Authors:**
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10 4 **Corresponding author:**
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12
13 5 **Juliana Roda**
14

15 6 **MD**
16

17 7 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e
18

19 8 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
20

21 9 Avenida Afonso Romão, 3000-602 Coimbra, Portugal
22

23 10 Telephone: +351 962748392
24

25 11 Email: juroda@hotmail.com
26

27 12 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8990-779X>
28
29
30
31
32

33 14 **Carla Maia**
34

35 15 **MD**
36

37 16 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e
38

39 17 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
40

41 18 Email: carla.maia@chuc.min-saude.pt
42
43
44
45
46

47 20 **Susana Almeida**
48

49 21 **MD**
50

51 22 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e
52

53 23 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
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55 24 Email: susana.almeida.coimbra@gmail.com
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Rui Caetano Oliveira

MD, PhD

Pathology Department, Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Portugal; Biophysics Institute, Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, 3000-548, Portugal
Coimbra Institute for Clinical and Biomedical Research (iCBR) Area of Environment Genetics and Oncobiology (CIMAGO), Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, 3000-548, Coimbra, Portugal
Email: ruipedrocoliveira@hotmail.com

Ricardo Ferreira

MD

Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Email: ricardo.ferreira@chuc.min-saude.pt

Guiomar Oliveira

MD, PhD

Centro de Desenvolvimento da Criança e Centro de Investigação e Formação Clínica, Hospital Pediátrico – Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Clínica Universitária de Pediatria, Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Email: guiomar@chuc.min-saude.pt
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7049-1277>

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1 ABSTRACT

2 Objective: To analyze the association of fecal calprotectin with the genetic and clinical
3 characteristics of pediatric patients with cystic fibrosis (PwCF). In a subset of these patients, we
4 aimed to associate histologic inflammatory features of rectal mucosa to fecal calprotectin
5 levels.

6 Methods: In a prospective study, fecal calprotectin levels were collected in all 23 PwCF
7 attending our pediatric center, together with demographic and clinical data. Associations
8 between fecal calprotectin and clinical features were determined. In 11 of these patients,
9 endoscopic rectal biopsies were obtained and the association between fecal calprotectin and
10 histologic inflammatory markers was analyzed. Statistical analyses included Spearman's
11 correlation coefficient, Mann-Whitney and Exact Fisher tests. Sensitivity and specificity was
12 calculated.

13 Results: Median age of PwCF was 12 years, 19 had pancreatic insufficiency (PI) (19/23).
14 Seventeen (17/23) had elevated fecal calprotectin, and the median value was 88 µg/g
15 (IQR=178 µg/g). Higher fecal calprotectin levels were observed in the PI group (101 vs 30 µg/g,
16 P=0.027). No significant correlation between elevated fecal calprotectin level and BMI z-score
17 was found. Five patients (22%) reported abdominal pain, three (13%) complained of diarrhea
18 and three (13%) had constipation, but these symptoms were not associated with elevated
19 fecal calprotectin.

20 Unspecific focal rectal inflammation was found in four patients (4/11). An association between
21 rectal mucosa inflammation and elevated fecal calprotectin was found (p=0.015). Sensitivity
22 was 100% and specificity was 86%.

23 Conclusions: In our PwCF, elevated fecal calprotectin was frequent, particularly if PI, and it was
24 not related to gastrointestinal symptoms or malnutrition. Elevated fecal calprotectin was

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1 present in patients with histologic evidence of rectal inflammation. Fecal calprotectin may be
2 an indicator of asymptomatic rectal inflammation in PwCF.

3

4 **Keywords:** cystic fibrosis, gastroenterology

5 **List of abbreviations:**

6 BMI - Body mass index

7 CF - Cystic fibrosis

8 CFTR - Cystic Fibrosis Transmembrane conductance Regulator

9 IQR – Interquartile range

10 PERT - pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy

11 PI - Pancreatic insufficiency

12 PS - pancreatic sufficient

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1 BACKGROUND

2 Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a severe autosomal recessive disease that results from mutations in a
3 gene encoding the cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) protein, a
4 chloride channel [1]. It is the most common life-limiting genetic disease among Caucasians,
5 occurring in 1 of 2500 live births worldwide. In Portugal, a prevalence of 0.27 per 10,000
6 inhabitants and an incidence of 1 per 7500 newborns have been estimated [2, 3].

7 CF is also the most common cause of pancreatic insufficiency (PI) in children [4]. Historically,
8 CF children died in infancy from severe malnutrition and later from respiratory failure, but due
9 to improved clinical care, including pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT), currently,
10 a majority of them reach adulthood [5]. Approximately 85% of CF patients have impaired
11 digestion due to PI and despite adequate PERT, several CF patients still have malabsorption,
12 growth impairment and gastrointestinal problems, including abdominal pain, steatorrhea, and
13 altered motility [4, 5]. It has been suggested that digestive symptoms are attributable not only
14 to PI but also to intestinal inflammation. However, the pathogenesis and nutritional
15 implications of this finding remains unclear [5].

16 Studies, in both animals and humans, have reported evidence of intestinal inflammation in CF.
17 In the mouse model of CF, the most common manifestation is intestinal obstruction resulting
18 from inflammatory enteropathy, leading to perforation [6]. Furthermore, abnormal mucus
19 accumulation in the intestines of murine models predisposes them to gut dysmotility, creating
20 a niche for bacterial overgrowth and dysbiosis [7].

21 In humans, the presence of inflammatory biomarkers, including fecal calprotectin, eosinophil
22 cationic protein, interleukin-1B and interleukin-8, was reported, suggesting that intestinal
23 inflammation is a feature of CF [5, 8]. Videocapsule endoscopic studies elicited mucosal
24 ulceration, erythema and mucosal breaks in the small bowel of CF patients, particularly those
25 with PI [4]. Calprotectin is a neutrophil secretory product, and elevated fecal levels are well
26 correlated with colonic inflammation in inflammatory bowel disease [9–11]. Dysbiosis may be

1 associated with intestinal inflammation as reflected by increased levels of fecal calprotectin
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5 2 that respond to antibiotic treatment [12]. CFTR modulators may potentially improve dysbiosis
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8 3 and inflammation, for example ivacaftor has been associated with a decrease in calprotectin
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10 4 levels[13].

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12 5 However, to our knowledge, there are no studies characterizing intestinal histological
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14 6 inflammatory findings in CF patients and, particularly, studies analysing the relationship
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16 7 between elevated fecal calprotectin and these histologic inflammatory findings.

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18 8 The aim of the present study was to analyze, in a cohort of pediatric CF patients, the
19
20 9 association between fecal calprotectin levels and genetic and clinical characteristics, including
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22 10 nutritional status and gastrointestinal symptoms. In a subset of this cohort, we also aimed to
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24 11 characterize histological inflammatory features of rectal mucosa and relate it to fecal
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26 12 calprotectin levels.

30 13 **METHODS**

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33 14 This prospective study included children and adolescents aged 0 to 18 years followed in the
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35 15 Pediatric Unit of the Cystic Fibrosis Reference Centre of the Centro Hospitalar e Universitário
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37 16 de Coimbra, Portugal, in the year 2019. The criteria for the diagnosis of CF were: clinical
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39 17 characteristics compatible with CF, a positive sweat test and a genetic study with the
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41 18 identification of two disease-causing mutations, according to the latest consensus [14]. All
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43 19 patients willing to participate were included. Exclusion criteria included recent respiratory
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45 20 exacerbation/infection or ingestion of antibiotics, steroids or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory
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47 21 drugs, both in the previous 4 weeks.

