International Journal of Hepatology Research

**ISSN Print:** 2664-6595
**ISSN Online:** 2664-6609
IJHR 2022; 4(1): 04-07
www.hepatologyjournal.in
Received: 12-11-2021
Accepted: 11-12--2021

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# The efficacy of Anti-TNF agents in the treatment of Crohn's disease

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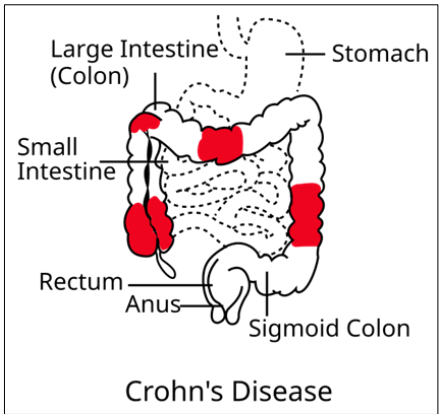
**DOI:** https://doi.org/10.33545/26646595.2022.v4.i1a.26

**Abstract**
Crohn's disease (CD) is a chronic inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) that can affect any part of the gastrointestinal tract, leading to debilitating symptoms, such as abdominal pain, diarrhea, weight loss, and fatigue. Tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) is a pro-inflammatory cytokine that plays a crucial role in the pathogenesis of CD. Anti-TNF agents, which block the action of TNF-α, have revolutionized the treatment of CD, providing significant clinical benefits. This review aims to explore the efficacy of anti-TNF agents in treating Crohn's disease, focusing on clinical outcomes, mechanisms of action, and associated risks and limitations. The review highlights data from clinical trials, real-world studies, and long-term follow-ups to provide a comprehensive understanding of their therapeutic role.

**Keywords:** Crohn's disease, Anti-TNF, therapeutic role, inflammatory bowel disease, abdominal pain

## Introduction
Crohn's disease (CD), an idiopathic, chronic inflammatory disorder, primarily affects the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Although the exact cause of CD remains unclear, it is widely accepted that a combination of genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and immune dysregulation leads to the disease. The tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) cytokine is central in initiating and sustaining inflammation in CD patients. Elevated TNF-α levels in the intestines contribute to the chronic inflammation and tissue destruction seen in the disease.
Anti-TNF agents, such as infliximab, adalimumab, and certolizumab pegol, target TNF-α and have proven to be an effective therapeutic strategy. This review delves into the efficacy of these biologic agents, examining their clinical efficacy, safety profiles, and mechanisms of action.




**Source:** Wikipedia

**Fig 1:** Crohn's Disease

## Action of Anti-TNF Agents
The therapeutic action of anti-TNF agents in Crohn's disease is primarily focused on neutralizing the pro-inflammatory cytokine tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α).

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TNF-α plays a critical role in the pathogenesis of Crohn's disease by promoting the recruitment and activation of immune cells that contribute to intestinal inflammation. In Crohn's disease, elevated levels of TNF-α are found in the affected regions of the gastrointestinal tract, contributing to chronic inflammation, tissue damage, and the exacerbation of disease symptoms. Anti-TNF agents, including infliximab, adalimumab, and certolizumab pegol, act by binding to TNF-α and preventing it from interacting with its receptors on the surface of immune cells. This blockade of TNF-α signaling interrupts the downstream pro-inflammatory pathways that are responsible for immune cell recruitment, production of other pro-inflammatory cytokines, and the resulting tissue injury. By neutralizing TNF-α, these agents help to reduce inflammation, promote healing of the intestinal mucosa, and alleviate clinical symptoms.

