

Efficacy and safety of levetiracetam treatment in childhood epilepsy

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Levetiracetam (LEV) is a second-generation antiepileptic drug widely used in pediatric epilepsy due to its favorable pharmacokinetics, efficacy, and tolerability. This study aimed to evaluate the long-term efficacy and safety of LEV treatment in children with epilepsy.

Material and Methods: A retrospective review was conducted on pediatric patients diagnosed with epilepsy and treated with LEV at a tertiary pediatric neurology center. Treatment efficacy was assessed based on seizure frequency reduction of more than 50% or complete seizure freedom. The occurrence and types of adverse effects were also analyzed. Statistical analyses included chi-square tests, independent t-tests, and logistic regression models.

Results: A total of 101 patients were included in the study. LEV was initiated as the first antiepileptic drug in 9.9% of patients. By the end of the follow-up, 34.7% remained on LEV treatment, and 11.9% discontinued LEV. LEV was effective in 72.3% of patients, with 38.0% achieving complete seizure freedom. The drug was significantly more effective in patients older than four years and those with a lower pre-treatment seizure frequency. The mean LEV dose was 24.8 mg/kg/day in the effective group and 33.8 mg/kg/day in the ineffective group. Adverse effects were observed in 45.5% of patients, with the most common being drowsiness, irritability, and fatigue. Patients with a prior history of adverse reactions to other antiepileptic drugs had a significantly higher likelihood of developing side effects with LEV.

Conclusion: Levetiracetam (LEV) is an effective and well-tolerated treatment option for childhood epilepsy, with high efficacy rates and a manageable safety profile. Older children, those receiving lower doses, and those with a lower pre-treatment seizure burden demonstrated better treatment outcomes. Careful monitoring is necessary for patients with a history of adverse reactions to other anti-epileptic drugs.

Keywords: Antiepileptic drugs, children, epilepsy, levetiracetam, seizure control, safety, tolerability

INTRODUCTION

Epilepsy is defined as the occurrence of two or more unprovoked seizures at least 24 hours apart (1). As the second most common neurological disorder after headaches, it is a chronic disease affecting 0.5–1% of children under 16 years of age (2,3). The primary goal of antiepileptic treatment is to achieve seizure freedom without adverse effects.

Levetiracetam [(S)-α-ethyl-2-oxo-1-pyrrolidineacetamide] is a water-soluble pyrrolidine derivative and a new-generation antiepileptic drug introduced in 2000 (4). The U.S. Food and

Drug Administration (FDA) initially approved LEV in 1999 as an adjunctive therapy for drug-resistant partial epilepsy in adults, extending its approval in 2005 to include individuals over four years of age (5,6). Currently, LEV is indicated as adjunctive therapy for myoclonic seizures in adults and adolescents (≥12 years) with juvenile myoclonic epilepsy, partial seizures in adults and infants (≥1 month) with epilepsy, and primary generalized tonic-clonic seizures in adults and children (≥5 years) with idiopathic generalized epilepsy (7).

This study aimed to evaluate the long-term efficacy and safety of LEV treatment in children with epilepsy.

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Received : 23.02.2025 Accepted : 08.07.2025 DOI: 10.12956/TJPD.2025.1221

MATERIALS and METHODS

This retrospective chart review included 101 patients who were diagnosed with epilepsy and started on levetiracetam (LEV) treatment in the Pediatric Neurology Clinic of Ankara Child Health and Diseases Hematology-Oncology Training and Research Hospital between 01.01.2010 and 30.12.2011.

Epilepsy was defined as two or more unprovoked seizures occurring at least 24 hours apart. Treatment efficacy was determined based on a reduction of over 50% in seizure frequency or complete seizure freedom with LEV.

Statistical Analyses

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 22.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Descriptive statistics, including mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage, were used to summarize the data. Pearson's chi-square test and the independent t test were used to compare groups. All statistical analyses were two-tailed, with a significance level set at 0,050 and a 95% confidence interval.