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50 22 In all participants, demographic data, genotype and clinical data, including nutritional status
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52 23 and PERT medication, were collected at the time of the appointment where stool sample was
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54 24 obtained. Nutritional status was assessed according to the z-score of weight, height, and body
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56 25 mass index (BMI). Patients were asked whether they had experienced gastrointestinal
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1 symptoms (abdominal pain, constipation or diarrhea) in the two weeks preceding the
2 calprotectin measurement.

3 Exocrine pancreatic function was assessed using fecal elastase levels. PI was considered when
4 the fecal elastase level was under 200 µg/g; above that, they were classified as pancreatic
5 sufficient (PS).

6 7 **Fecal calprotectin measurement**

8 Stool samples were collected at home or at the CF Reference Centre. Calprotectin level in the
9 fecal samples were measured using EliA Calprotectin® (reagents from Thermo Fisher
10 Scientific®). Fecal calprotectin concentration was considered normal up to 50 µg/g stool, as
11 was considered in previous studies with CF patients [4] and as it has been shown to be
12 sensitive for detecting inflammation in children with inflammatory bowel disease [15].

13 14 **Rectal biopsies**

15 Rectal biopsies were obtained, from patients already enrolled in another study from our
16 center, which aimed to test CFTR modulator responses in intestinal organoids from patients
17 with rarer mutations (data not yet published; *UID/MULTI/04046/2019*). As a consequence,
18 most of these patients had less common mutations. Time between fecal calprotectin
19 measurement and rectal biopsies was a maximum of two days.

20 Rectal mucosa specimens (3-4 mm in diameter) were obtained from eleven patients, with or
21 without sedation (depending on individuals will or collaboration) using a colonoscope and
22 colon forceps (Endoflex®, diameter 2.8 mm). Samples were immediately stored in formalin.

23 One pathologist with experience in gastrointestinal pathology from the Pathology Department,
24 Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Portugal performed the histologic analysis.
25 Samples were blinded to the clinical information and were analyzed under an optical

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3 1 microscope (Nikon Eclipse 50i®). Pictures were taken with a Nikon-Digital Sight DS-Fi1® digital
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5 2 camera.

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7 3 Since the diagnosis of CF is based mainly on bioelectrical/biochemical analyses, there is no
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9 4 defined standard histological classification score. Therefore, the evaluation took into
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11 5 consideration the density of mononucleated inflammatory population, on a semi quantitative
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13 6 approach: none, mild, moderate and severe.
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16 7 17 18 8 **Statistical Analysis**

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20 9 Statistical analyses were performed with SPSS software (v.19; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA), and
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22 10 a p value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Descriptive statistics were presented
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24 11 according to the normality of the data distribution using Shapiro-Wilk test. Spearman's
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26 12 correlation coefficient, Mann-Whitney and Exact Fisher tests were used between patient
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28 13 groups to evaluate correlation, differences and associations, respectively. Sensitivity and
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30 14 specificity of calprotectin as a marker of rectal inflammation was calculated.
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36 16 **Ethics Approval**

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38 17 The present study was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved
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40 18 by the board of the Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra (Portugal) after a favorable
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42 19 report by the Health Ethics Committee (Ref. CHUC-080-16). Informed consent was obtained by
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44 20 all participants aged over 16 years or by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.
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50 22 **Patient involvement**

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52 23 Patients were not directly involved in setting the research question, the design or in the
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54 24 implementation of the project.
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2 **RESULTS**

3 Fecal calprotectin was measured in all 23 PwCF followed in our center during one year. The
4 median age was 12 years, aged from 2 months to 17 years old. Twelve were male. All patients
5 with PI (19/23, 83%) were taking PERT. The F508del mutation was present in all patients in at
6 least one allele. Fifteen (65%) patients were F508del homozygous, and the others carried one
7 of the following mutations: R334W (n=3), 711+ 1G->T (n=2), and 2184insA (n=1), P5L (n=1) and
8 a novel mutation, c.3321dup (n=1) (Table 1). Only two patients were taking CFTR modulator
9 lumacaftor/ivacaftor (patient 15 and patient 20, presenting fecal calprotectin level of 347 and
10 142 µg/g, respectively). Sweat test of these patients did not improve with modulator drug.
11 Seventeen of the 23 patients (74%) had an elevated fecal calprotectin measurement, and the
12 median value was 88 µg/g (IQR=178 µg/g). Most patients (16/19) with PI had elevated fecal
13 calprotectin (84%). The PI group had higher fecal calprotectin levels than in the PS group (101
14 µg/g; IQR=234 vs 30 µg/g; IQR=53; p=0.0027).

15 A moderate positive correlation was found between fecal calprotectin and sweat test values
16 (from the time of diagnosis) (r=0.46; p=0.029). A weak negative correlation was found
17 between age and fecal calprotectin (r=-0.3; p=0.14). Also meconium ileus past history was not
18 associated with elevated calprotectin (Table 2).

19 Comparing the median BMI z-score in patients with normal and elevated fecal calprotectin, no
20 significant difference was found (-0.58 kg/m²; IQR= 2.8 vs 0.1 kg/m²; IQR=1.08; p=0.09). No
21 significant correlation between fecal calprotectin level and BMI z-score was found (r=0.19;
22 p=0.36).

23 All 15 patients homozygous for the F508del mutation had elevated fecal calprotectin. These
24 PwCF have a statistically significant higher fecal calprotectin than F508del heterozygous
25 patients (110 µg/g; IQR=217 vs 40 µg/g; IQR=54, p=0.003).

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3 1 Some CF patients reported digestive symptoms: five patients (22%) reported abdominal pain,
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5 2 three (13%) complained of diarrhea, and three (13%) had constipation (Table 1).
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7 3 Gastrointestinal symptoms were not associated with elevated fecal calprotectin (Table 2).
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11 5 **Histologic features**

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14 6 Rectal biopsies were obtained from 11 of the 23 PwCF. Eight patients had the rarer mutations
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16 7 R334W (n=3), 711+1G-T (n=2), P5L (n=1), c.3321dup (n=1) and 2184insA (n=1), and three
17
18 8 patients were homozygous for the F508del mutation.

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20
21 9 Unspecific mild focal inflammation was found in the three F508del homozygous patients, all of
22
23 10 which had elevated fecal calprotectin (Table 1). Inflammatory features were characterized as
24
25 11 small lymphocyte and plasma cell infiltrates distributed in a vaguely nodular pattern between
26
27 12 colonic crypts (Figure 1 – B, C and D).

28
29
30 13 Mild to moderate focal inflammation composed of plasma cells and small lymphocytes in the
31
32 14 mucosa was found in the patient carrying F508del in one allele and the new mutation
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34 15 c.3321dup in the other allele (Figure 1 – A). This patient had significantly elevated fecal
35
36 16 calprotectin (341 µg/g) (patient 7; Table 1).