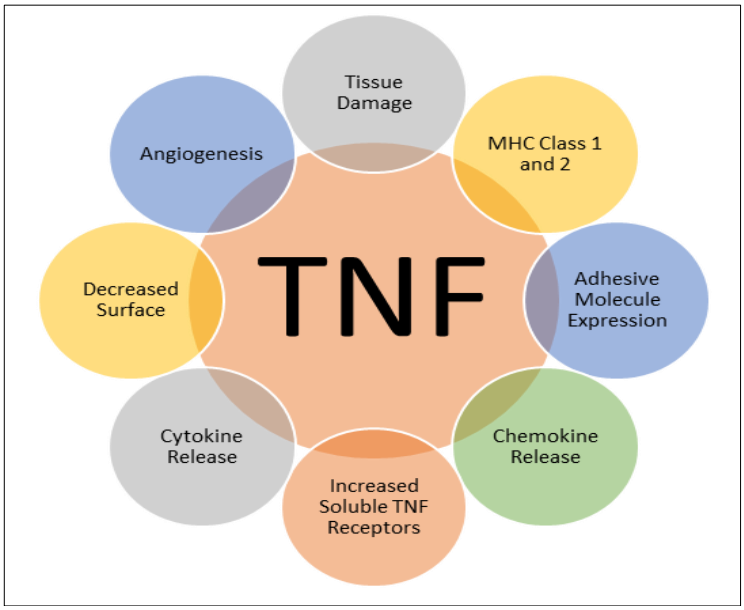


**Fig 2:** Anti-TNF Agents

Infliximab, a chimeric monoclonal antibody, was the first anti-TNF agent approved for the treatment of Crohn's disease. Its efficacy has been attributed to its ability to induce apoptosis of TNF-expressing cells, thereby dampening the inflammatory response. Infliximab binds with high affinity to both soluble and transmembrane TNF-α, effectively preventing it from activating TNF receptors. This binding reduces the inflammatory milieu and limits the migration of immune cells into the gut.

Adalimumab, a fully human monoclonal antibody, also targets TNF-α and shares a similar mechanism of action with infliximab. Adalimumab's fully human nature helps reduce the risk of immunogenicity compared to infliximab. Certolizumab pegol, a pegylated Fab fragment of a monoclonal antibody, lacks the Fc region, reducing its potential to induce antibody-dependent cellular cytotoxicity. This agent selectively binds TNF-α without activating other immune-mediated pathways, offering an alternative approach to targeting TNF-α.

Numerous studies have established the critical role of TNF-α in mediating the inflammation associated with Crohn's disease. The blockage of TNF-α not only reduces acute inflammation but also has a longer-term effect on preventing the progression of tissue damage and fibrosis in the gut. This is particularly significant in patients with fistulizing disease, where the suppression of TNF-α activity can lead to fistula closure and improved quality of life. By directly targeting a key cytokine in the inflammatory process, anti-TNF agents have become a cornerstone of therapy in moderate-to-severe Crohn's disease. Despite this, the effectiveness of these agents can be limited by the development of anti-drug antibodies and secondary loss of response, necessitating regular monitoring and, in some cases, switching between biologics.

**Efficacy in Clinical Trials**

The efficacy of anti-TNF agents in Crohn's disease has been robustly evaluated in numerous clinical trials. Infliximab, the first anti-TNF agent approved for Crohn's disease, demonstrated significant efficacy in the pivotal Accent I trial. In this study, infliximab was able to induce remission in a substantial proportion of patients with moderate-to-severe Crohn's disease, with many patients maintaining remission over a prolonged period. The trial showed that infliximab not only induced clinical remission but also reduced the need for corticosteroids and hospitalization. Importantly, infliximab was particularly effective in treating patients with fistulising Crohn's disease, where it promoted fistula closure in many cases.

Adalimumab's efficacy was demonstrated in the Classic and Charm studies. In the Classic trial, adalimumab was evaluated in patients with moderate-to-severe Crohn's disease, showing a significant induction of remission compared to placebo. In the Charm trial, adalimumab's ability to maintain remission was confirmed, with a higher percentage of patients remaining in remission at one year compared to placebo. These trials also highlighted adalimumab's role in reducing the need for surgical interventions and improving patients' overall quality of life. Adalimumab's fully human structure reduced the incidence of anti-drug antibody formation, contributing to its sustained efficacy over time.

Certolizumab pegol has been evaluated in the precise studies, which demonstrated its efficacy in both induction

and maintenance of remission. In the Precise 1 trial, certolizumab was shown to induce clinical remission in a significant proportion of patients who had failed conventional therapies. In the Precise 2 trial, certolizumab was able to maintain remission in patients who responded to induction therapy. This agent's unique structure, lacking the Fc portion, has made it particularly useful in patients with a higher risk of developing anti-drug antibodies.