RESULTS

A total of 101 patients were included in the study, of whom 41 (40.6%) were female and 60 (59.4%) were male. The mean age of the participants was 12.6 ± 4.7 years (range, 1.5-23 years) (Table I).. LEV was initiated as the first antiepileptic drug in 10 (9.9%) of the 101 patients. By the end of the treatment period, 35 (34.7%) patients were on LEV monotherapy, while LEV was discontinued in 12 (11.9%) patients. Table II presents the clinical characteristics associated with LEV treatment, observed adverse effects, and seizure outcomes at final follow-up.

Levetiracetam was found to be effective in 72.3% (73/101) of patients. No statistically significant differences were observed between LEV efficacy and patients' sex, age, or age at diagnosis. In patients with effective LEV treatment (n=73), the mean age at initiation was 11.25±3.94 years, which was significantly higher than the mean age of 8.86±5.43 years observed in those with an ineffective response (n=28) (p=0.040). The mean LEV dose was 24.8±9.6 mg/kg/day in the effective group, whereas it was 33.8±9.05 mg/kg/day in the ineffective group, with a statistically significant difference (p=0.001). Details regarding LEV treatment efficacy are presented in Table III.

LEV treatment was discontinued in 12 out of our 101 patients. Among these, 5 (41.7%) discontinued due to lack of efficacy, 4 (33.3%) due to side effects, and 3 (25%) due to increased seizure frequency. The mean duration of LEV use in these patients was 9.5±8.2 months.

Side effects were observed in 46 patients (45.5%), including drowsiness, irritability, fatigue, aggression, dizziness, insomnia, headache, vomiting, and loss of appetite. Among all patients,

Table I: Demographic, clinical, and laboratory characteristics, imaging, and electroencephalographic findings of the patients					
Gender* Female Male	41 (40.6) 60 (59.4)				
Age (years)†	12.6±4.7 (1.5-23)				
Age at epilepsy diagnosis (years) †	5.5±4.5 (0.1-17)				
Seizure Classification* Generalized Seizure Focal Seizure	77 (76.2) 24 (23.8)				
Mental and motor developmental delay	48 (47.5)				
History of febrile convulsions	19 (18.8)				
History of past illness	72 (71.3)				
Use of other medications	35 (34.7)				
History of hospitalization	65 (64.4)				
Academic Performance* Regular education Special education Not attending school	47 (46.5) 46 (45.5) 8 (8)				
Family history of epilepsy	33 (32.7)				
Family history of neurological disorders	38 (37.6)				
Pathological findings on systemic examination	4 (4)				
Neurological Examination Findings* Mental retardation Motor retardation Microcephaly Syndromic appearance	57 (56.4) 43 (42.6) 29 (28.7) 13 (12.9)				
Abnormal EEG *	75 (74.2)				
Abnormal MRI*	72 (71.2)				
Etiology* Unknown Hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy Structural CNS abnormalities Specific epileptic syndromes Thromboembolism – Infarct CNS infections Metabolic disorders Chromosomal anomalies CNS tumor Intracranial hemorrhage Intrauterine infection Trauma	46 (45.5) 13 (12.9) 8 (7.9) 7 (6.9) 6 (5.9) 5 (5) 5 (5) 3 (3) 3 (3) 3 (3) 1 (1) 1 (1)				

*: n (%), †: mean±SD (min-max), **EEG**: Electroencephalography, **MRI**: Magnetic Resonance Imaging, CNS: Central Nervous System

19 (18.8%) had previously experienced side effects from another antiepileptic drug (AED) and 13 of these 19 (68.4%) also developed side effects with LEV. Among these 19 patients, adverse effects were observed in 6 patients (31.6%) with valproic acid, 6 patients (31.6%) with carbamazepine, 3 patients (15.8%) with lamotrigine, 2 patients (10.5%) with clonazepam, 1 patient (5.3%) with oxcarbazepine, and 1 patient (5.3%) with primidone. Table III presents the factors influencing the