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38
39 17 There was an association between elevated fecal calprotectin levels and the presence of
40
41 18 inflammation in rectal biopsies (Table 3). In our study, sensitivity of calprotectin levels was
42
43 19 100% and specificity was 86%.

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45 20 Median calprotectin was higher in PwCF with histological inflammatory alterations comparing
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47 21 with PwCF with normal histology (143 µg/g; IQR=249 vs 19 µg/g; IQR=30; p=0.024). None of
48
49 22 the mucosal samples had architectural changes, which are a major sign of chronic
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51 23 inflammation.

52 24 53 54 55 56 25 **DISCUSSION**

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3 1 Most patients from this study (78%) had an elevated fecal calprotectin level, some reaching a
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5 2 maximum level of more than 300 µg/g. This is consistent with previous studies and suggests
6
7 3 the presence of intestinal inflammation in PwCF [4, 5, 16]. The pathophysiology of intestinal
8
9 4 inflammation may be explained by the same triad of obstruction by mucus accumulation,
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11 5 inflammation and infection that causes disease in the airways of PwCF [17]. The *CFTR* gene is
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13 6 strongly expressed all along the intestinal tract in a cephalad-caudal gradient, *CFTR* messenger
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15 7 RNA levels are highest in the duodenum and levels decrease distally along the small intestine
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17 8 to the large intestine [17]. This “CF enteropathy” may be an independent entity in the disease
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19 9 process or may be due to other factors. High doses of PERT can cause inflammation and
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21 10 fibrosing colonopathy[18]. Inspissated intestinal secretions, mucus accumulation, constipation,
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23 11 slow intestinal motility, the use of proton pump inhibitors and frequent courses of antibiotics
24
25 12 are multiple risk factors for small bowel bacterial overgrowth in CF patients, which can cause
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27 13 inflammation, mucosal damage and aggravate maldigestion [16]. An unfavorable intestinal
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29 14 microbiome may also be a stimulus for inflammation [19, 20]. One trial with probiotics
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31 15 supported this hypothesis, as the use of *Lactobacillus rhamnosus GG* reduced calprotectin
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33 16 concentrations in CF children [19]. Another study, found increased abundances of
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35 17 *Staphylococcus*, *Streptococcus*, and *Veillonella dispar*, along with decreased abundances of
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37 18 *Bacteroides*, *Bifidobacterium adolescentis*, and *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii* to be associated
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39 19 to intestinal inflammation in PwCF in similarity to changes found in patients with Crohn’s
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41 20 disease [20].
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48 21 In our study, lower fecal calprotectin levels were found in PS patients. Elevated fecal
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50 22 calprotectin only in PI patients has also been reported by Dhaliwal *et al* [5]. On the other hand,
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52 23 sixteen of nineteen patients with PI had elevated fecal calprotectin, and the difference in fecal
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54 24 calprotectin levels between the PI and PS groups was impressive (101 vs 30 µg/g). This means
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56 25 that either PI by itself or PERT may be responsible for intestinal inflammation in these
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58 26 patients[21]. However, there has been reported a lack of correlation between PERT and fecal
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1 calprotectin[22]. As reported by Dumoulin *et al.*, calprotectin is subject to proteolysis by tripsin
2 activity, which is virtually absent in PI PwCF. As a result, calprotectin proteolysis is also
3 reduced. Therefore, calprotectin levels detected in stools of PI patients may be higher, and this
4 may not be exclusively attributed to intestinal inflammation[23]. Perhaps, in PI PwCF, the
5 upper limit of the considered "normal" fecal calprotectin should be higher than the value
6 considered for inflammatory bowel disease, as no association was found with digestive
7 symptoms [23, 24]. Some recent studies suggest an upper limit of >50 µg/g or 250 µg/g and it
8 remains unclear whether reference ranges that are useful in IBD are equally applicable in
9 CF[20, 24]. Also, the pancreatic status is related to CFTR function and genotype and intestinal
10 inflammation may be another manifestation of the multisystemic involvement of the disease
11 and not only influenced by pancreatic function [25].

12 Another interesting finding was that PwCF F508del homozygous have significantly higher
13 calprotectin levels in comparison to heterozygotes. This genotype may be associated with an
14 increased risk of more significant intestinal inflammation.

15 Overall, only a small number of patients complained of gastrointestinal symptoms, and no
16 association between elevated calprotectin and digestive symptoms could be found. The same
17 conclusion has been reported even in studies where digestive symptoms were much more
18 frequent[22].

19 In contrast to previous studies [5], no relationship could be found between fecal calprotectin
20 and nutritional status or growth parameters. However, interestingly, a positive correlation was
21 found between fecal calprotectin and sweat test values, which may be indicative of the
22 presence of significant intestinal inflammation in patients with a more severe phenotype. The
23 negative correlation found between fecal calprotectin and age is in line with the reported
24 tendency towards lower values with increasing age reported in the literature, even though
25 there are no well-established cut off levels for specific age ranges[26].

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3 1 Historically, distinct histological changes, which have been interpreted as signs of mucus
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5 2 hypersecretion, have been reported in light microscopic studies of large intestinal mucosa
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7 3 from CF patients. "Hypertrophic" or enlarged goblet cells and crypts distended by accumulated
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9 4 mucus were described, and these changes were considered useful in the diagnosis of CF by
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11 5 some authors [27]. In this study we were specifically looking for histologic evidence of
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13 6 inflammation in CF patients and try to associate it to fecal calprotectin.

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16 7 Four out of the eleven patients to whom rectal biopsies were performed had histologic
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18 8 inflammatory alterations. Interestingly, all the three patients homozygous for F508del
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20 9 mutation had histological signs of inflammation and this may be related to the severe
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22 10 phenotype associated to this common mutation.

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25 11 Elevated calprotectin level was associated with histologic inflammation in the rectal mucosa
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27 12 (Table 3) and PwCF with rectal inflammation had a significantly higher calprotectin level. High
28
29 13 sensitivity and specificity, allows us to conclude that fecal calprotectin may be a good indicator
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31 14 of rectal inflammation in PwCF. However, the clinical meaning of this finding remains to be
32
33 15 explained, as this did not translate into more frequent gastrointestinal symptoms or influenced
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35 16 nutritional status. However, as the life expectancy of PwCF is increasing there has been
36
37 17 reported an increased risk of gastrointestinal malignancies. Chronic intestinal inflammation is a
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39 18 risk factor for cancer development and this should probably be addressed early in life[24].

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43 19 We are aware that our study had several limitations: it is a small and unicentric study, and
44
45 20 biopsies were performed on a subset of our patients and limited to the rectum. Larger
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47 21 multicenter studies with the aim of determining serial and longitudinal studies of calprotectin
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49 22 levels and biopsies of the upper and lower gastrointestinal tract may help to determine clinical
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51 23 relevance.

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54 24 However, the finding of abnormal calprotectin levels and inflammatory alterations in the
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56 25 intestinal mucosa in the pediatric population raises questions about the early detection of CF
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58 26 enteropathy.