Long-term follow-up data from these clinical trials have provided further insights into the sustained efficacy of anti-TNF agents. For example, the Accent I and Charm trials demonstrated that many patients continued to experience clinical remission beyond the one-year mark, with a lower risk of disease relapse. Additionally, these trials emphasized the mucosal healing effect of anti-TNF therapy, which has been associated with better long-term outcomes in Crohn's disease, including reduced risk of surgery and hospitalization. Mucosal healing, assessed via endoscopy, is now recognized as a critical endpoint in Crohn's disease management, as it is predictive of sustained remission.

Despite the overall efficacy of anti-TNF agents, clinical trials have also highlighted the issue of primary non-response and secondary loss of response. A proportion of patients do not respond to induction therapy, while others experience a diminishing effect over time due to the development of anti-drug antibodies or alterations in disease biology. Studies suggest that the concurrent use of Immunomodulatory, such as azathioprine, can reduce the likelihood of antibody formation and improve the durability of anti-TNF therapy.

In conclusion, clinical trials have consistently demonstrated the efficacy of anti-TNF agents in inducing and maintaining remission in Crohn's disease. These agents have significantly improved the therapeutic landscape, offering patients relief from symptoms and reducing the burden of corticosteroids and surgery. However, the challenges of non-response, loss of response, and potential adverse effects underscore the need for ongoing monitoring and personalized approaches in the management of Crohn's disease.

**Impact on Endoscopic and Histologic Healing**

Endoscopic healing, characterized by the visual resolution of inflammation in the gastrointestinal tract, is a key therapeutic goal in the management of Crohn's disease. It is closely associated with improved long-term outcomes, including sustained clinical remission, decreased need for corticosteroids, reduced rates of hospitalization, and lower surgical intervention rates. Anti-TNF agents have been shown to promote significant endoscopic healing in patients with Crohn's disease. Infliximab, for example, has been extensively studied in this regard. The SONIC trial demonstrated that infliximab, particularly in combination with azathioprine, led to higher rates of endoscopic healing compared to either therapy alone. Adalimumab has also been shown to induce endoscopic healing, as demonstrated in the extend study, where a substantial proportion of patients exhibited mucosal healing after one year of therapy.

Histologic healing, which involves the resolution of microscopic inflammation, is less commonly assessed but is an important marker of deep remission. Studies have indicated that while anti-TNF agents can significantly reduce histologic activity, complete histologic healing remains rare, as subclinical inflammation often persists even when endoscopic remission is achieved. Nevertheless, the reduction in histologic inflammation correlates with improved long-term prognosis and fewer disease-related complications. This suggests that while achieving complete histologic healing may not always be feasible, reducing the burden of microscopic inflammation can still confer significant clinical benefits.

Overall, the ability of anti-TNF agents to promote both endoscopic and histologic healing underscores their importance in disease management, as these forms of healing are predictive of reduced disease progression, longer periods of remission, and improved quality of life for patients with Crohn's disease.

**Real-World Data and Long-Term Efficacy**

The long-term efficacy of anti-TNF agents in Crohn's disease has been well-documented in real-world settings, where the benefits observed in clinical trials are often mirrored, though they come with additional insights into practical challenges such as drug persistence and patient adherence. Observational studies and registry data have consistently shown that anti-TNF agents, particularly infliximab and adalimumab, provide durable control of symptoms over extended periods, with many patients maintaining remission for several years.

One of the key findings from real-world data is the issue of secondary loss of response, where patients initially respond to anti-TNF therapy but later experience a diminished effect. This phenomenon is attributed to the development of anti-drug antibodies, which can neutralize the therapeutic effects of these biologics. Studies indicate that approximately 30-40% of patients lose responsiveness to anti-TNF agents within the first few years of treatment, necessitating dose escalation, switching to another anti-TNF agent, or transitioning to an alternative biologic therapy.

Real-world data also highlight the role of combination therapy, where anti-TNF agents are used in conjunction with Immunomodulatory like azathioprine or methotrexate. This strategy has been shown to reduce the risk of antibody formation and improve drug persistence, leading to better long-term outcomes. Additionally, long-term studies have emphasized the reduction in hospitalization rates, surgery, and the need for corticosteroids among patients who continue to respond to anti-TNF therapy, which ultimately contributes to a better quality of life.