Table II: Clinical features related to lev effects, and follow-up seizure outcomes	
Seizure Frequency Before LEV Treatment* 1 or fewer seizures per year Less than 1 seizure per 6 months 1 or fewer seizures per month More than 1 seizure per month	4 (4) 11 (10.9) 36 (35.6) 50 (49.5)
Seizure Duration Before LEV Treatment* <1 minute 1–5 minutes 5–30 minutes Status epilepticus	29 (28.7) 34 (33.7) 35 (34.7) 3 (3)
LEV Treatment Details† Age at LEV initiation (years) Order of LEV usage Initial LEV dose (mg/kg/day) Final LEV dose (mg/kg/day) Duration of LEV treatment (months)	10.5±4.5 (0.6-20.5) 3.7±2.1 (1-10) 10.8±4.2 (5-25) 27.3 ±10.2 21.7±15.08
Adverse Effects of LEV Treatment* Any adverse effect observed No adverse effect	46 (45.5) 55 (54.5)
Types of Adverse Effects Observed* Drowsiness / Excessive sleep Irritability Fatigue Aggressiveness* Dizziness Insomnia Reduction in aggressiveness Headache Vomiting Loss of appetite Other	14 (13.9) 13 (12.9) 9 (8.9) 6 (5.9) 5 (5) 4 (4) 4 (4) 3 (3) 3 (3) 2 (2) 11 (11)
Seizure Frequency at Final Follow-up After LEV Treatment* Seizure-free >50% reduction in seizure frequency <50% reduction in seizure frequency No change in seizure frequency Increased seizure frequency	39 (38) 34 (34) 8 (8) 12 (12) 8 (8)

^{*:} n (%), †: mean±SD (min-max), LEV: Levetiracetam

development of side effects in patients who were initiated on LEV treatment.

DISCUSSION

Levetiracetam is considered a favorable option for the treatment of childhood epilepsy due to its efficacy and tolerability. Recent studies report LEV efficacy rates ranging from 44% to 94% (8-10). A retrospective study conducted by Tekgül H. et al. (11) in Türkiye, involving 351 pediatric epilepsy patients aged 6 months to 18 years, demonstrated that LEV was effective in 65% of cases following a 12-month follow-up period. Similarly, our findings indicate that LEV was effective in 72.3% of patients. The variability in reported LEV efficacy may be attributed to the significant heterogeneity of study populations.

Initially approved for drug-resistant focal epilepsy in adults, LEV was suggested to be more effective in partial epilepsy. However, multiple studies have found no significant difference in efficacy between generalized and partial epilepsy (12-18). In the present analysis, when end-of-treatment efficacy was evaluated based on seizure type, LEV was effective in 55 of 77 (71.4%) patients with generalized epilepsy and in 18 of 24 (75%) patients with partial epilepsy. No statistically significant difference in efficacy was observed between patients with generalized and partial epilepsy.

A multicenter, double-blind, randomized study comparing patients receiving 4000 mg/day and 2000 mg/day of LEV to those receiving a placebo found LEV to be more effective at a dose of 2000 mg/day, while no significant difference was observed between the 4000 mg/day group and the placebo group (19). In contrast, some studies suggest that higher LEV doses are more effective, whereas others report no significant relationship between LEV dose and efficacy (16,20,21). Additionally, a review by Sourbron et al. (22) highlighted that in children aged 2 months to 12 years, LEV clearance is 30-70% higher compared to adults, indicating that higher LEV doses may be required in this age group. Consistent with these findings, our results demonstrated that the mean LEV dose was significantly lower in patients for whom LEV was effective than in those for whom it was ineffective (p=0.001).

Although studies on LEV efficacy in younger age groups are limited, a retrospective analysis of 122 epilepsy patients under four years old reported a reduction in seizure frequency in 57% of patients, primarily those with partial epilepsy requiring lower LEV doses. Hu et al. (24) studied 120 patients aged four months to four years with refractory epilepsy, finding that after a mean follow-up of 13 months, 38.4% achieved a ≥50% seizure reduction, and 12.5% became seizure-free. Kanmaz et al. (25) examined 67 neonates treated with LEV, reporting that after one year, 76% achieved seizure freedom with LEV monotherapy, and 63.8% showed positive neurodevelopmental outcomes. Arzimanoglou et al. (26) found a 71.8% LEV efficacy rate in 100 infants aged 1-11 months, while Zhao et al. (27) reported a 41% seizure-free rate over 12 months in 78 patients (aged 2-24 months) receiving LEV monotherapy (23-25). In the present study, LEV was effective in 28.6% of patients who started treatment at ≤4 years and in 75.5% of those who started at >4 years (p=0.017). The small sample size for patients under four years old (7/101) may have limited our evaluation, underscoring the need for larger cohorts in future prospective studies.