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3 1 In conclusion, there is increasing evidence that intestinal inflammation is part of CF and is
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5 2 present early in life, particularly in childhood and adolescence. The additional contribution of
6
7 3 low trypsin activity, chronic enzyme dosage, dysmotility, bacterial overgrowth, dysbiosis and
8
9 4 other unidentified factors may play a role in its multifactorial cause. Fecal calprotectin may be
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11 5 considered a noninvasive biomarker of intestinal inflammation in CF patients since a
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13 6 relationship with histologic evidence of rectal mucosa inflammation was found. Further and
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15 7 larger studies need to be performed to confirm and explain the mechanisms and clinical
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17 8 relevance of these findings.
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3 1 **Ethics approval and consent to participate:** The present study was performed in accordance
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5 2 with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the board of the Centro Hospitalar e
6
7 3 Universitário de Coimbra (Portugal) after a favorable report by the Health Ethics Committee
8
9 4 (Ref. CHUC-080-16). Informed consent was obtained by all participants aged over 16 years or
10
11 5 by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.

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13
14 6 **Consent for publication:** Informed consent for publication was obtained by all participants
15
16 7 aged over 16 years or by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.

17
18
19 8 **Availability of data and materials:** The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study
20
21 9 are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

22
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30 12
31 13 **Authors' contributions:**

32 14 **JR** conceived and designed the study, collected, analyzed and interpreted the data and wrote
33
34 15 the first draft of the manuscript.

35
36 16 **CM** interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript

37
38 17 **SA** interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript.

39
40 18 **RCO** prepared Figure 1 and analyzed and interpreted the data

41
42 19 **RF** analyzed and interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript.

43
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1 What is already known on this topic:

- 2 • There is increasing evidence of intestinal inflammation in cystic fibrosis (CF)
- 3 • Elevated fecal calprotectin has been found in CF patients

4
5 What this study adds:

- 6 • Focal inflammation in rectal biopsies was found in CF patients and it is associated to
- 7 elevated fecal calprotectin
- 8 • Fecal calprotectin may be an indicator of intestinal inflammation in CF

Confidential: For Review Only

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Table 1. Genotype, body mass index, gastrointestinal symptoms, fecal calprotectin and rectal histology of patients with cystic fibrosis.

no.	Genotype	BMI z-score kg/m ²	Pancreatic function	Abdominal pain	Diarrhea	Constipation	Calprotectin (µg/g)	Histology
1	F508del/R334W	-0,42	PS	yes	no	no	19	normal
2	F508del/R334W	1,18	PS	no	no	no	15	normal
3	F508del/R334W	0,94	PS	yes	no	yes	79	normal
4	F508del/711+1G-T	-0,74	PI	no	no	yes	9	normal
5	F508del/711+1G-T	-1,99	PI	no	no	no	19	normal
6	F508del/2184insA	-4,95	PI	yes	yes	no	45	normal
7	F508del/c.3321dup	-0,22	PI	no	no	no	341	inflammation
8	F508del/P5L	-0,3	PS	no	no	no	40	normal
9	F508del/F508del	-2,37	PI	no	no	no	223	inflammation
10	F508del/F508del	-2,6	PI	no	no	no	62	inflammation
11	F508del/F508del	-0,3	PI	yes	no	yes	63	inflammation
12	F508del/F508del	-0,64	PI	no	no	no	55	-
13	F508del/F508del	0,3	PI	no	no	no	90	-
14	F508del/F508del	0,1	PI	no	no	no	352	-
15	F508del/F508del	-0,27	PI	no	yes	no	347	-
16	F508del/F508del	-0,13	PI	no	no	no	116	-
17	F508del/F508del	0,1	PI	no	no	no	101	-
18	F508del/F508del	0,55	PI	yes	yes	no	104	-
19	F508del/F508del	1,42	PI	no	no	no	88	-
20	F508del/F508del	-1,16	PI	no	no	no	142	-
21	F508del/F508del	0,03	PI	no	no	no	55	-
22	F508del/F508del	1,1	PI	no	no	no	330	-
23	F508del/F508del	1,2	PI	no	no	no	289	-

BMI – Body mass index; m- months; PI – pancreatic insufficiency; PS-pancreatic sufficiency

Table 2. Association between gastrointestinal symptoms and meconium ileus past history and normal or elevated fecal calprotectin.

n=23	Normal calprotectin (n=6)		Elevated calprotectin (n=17)		p-value#
	yes	no	yes	no	
Abdominal pain	2	4	3	14	0.58
Diarrhea	0	6	3	14	1
Constipation	2	4	1	16	1
Meconium ileus	1	5	4	13	1

#Fisher exact test

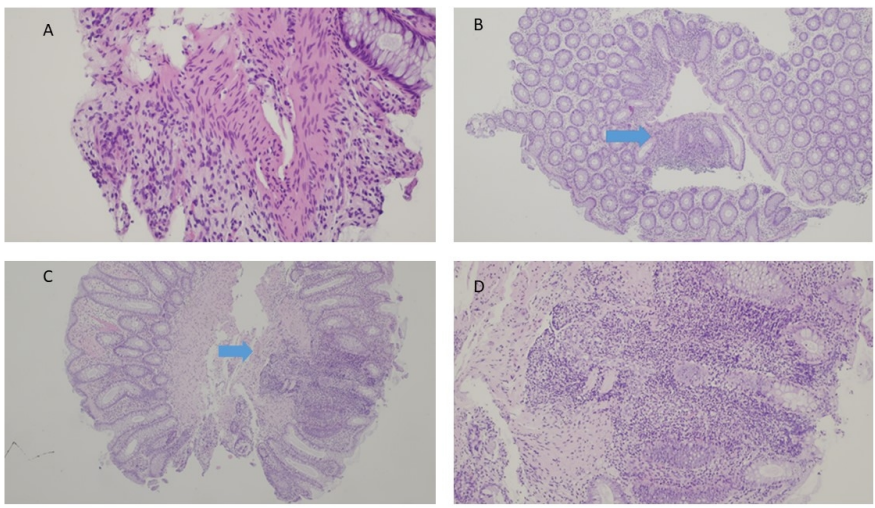
Table 3. Comparison of histologic rectal inflammation presence between patients with normal or elevated fecal calprotectin.

(n=11)	Normal calprotectin n=6		Elevated calprotectin n=5	
	yes	no	yes	no
Mucosal inflammation	0	6	4	1

#Fisher exact test p-value=0.015

Figure 1 – A - Histologic features of patient 8 (F508del/c.3321dup) showing mild to moderate focal inflammation, composed of plasma cells and small lymphocytes, in the mucosa, H&E 200x. **B** - Histologic features of patient 9 (F508del/F508del) showing mild focal inflammation of mononucleated cells of the mucosa in a vaguely nodular pattern (blue arrow), H&E 40x; **C** - Histologic features of patient 10 (F508del/F508del) showing mild focal inflammation of the mucosa, with small lymphocytes and plasma cells, between colonic crypts (blue arrow), H&E 40x, highlighted in higher magnification **D**, H&E 200x.