Another important consideration from real-world data is the safety profile of anti-TNF agents over long-term use. While the risk of serious infections, including tuberculosis and opportunistic infections, remains a concern, studies suggest that these risks are manageable with appropriate screening and monitoring. The potential association between anti-TNF therapy and malignancies, particularly lymphoma, has also been a subject of scrutiny, but long-term data suggest that the absolute risk remains low, especially when balanced against the benefits of controlling the disease.

In summary, real-world data support the long-term efficacy of anti-TNF agents in Crohn's disease, while also highlighting challenges such as secondary loss of response and safety concerns that require careful monitoring and management.

**Comparative Efficacy and Emerging Therapies**

While anti-TNF agents have long been the cornerstone of biologic therapy in Crohn's disease, newer therapies have emerged, offering alternative mechanisms of action for patients who are refractory to or intolerant of anti-TNF therapy. Comparative studies have sought to evaluate the

relative efficacy of anti-TNF agents against newer biologics, such as Vedolizumab and ustekinumab.

Vedolizumab, an integrin antagonist that selectively targets the gut, has demonstrated efficacy in patients with moderate-to-severe Crohn's disease who have failed anti-TNF therapy. In the Gemini 2 trial, Vedolizumab was shown to induce and maintain remission in a significant proportion of patients, particularly those with moderate-to-severe disease. Its gut-selective mechanism offers a safety advantage, as it is associated with a lower risk of systemic infections compared to anti-TNF agents. This has made Vedolizumab an attractive option for patients with a history of recurrent infections or those at high risk of infection.

Ustekinumab, an IL-12/23 inhibitor, has also shown promise as a treatment for Crohn's disease, particularly in patients who are refractory to anti-TNF therapy. The UNITI trials demonstrated that ustekinumab effectively induces and maintains remission in patients with moderate-to-severe Crohn's disease. Its novel mechanism of targeting IL-12 and IL-23 pathways provides an alternative approach to managing inflammation, making it particularly valuable for patients who have developed resistance or intolerance to anti-TNF agents.

Comparative studies between anti-TNF agents and these newer biologics suggest that while anti-TNF therapy remains highly effective, alternatives like Vedolizumab and ustekinumab offer similar or superior efficacy in certain patient populations, especially those with prior anti-TNF exposure. Moreover, these newer agents are associated with a different safety profile, with Vedolizumab offering a reduced risk of systemic infections and ustekinumab showing lower immunogenicity.

In addition to these biologics, small-molecule therapies such as Janus kinase (JAK) inhibitors are being explored as potential treatments for Crohn's disease. These therapies offer oral administration, which may improve patient adherence compared to injectable biologics. Early trials have shown promising results, though long-term efficacy and safety data are still being gathered.

As more biologics and small-molecule therapies become available, the landscape of Crohn's disease treatment is expanding, offering greater flexibility in tailoring therapy to individual patient needs. Personalized medicine, guided by biomarkers and disease phenotypes, is becoming increasingly important in optimizing treatment strategies. While anti-TNF agents will likely remain a key component of therapy for many patients, emerging therapies are providing valuable alternatives for those who do not respond to or cannot tolerate anti-TNF therapy, ultimately improving the overall management of Crohn's disease.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, anti-TNF agents have revolutionized the treatment of Crohn's disease, providing effective control of inflammation, inducing and maintaining clinical remission, and promoting both endoscopic and histologic healing. Their role in reducing hospitalization, surgery, and corticosteroid use has significantly improved the quality of life for many patients. However, challenges such as primary non-response, secondary loss of response, and the risk of adverse effects like infections and immunogenicity remain. Real-world data support the long-term efficacy of these agents but underscore the importance of regular monitoring and personalized approaches to therapy. As newer biologics and small-molecule therapies emerge, offering alternative mechanisms of action and improved safety profiles, the therapeutic landscape for Crohn's disease continues to evolve. These developments hold promise for better disease management and more tailored treatment options for patients, ensuring that the benefits of therapy are maximized while minimizing associated risks.

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