Studies investigating the relationship between seizure frequency before LEV treatment and LEV efficacy have shown that patients experiencing two or more seizures per month prior to LEV initiation had a poorer response to treatment (23). In this analysis, LEV was significantly more effective in patients who had one or fewer seizures per month before treatment (p =0.012).

Although LEV is generally well tolerated, literature reviews indicate that side effects occur in 7% to 55% of patients (12-

Group	n	Effective Response to LEV Treatment		Patients experiencing adverse effects	
		n (%)	p*	n (%)	p*
Generalized Epilepsy	72	55 (71.4)	0.936	-	-
Focal Epilepsy	24	18 (75)	0.930		
LEV Initiation Age ≤ 4 years	7	2 (28.6)	0.017	2 (28.6)	0.450
LEV Initiation Age > 4 years	94	71 (75.5)	0.017	44 (46.8)	0.450
Pre-Treatment Seizure Frequency ≤ 1 per month	51	43 (84.3)	0.012	22 (43.1)	11024
Pre-Treatment Seizure Frequency > 1 per month	50	30 (60)	0.012	24 (48)	
LEV Initiated as Adjunctive Therapy	91	63 (69.2)	0.058	41 (45.1)	0.998
LEV Initiated as First-Line Therapy	10	10 (100)		5 (50)	0.990
Initial Dose <10 mg/kg/day	60	44 (73.3)	0.952	27 (45)	0.894
Initial Dose ≥10 mg/kg/day	41	29 (70.7)	0.952	19 (46.3)	
Final Dose <40 mg/kg/day	89	65 (73)	0.733	40 (44.9)	0.983
Final Dose ≥40 mg/kg/day	12	8 (66.7)	0.733	6 (50)	
LEV Treatment Order ≤ 4	76	56 (73.7)	0.769	34 (44.7)	0.958
LEV Treatment Order ≥ 5	25	17 (68.0)		12 (48)	0.900
LEV Treatment Duration ≤ 12 months	37		_	16 (43.2)	0.724
LEV Treatment Duration > 12 months	64	-	-	30 (46.9)	0.724
Normal Neurological Examination	51	41 (80.4)	0.106	_	_
Abnormal Neurological Examination	50	32 (62)	0.100	-	_
Normal EEG	26	22 (84.6)	0.113		
Abnormal EEG	75	51 (68)		_	_
Normal MRI	29	23 (79.3)	0.449		
Abnormal MRI	72	50 (69.4)	0.449	_	_

^{*:} Pearson Chi-Square test, EEG: Electroencephalography, MRI: Magnetic Resonance Imaging, LEV: Levetiracetam

18). In the current study, at least one side effect was observed in 46 patients (45.5%). Additionally, 19 patients (18.8%) had previously experienced side effects from another AED before LEV initiation. Among these, 13 (68.4%) also developed side effects with LEV (p=0.049), suggesting a predisposition to adverse reactions. This finding highlights the importance of reviewing patients' prior AED histories before initiating LEV treatment.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that levetiracetam is an effective, welltolerated, and safe treatment for childhood epilepsy. Although it may cause side effects or an increase in seizures, these effects were generally mild and transient, not necessitating treatment discontinuation in most patients. Efficacy was higher in children over four years of age, those receiving lower doses, and those with less frequent seizures before treatment. The risk of side effects was found to be higher in patients who had previously experienced side effects from another AED.

Additional information

Presented at the 44th Pediatrics Days, 23rd Pediatric Nursing Days, April 17-20, 2022, Online Congress

Ethics committee approval

This study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration Principles. The study was approved by The study was approved by the Education Planning and Coordination Committee of the Ankara Children's Health and Diseases Hematology Oncology Education and Research Hospital. (06.02.2012, reference number:

Contribution of the authors

Study conception and design: **AT, ST**; data collection: **AT**; analysis and interpretation of results: **AT, ST**; draft manuscript preparation: AT, ST. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the article.

Source of funding

The authors declare the study received no funding.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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