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338x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)

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Fecal calprotectin and rectal histologic inflammatory markers in cystic fibrosis - single centre study

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5 2 **single centre study**
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8 3 **Authors:**
9

10 4 **Corresponding author:**
11

12
13 5 **Juliana Roda**
14

15 6 **MD**
16

17
18 7 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e
19

20 8 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
21

22 9 Avenida Afonso Romão, 3000-602 Coimbra, Portugal
23

24
25 10 Telephone: +351 962748392
26

27 11 Email: juroda@hotmail.com
28

29 12 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8990-779X>
30
31
32

33 14 **Carla Maia**
34

35 15 **MD**
36

37
38 16 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e
39

40 17 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
41

42 18 Email: carla.maia@chuc.min-saude.pt
43
44
45
46

47 20 **Susana Almeida**
48

49 21 **MD**
50

51 22 Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e
52

53 23 Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
54

55
56 24 Email: susana.almeida.coimbra@gmail.com
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Rui Caetano Oliveira

MD, PhD

Pathology Department, Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Portugal; Biophysics Institute, Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, 3000-548, Portugal
Coimbra Institute for Clinical and Biomedical Research (iCBR) Area of Environment Genetics and Oncobiology (CIMAGO), Faculty of Medicine, University of Coimbra, 3000-548, Coimbra, Portugal
Email: ruipedrocoliveira@hotmail.com

Ricardo Ferreira

MD

Pediatric Gastroenterology and Nutrition Unit, Hospital Pediátrico - Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Email: ricardo.ferreira@chuc.min-saude.pt

Guiomar Oliveira

MD, PhD

Centro de Desenvolvimento da Criança e Centro de Investigação e Formação Clínica, Hospital Pediátrico – Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Clínica Universitária de Pediatria, Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de Coimbra, Coimbra, Portugal
Email: guiomar@chuc.min-saude.pt
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7049-1277>

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1 ABSTRACT

2 Objective: To analyze the association of fecal calprotectin with the genetic and clinical
3 characteristics of pediatric patients with cystic fibrosis (PwCF). In a subset of these patients, we
4 aimed to associate histologic inflammatory features of rectal mucosa to fecal calprotectin
5 levels.

6 Methods: In a prospective study, fecal calprotectin levels were collected in all 23 PwCF
7 attending our pediatric center, together with demographic and clinical data. Associations
8 between fecal calprotectin and clinical features were determined. In 11 of these patients,
9 endoscopic rectal biopsies were obtained and the association between fecal calprotectin and
10 histologic inflammatory markers was analyzed. Statistical analyses included Spearman's
11 correlation coefficient, Mann-Whitney and Exact Fisher tests. Sensitivity and specificity was
12 calculated.

13 Results: Median age of PwCF was 12 years, 19 had pancreatic insufficiency (PI) (19/23).
14 Seventeen (17/23) had elevated fecal calprotectin, and the median value was 88 $\mu\text{g/g}$
15 (IQR=178 $\mu\text{g/g}$). Higher fecal calprotectin levels were observed in the PI group (101 vs 30 $\mu\text{g/g}$,
16 $P=0.027$). No significant correlation between elevated fecal calprotectin level and BMI z-score
17 was found. Five patients (22%) reported abdominal pain, three (13%) complained of diarrhea
18 and three (13%) had constipation, but these symptoms were not associated with elevated
19 fecal calprotectin.

20 Unspecific focal rectal inflammation was found in four patients (4/11). An association between
21 rectal mucosa inflammation and elevated fecal calprotectin was found ($p=0.015$). Sensitivity
22 was 100% and specificity was 86%.

23 Conclusions: In our PwCF, elevated fecal calprotectin was frequent, particularly if PI, and it was
24 not related to gastrointestinal symptoms or malnutrition. Elevated fecal calprotectin was

1 present in patients with histologic evidence of rectal inflammation. Fecal calprotectin may be
2 an indicator of asymptomatic rectal inflammation in PwCF.

3

4 **Keywords:** cystic fibrosis, gastroenterology

5 **What is already known on this topic:**

- 6 • There is increasing evidence of intestinal inflammation in cystic fibrosis (CF)
- 7 • Elevated fecal calprotectin has been found in CF patients

8 **What this study adds:**

- 9 • Elevated fecal calprotectin is frequent, particularly if pancreatic insufficient patients
10 with CF
- 11 • Focal inflammation in rectal biopsies was found in CF patients and it is associated to
12 elevated fecal calprotectin

13 **How this study might affect research, practice or policy:** Fecal calprotectin may be used as an
14 indicator of rectal inflammation in CF

15 **List of abbreviations:**

16 BMI - Body mass index

17 CF - Cystic fibrosis

18 CFTR - Cystic Fibrosis Transmembrane conductance Regulator

19 IQR – Interquartile range

20 PERT - pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy

21 PI - Pancreatic insufficiency

22 PS - pancreatic sufficient

1 INTRODUCTION

2 Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a severe autosomal recessive disease that results from mutations in a
3 gene encoding the cystic fibrosis transmembrane conductance regulator (CFTR) protein, a
4 chloride channel [1]. It is the most common life-limiting genetic disease among Caucasians,
5 occurring in 1 of 2500 live births worldwide. In Portugal, a prevalence of 0.27 per 10,000
6 inhabitants and an incidence of 1 per 7500 newborns have been estimated [2, 3].

7 CF is also the most common cause of pancreatic insufficiency (PI) in children [4]. Historically,
8 CF children died in infancy from severe malnutrition and later from respiratory failure, but due
9 to improved clinical care, including pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT), currently,
10 a majority of them reach adulthood [5]. Approximately 85% of CF patients have impaired
11 digestion due to PI and despite adequate PERT, several CF patients still have malabsorption,
12 growth impairment and gastrointestinal problems, including abdominal pain, steatorrhea, and
13 altered motility [4, 5]. It has been suggested that digestive symptoms are attributable not only
14 to PI but also to intestinal inflammation. However, the pathogenesis and nutritional
15 implications of this finding remains unclear [5].

16 Studies, in both animals and humans, have reported evidence of intestinal inflammation in CF.
17 In the mouse model of CF, the most common manifestation is intestinal obstruction resulting
18 from inflammatory enteropathy, leading to perforation [6]. Furthermore, abnormal mucus
19 accumulation in the intestines of murine models predisposes them to gut dysmotility, creating
20 a niche for bacterial overgrowth and dysbiosis [7].

21 In humans, the presence of inflammatory biomarkers, including fecal calprotectin, eosinophil
22 cationic protein, interleukin-1B and interleukin-8, was reported, suggesting that intestinal
23 inflammation is a feature of CF [5, 8]. Videocapsule endoscopic studies elicited mucosal
24 ulceration, erythema and mucosal breaks in the small bowel of CF patients, particularly those
25 with PI [4]. Calprotectin is a neutrophil secretory product, and elevated fecal levels are well
26 correlated with colonic inflammation in inflammatory bowel disease [9–11]. Dysbiosis may be

1 associated with intestinal inflammation as reflected by increased levels of fecal calprotectin
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5 2 that respond to antibiotic treatment [12]. CFTR modulators may potentially improve dysbiosis
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8 3 and inflammation, for example ivacaftor has been associated with a decrease in calprotectin
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10 4 levels[13].

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12 5 However, to our knowledge, there are no studies characterizing intestinal histological
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14 6 inflammatory findings in CF patients and, particularly, studies analysing the relationship
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16 7 between elevated fecal calprotectin and these histologic inflammatory findings.

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18 8 The aim of the present study was to analyze, in a cohort of pediatric CF patients, the
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20 9 association between fecal calprotectin levels and genetic and clinical characteristics, including
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22 10 nutritional status and gastrointestinal symptoms. In a subset of this cohort, we also aimed to
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24 11 characterize histological inflammatory features of rectal mucosa and relate it to fecal
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26 12 calprotectin levels.

13 **METHODS**

14 This prospective study included children and adolescents aged 0 to 18 years followed in the
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16 15 Pediatric Unit of the Cystic Fibrosis Reference Centre of the Centro Hospitalar e Universitário
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18 16 de Coimbra, Portugal, in the year 2019. The criteria for the diagnosis of CF were: clinical
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20 17 characteristics compatible with CF, a positive sweat test and a genetic study with the
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22 18 identification of two disease-causing mutations, according to the latest consensus [14]. All
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24 19 patients willing to participate were included. Exclusion criteria included recent respiratory
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26 20 exacerbation/infection or ingestion of antibiotics, steroids or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory
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28 21 drugs, both in the previous 4 weeks.

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30 22 In all participants, demographic data, genotype and clinical data, including nutritional status
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32 23 and PERT medication, were collected at the time of the appointment where stool sample was
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34 24 obtained. Nutritional status was assessed according to the z-score of weight, height, and body
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36 25 mass index (BMI). Patients were asked whether they had experienced gastrointestinal
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1 symptoms (abdominal pain, constipation or diarrhea) in the two weeks preceding the
2 calprotectin measurement.

3 Exocrine pancreatic function was assessed using fecal elastase levels. PI was considered when
4 the fecal elastase level was under 200 $\mu\text{g/g}$; above that, they were classified as pancreatic
5 sufficient (PS).

6 7 **Fecal calprotectin measurement**

8 Stool samples were collected at home or at the CF Reference Centre. Calprotectin level in the
9 fecal samples were measured using EliA Calprotectin[®] (reagents from Thermo Fisher
10 Scientific[®]). Fecal calprotectin concentration was considered normal up to 50 $\mu\text{g/g}$ stool, as
11 was considered in previous studies with CF patients [4] and as it has been shown to be
12 sensitive for detecting inflammation in children with inflammatory bowel disease [15].

13 14 **Rectal biopsies**

15 Rectal biopsies were obtained, from patients already enrolled in another study from our
16 center, which aimed to test CFTR modulator responses in intestinal organoids from patients
17 with rarer mutations (data not yet published; *UID/MULTI/04046/2019*). As a consequence,
18 most of these patients had less common mutations. Time between fecal calprotectin
19 measurement and rectal biopsies was a maximum of two days.

20 Rectal mucosa specimens (3-4 mm in diameter) were obtained from eleven patients, with or
21 without sedation (depending on individuals will or collaboration) using a colonoscope and
22 colon forceps (Endoflex[®], diameter 2.8 mm). Samples were immediately stored in formalin.

23 One pathologist with experience in gastrointestinal pathology from the Pathology Department,
24 Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra, Portugal performed the histologic analysis.
25 Samples were blinded to the clinical information and were analyzed under an optical

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3 1 microscope (Nikon Eclipse 50i®). Pictures were taken with a Nikon-Digital Sight DS-Fi1® digital
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5 2 camera.

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7 3 Since the diagnosis of CF is based mainly on bioelectrical/biochemical analyses, there is no
8
9 4 defined standard histological classification score. Therefore, the evaluation took into
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11 5 consideration the density of mononucleated inflammatory population, on a semi quantitative
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13 6 approach: none, mild, moderate and severe.
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16 7 17 18 8 **Statistical Analysis**

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20 9 Statistical analyses were performed with SPSS software (v.19; SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA), and
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22 10 a p value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Descriptive statistics were presented
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24 11 according to the normality of the data distribution using Shapiro-Wilk test. Spearman's
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26 12 correlation coefficient, Mann-Whitney and Exact Fisher tests were used between patient
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28 13 groups to evaluate correlation, differences and associations, respectively. Sensitivity and
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30 14 specificity of calprotectin as a marker of rectal inflammation was calculated.
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36 16 **Ethics Approval**

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38 17 The present study was performed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved
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40 18 by the board of the Centro Hospitalar e Universitário de Coimbra (Portugal) after a favorable
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42 19 report by the Health Ethics Committee (Ref. CHUC-080-16). Informed consent was obtained by
43
44 20 all participants aged over 16 years or by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.
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50 22 **Patient involvement**

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52 23 Patients were not directly involved in setting the research question, the design or in the
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54 24 implementation of the project.
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2 **RESULTS**

3 Fecal calprotectin was measured in all 23 PwCF followed in our center during one year. The
4 median age was 12 years, aged from 2 months to 17 years old. Twelve were male. All patients
5 with PI (19/23, 83%) were taking PERT. The F508del mutation was present in all patients in at
6 least one allele. Fifteen (65%) patients were F508del homozygous, and the others carried one
7 of the following mutations: R334W (n=3), 711+ 1G->T (n=2), and 2184insA (n=1), P5L (n=1) and
8 a novel mutation, c.3321dup (n=1) (Table 1). Only two patients were taking CFTR modulator
9 lumacaftor/ivacaftor (patient 15 and patient 20, presenting fecal calprotectin level of 347 and
10 142 µg/g, respectively). Sweat test of these patients did not improve with modulator drug.
11 Seventeen of the 23 patients (74%) had an elevated fecal calprotectin measurement, and the
12 median value was 88 µg/g (IQR=178 µg/g). Most patients (16/19) with PI had elevated fecal
13 calprotectin (84%). The PI group had higher fecal calprotectin levels than in the PS group (101
14 µg/g; IQR=234 vs 30 µg/g; IQR=53; p=0.0027).

15 A moderate positive correlation was found between fecal calprotectin and sweat test values
16 (from the time of diagnosis) (r=0.46; p=0.029). A weak negative correlation was found
17 between age and fecal calprotectin (r=-0.3; p=0.14). Also meconium ileus past history was not
18 associated with elevated calprotectin (Table 2).

19 Comparing the median BMI z-score in patients with normal and elevated fecal calprotectin, no
20 significant difference was found (-0.58 kg/m²; IQR= 2.8 vs 0.1 kg/m²; IQR=1.08; p=0.09). No
21 significant correlation between fecal calprotectin level and BMI z-score was found (r=0.19;
22 p=0.36).

23 All 15 patients homozygous for the F508del mutation had elevated fecal calprotectin. These
24 PwCF have a statistically significant higher fecal calprotectin than F508del heterozygous
25 patients (110 µg/g; IQR=217 vs 40 µg/g; IQR=54, p=0.003).

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3 1 Some CF patients reported digestive symptoms: five patients (22%) reported abdominal pain,
4
5 2 three (13%) complained of diarrhea, and three (13%) had constipation (Table 1).
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7 3 Gastrointestinal symptoms were not associated with elevated fecal calprotectin (Table 2).
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11 5 **Histologic features**

12 6 Rectal biopsies were obtained from 11 of the 23 PwCF. Eight patients had the rarer mutations
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14 7 R334W (n=3), 711+1G-T (n=2), P5L (n=1), c.3321dup (n=1) and 2184insA (n=1), and three
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16 8 patients were homozygous for the F508del mutation.
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20 9 Unspecific mild focal inflammation was found in the three F508del homozygous patients, all of
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22 10 which had elevated fecal calprotectin (Table 1). Inflammatory features were characterized as
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24 11 small lymphocyte and plasma cell infiltrates distributed in a vaguely nodular pattern between
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26 12 colonic crypts (Figure 1 – B, C and D).
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29 13 Mild to moderate focal inflammation composed of plasma cells and small lymphocytes in the
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31 14 mucosa was found in the patient carrying F508del in one allele and the new mutation
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33 15 c.3321dup in the other allele (Figure 1 – A). This patient had significantly elevated fecal
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35 16 calprotectin (341 µg/g) (patient 7; Table 1).
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38 17 There was an association between elevated fecal calprotectin levels and the presence of
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40 18 inflammation in rectal biopsies (Table 3). In our study, sensitivity of calprotectin levels was
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42 19 100% and specificity was 86%.
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45 20 Median calprotectin was higher in PwCF with histological inflammatory alterations comparing
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47 21 with PwCF with normal histology (143 µg/g; IQR=249 vs 19 µg/g; IQR=30; p=0.024). None of
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49 22 the mucosal samples had architectural changes, which are a major sign of chronic
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51 23 inflammation.
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54 24 55 25 **DISCUSSION**

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3 1 Most patients from this study (78%) had an elevated fecal calprotectin level, some reaching a
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5 2 maximum level of more than 300 µg/g. This is consistent with previous studies and suggests
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7 3 the presence of intestinal inflammation in PwCF [4, 5, 16]. The pathophysiology of intestinal
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9 4 inflammation may be explained by the same triad of obstruction by mucus accumulation,
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11 5 inflammation and infection that causes disease in the airways of PwCF [17]. The *CFTR* gene is
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13 6 strongly expressed all along the intestinal tract in a cephalad-caudal gradient, *CFTR* messenger
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15 7 RNA levels are highest in the duodenum and levels decrease distally along the small intestine
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17 8 to the large intestine [17]. This “CF enteropathy” may be an independent entity in the disease
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19 9 process or may be due to other factors. High doses of PERT can cause inflammation and
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21 10 fibrosing colonopathy[18]. Inspissated intestinal secretions, mucus accumulation, constipation,
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23 11 slow intestinal motility, the use of proton pump inhibitors and frequent courses of antibiotics
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25 12 are multiple risk factors for small bowel bacterial overgrowth in CF patients, which can cause
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27 13 inflammation, mucosal damage and aggravate maldigestion [16]. An unfavorable intestinal
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29 14 microbiome may also be a stimulus for inflammation [19, 20]. One trial with probiotics
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31 15 supported this hypothesis, as the use of *Lactobacillus rhamnosus GG* reduced calprotectin
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33 16 concentrations in CF children [19]. Another study, found increased abundances of
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35 17 *Staphylococcus*, *Streptococcus*, and *Veillonella dispar*, along with decreased abundances of
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37 18 *Bacteroides*, *Bifidobacterium adolescentis*, and *Faecalibacterium prausnitzii* to be associated
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39 19 to intestinal inflammation in PwCF in similarity to changes found in patients with Crohn’s
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41 20 disease [20].
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48 21 In our study, lower fecal calprotectin levels were found in PS patients. Elevated fecal
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50 22 calprotectin only in PI patients has also been reported by Dhaliwal *et al* [5]. On the other hand,
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52 23 sixteen of nineteen patients with PI had elevated fecal calprotectin, and the difference in fecal
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54 24 calprotectin levels between the PI and PS groups was impressive (101 vs 30 µg/g). This means
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56 25 that either PI by itself or PERT may be responsible for intestinal inflammation in these
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58 26 patients[21]. However, there has been reported a lack of correlation between PERT and fecal
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1 calprotectin[22]. As reported by Dumoulin *et al.*, calprotectin is subject to proteolysis by tripsin
2 activity, which is virtually absent in PI PwCF. As a result, calprotectin proteolysis is also
3 reduced. Therefore, calprotectin levels detected in stools of PI patients may be higher, and this
4 may not be exclusively attributed to intestinal inflammation[23]. Perhaps, in PI PwCF, the
5 upper limit of the considered "normal" fecal calprotectin should be higher than the value
6 considered for inflammatory bowel disease, as no association was found with digestive
7 symptoms [23, 24]. Some recent studies suggest an upper limit of >50 µg/g or 250 µg/g and it
8 remains unclear whether reference ranges that are useful in IBD are equally applicable in
9 CF[20, 24]. Also, the pancreatic status is related to CFTR function and genotype and intestinal
10 inflammation may be another manifestation of the multisystemic involvement of the disease
11 and not only influenced by pancreatic function [25].

12 Another interesting finding was that PwCF F508del homozygous have significantly higher
13 calprotectin levels in comparison to heterozygotes. This genotype may be associated with an
14 increased risk of more significant intestinal inflammation.

15 Overall, only a small number of patients complained of gastrointestinal symptoms, and no
16 association between elevated calprotectin and digestive symptoms could be found. The same
17 conclusion has been reported even in studies where digestive symptoms were much more
18 frequent[22].

19 In contrast to previous studies [5], no relationship could be found between fecal calprotectin
20 and nutritional status or growth parameters. However, interestingly, a positive correlation was
21 found between fecal calprotectin and sweat test values, which may be indicative of the
22 presence of significant intestinal inflammation in patients with a more severe phenotype. The
23 negative correlation found between fecal calprotectin and age is in line with the reported
24 tendency towards lower values with increasing age in healthy individuals, even though there
25 are no well-established cut off levels for specific age ranges[26]. However, it is in contrast with

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3 1 some studies that found an increase in calprotectin with age in patients with CF, particularly in
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5 2 those with severe disease[27–29].
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8 3 Historically, distinct histological changes, which have been interpreted as signs of mucus
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10 4 hypersecretion, have been reported in light microscopic studies of large intestinal mucosa
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12 5 from CF patients. "Hypertrophic" or enlarged goblet cells and crypts distended by accumulated
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14 6 mucus were described, and these changes were considered useful in the diagnosis of CF by
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16 7 some authors [30]. In this study we were specifically looking for histologic evidence of
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18 8 inflammation in CF patients and try to associate it to fecal calprotectin.
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21 9 Four out of the eleven patients to whom rectal biopsies were performed had histologic
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23 10 inflammatory alterations. Interestingly, all the three patients homozygous for F508del
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25 11 mutation had histological signs of inflammation and this may be related to the severe
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27 12 phenotype associated to this common mutation.
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30 13 Elevated calprotectin level was associated with histologic inflammation in the rectal mucosa
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32 14 (Table 3) and PwCF with rectal inflammation had a significantly higher calprotectin level. High
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34 15 sensitivity and specificity, allows us to conclude that fecal calprotectin may be a good indicator
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36 16 of rectal inflammation in PwCF. However, the clinical meaning of this finding remains to be
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38 17 explained, as this did not translate into more frequent gastrointestinal symptoms or influenced
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40 18 nutritional status. However, as the life expectancy of PwCF is increasing there has been
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42 19 reported an increased risk of gastrointestinal malignancies. Chronic intestinal inflammation is a
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44 20 risk factor for cancer development and this should probably be addressed early in life[24].
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47 21 We are aware that our study had several limitations: it is a small and unicentric study, and
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49 22 biopsies were performed on a subset of our patients and limited to the rectum. Larger
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51 23 multicenter studies with the aim of determining serial and longitudinal studies of calprotectin
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53 24 levels and biopsies of the upper and lower gastrointestinal tract may help to determine clinical
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55 25 relevance.
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3 1 However, the finding of abnormal calprotectin levels and inflammatory alterations in the
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5 2 intestinal mucosa in the pediatric population raises questions about the early detection of CF
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7 3 enteropathy.
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10 4 In conclusion, there is increasing evidence that intestinal inflammation is part of CF and is
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12 5 present early in life, particularly in childhood and adolescence. The additional contribution of
13
14 6 low trypsin activity, chronic enzyme dosage, dysmotility, bacterial overgrowth, dysbiosis and
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16 7 other unidentified factors may play a role in its multifactorial cause. Fecal calprotectin may be
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18 8 considered a noninvasive biomarker of intestinal inflammation in CF patients since a
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20 9 relationship with histologic evidence of rectal mucosa inflammation was found. Further and
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22 10 larger studies need to be performed to confirm and explain the mechanisms and clinical
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24 11 relevance of these findings.
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4 commercial or not-for-profit sectors.
5
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11
12
13

14 6 **Authors' contributions:**

15
16 7 **JR** conceived and designed the study, collected, analyzed and interpreted the data and wrote
17 the first draft of the manuscript.
18
19

20 9 **CM** interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript

21 10 **SA** interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript.
22

23 11 **RCO** prepared Figure 1 and analyzed and interpreted the data
24

25 12 **RF** analyzed and interpreted the data and critically reviewed the manuscript.
26
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28 13 **GO** critically reviewed the manuscript
29

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37 16 **Ethics approval and consent to participate:** The present study was performed in accordance
38 with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the board of the Centro Hospitalar e
39 Universitário de Coimbra (Portugal) after a favorable report by the Health Ethics Committee
40 (Ref. CHUC-080-16). Informed consent was obtained by all participants aged over 16 years or
41 by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.
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50 22 **Consent for publication:** Informed consent for publication was obtained by all participants
51 aged over 16 years or by their parents or legal guardians if under 16 years old.
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54 24 **Availability of data and materials:** The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study
55 are available from the corresponding author on request.
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Table 1. Genotype, body mass index, gastrointestinal symptoms, fecal calprotectin and rectal histology of patients with cystic fibrosis.

no.	Genotype	BMI z-score kg/m ²	Pancreatic function	Abdominal pain	Diarrhea	Constipation	Calprotectin (µg/g)	Histology
1	F508del/R334W	-0,42	PS	yes	no	no	19	normal
2	F508del/R334W	1,18	PS	no	no	no	15	normal
3	F508del/R334W	0,94	PS	yes	no	yes	79	normal
4	F508del/711+1G-T	-0,74	PI	no	no	yes	9	normal
5	F508del/711+1G-T	-1,99	PI	no	no	no	19	normal
6	F508del/2184insA	-4,95	PI	yes	yes	no	45	normal
7	F508del/c.3321dup	-0,22	PI	no	no	no	341	inflammation
8	F508del/P5L	-0,3	PS	no	no	no	40	normal
9	F508del/F508del	-2,37	PI	no	no	no	223	inflammation
10	F508del/F508del	-2,6	PI	no	no	no	62	inflammation
11	F508del/F508del	-0,3	PI	yes	no	yes	63	inflammation
12	F508del/F508del	-0,64	PI	no	no	no	55	-
13	F508del/F508del	0,3	PI	no	no	no	90	-
14	F508del/F508del	0,1	PI	no	no	no	352	-
15	F508del/F508del	-0,27	PI	no	yes	no	347	-
16	F508del/F508del	-0,13	PI	no	no	no	116	-
17	F508del/F508del	0,1	PI	no	no	no	101	-
18	F508del/F508del	0,55	PI	yes	yes	no	104	-
19	F508del/F508del	1,42	PI	no	no	no	88	-
20	F508del/F508del	-1,16	PI	no	no	no	142	-
21	F508del/F508del	0,03	PI	no	no	no	55	-
22	F508del/F508del	1,1	PI	no	no	no	330	-
23	F508del/F508del	1,2	PI	no	no	no	289	-

BMI – Body mass index; m- months; PI – pancreatic insufficiency; PS-pancreatic sufficiency

Table 2. Association between gastrointestinal symptoms and meconium ileus past history and normal or elevated fecal calprotectin.

n=23	Normal calprotectin (n=6)		Elevated calprotectin (n=17)		p-value#
	yes	no	yes	no	
Abdominal pain	2	4	3	14	0.58
Diarrhea	0	6	3	14	1
Constipation	2	4	1	16	1
Meconium ileus	1	5	4	13	1

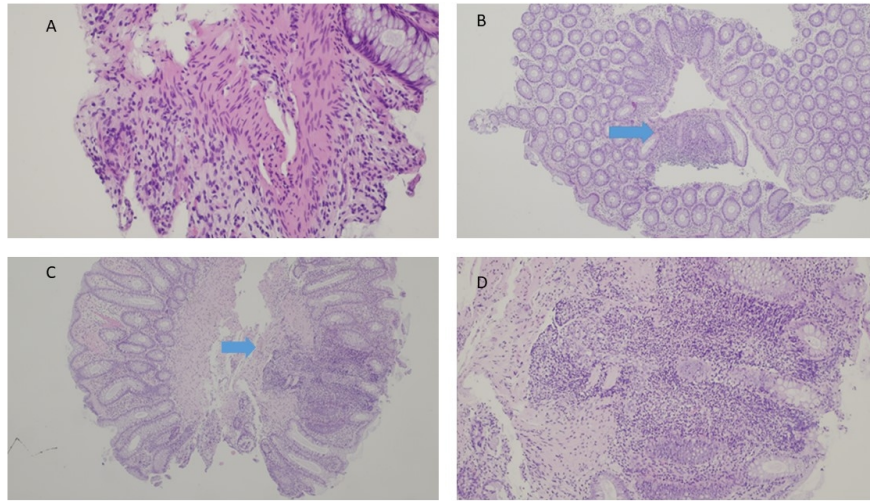
#Fisher exact test

Table 3. Comparison of histologic rectal inflammation presence between patients with normal or elevated fecal calprotectin.

(n=11)	Normal calprotectin n=6		Elevated calprotectin n=5	
	yes	no	yes	no
Mucosal inflammation	0	6	4	1

#Fisher exact test p-value=0.015

Figure 1 – A - Histologic features of patient 8 (F508del/c.3321dup) showing mild to moderate focal inflammation, composed of plasma cells and small lymphocytes, in the mucosa, H&E 200x. **B** - Histologic features of patient 9 (F508del/F508del) showing mild focal inflammation of mononucleated cells of the mucosa in a vaguely nodular pattern (blue arrow), H&E 40x; **C** - Histologic features of patient 10 (F508del/F508del) showing mild focal inflammation of the mucosa, with small lymphocytes and plasma cells, between colonic crypts (blue arrow), H&E 40x, highlighted in higher magnification **D**, H&E 200x.



338x190mm (96 x 96 DPI)