

1 Relationship between anaemia, malaria co-infection and Kaposi Sarcoma-associated Herpesvirus  
2 (KSHV) seropositivity in a population-based study in rural Uganda

3 Running title: Anaemia, malaria co-infection and KSHV seropositivity

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## 14 **Summary**

15 KSHV seroprevalence is very high in rural Uganda. Malaria infection and anaemia are the risk factors  
16 associated with KSHV seroprevalence and antibody levels in this study. These factors might cause  
17 reactivation of the virus and hence lead to increased transmission.

18

## 19 **Abstract**

20 We examined anaemia and malaria as risk factors for KSHV seropositivity and antibody levels in a  
21 long-standing rural Ugandan cohort, in which KSHV is prevalent. Samples from 4134 children, aged  
22 1-17 years, with a sex ratio of 1:1 and 3149 adults aged 18-103 years, 41% of whom were males,  
23 were analysed. Among children, malaria infection was associated with higher KSHV prevalence (61%  
24 versus 41% prevalence among malaria infected and uninfected respectively); malaria was not  
25 assessed in adults. Additionally, lower haemoglobin level was associated with an increased  
26 prevalence of KSHV seropositivity, both in children and in adults.

27 Word count: 97

28 **Keywords:** Kaposi's sarcoma herpesvirus antibodies, rural population, anaemia, malaria

## 29 **Introduction**

30 We recently reported KSHV prevalence of 95% among adults in a rural population cohort (the  
31 General Population Cohort (GPC) in Uganda [1], the highest prevalence of KSHV ever reported, in  
32 addition to high KSHV antibody levels. We propose that the very high prevalence in this population  
33 may be driven by frequent KSHV reactivation, viral shedding and transmission rates and that the  
34 high antibody levels also reflect frequent reactivation. It is important therefore to study potential co-  
35 factors for reactivation in relation to KSHV prevalence and antibody levels. We have previously  
36 reported an association between malaria and hookworm infections and KSHV seropositivity in an  
37 urban population in Uganda [2, 3]. Since both malaria and hookworm are associated with anaemia,  
38 we hypothesized that anaemia may have a role in KSHV transmission via viral reactivation. This  
39 hypothesis is supported by data from *in vitro* experiments showing reactivation of KSHV in  
40 conditions of hypoxia [4]. In this study we aimed to confirm the high prevalence of KSHV in the GPC  
41 in recent years, with higher ART coverage, and determine the role of anaemia and malaria co-  
42 infection as risk factors for KSHV prevalence and antibody levels in a highly endemic population.

43

## 44 **Methods**

### 45 **Study population and socio-demographic data collection**

46 The General Population Cohort (GPC) is located in south-western Uganda in Kyamulibwa sub-  
47 community of Kalungu district with an altitude of approximately 1200m above sea level. It is  
48 community-based open cohort of about 22,000 people in 25 adjacent villages [5]. This cross  
49 sectional study analysed plasma samples collected from two surveys, the adult survey and the  
50 children survey. The adults were surveyed in 2014/2015 and the children in 2016. Adults without  
51 haematological parameter data and children without either haematological parameter data or  
52 malaria parasitaemia status data were excluded in the laboratory analysis. Children less than 1 year  
53 of age were excluded from the statistical analysis and children less than 2 years were not tested for  
54 HIV serostatus, due to the potential for maternal IgG to be present, which could affect antibody

55 measurement. Socio-economic scores were generated for adults using Principal Component Analysis  
56 of various household indicators during the previous survey.

57

### 58 **Ethical approval**

59 The study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee Uganda Virus Research Institute and  
60 the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology.

61

### 62 **Haematological and serological analysis**

63 During these two surveys, blood was collected from study participants and tested immediately after  
64 collection for HIV; a smaller proportion of samples were also tested for malaria parasitaemia and  
65 haemoglobin levels, using point-of care assays and rapid tests. HIV serostatus was determined using  
66 rapid diagnostic tests. Malaria parasitaemia was measured in children only, using malaria Rapid  
67 Diagnostic Tests (ONE STEP Malaria HRP-II (P.f) and pLDH (Pan) Antigen Rapid Test). Haemoglobin  
68 levels in g/dL were obtained from the Haemocue 201 analyzer.

69

70 Stored plasma samples for both children and adults were retrieved and tested for KSHV antibodies  
71 using an in-house ELISA as previously described [6]. Samples from the two surveys were tested  
72 separately after simple randomisation onto ELISA plates. Antibodies to both K8.1 and ORF73  
73 proteins were measured as optical density. Each ELISA plate contained three negative and positive  
74 control wells; negative controls were used to calculate a cut-off value for every plate as previously  
75 described [2, 7]. Seropositivity was defined as reactivity to either K8.1 or ORF73 proteins.

76

### 77 **Statistical analysis**

78 Statistical analysis was carried out using STATA13 (Statacorp, College Station, Texas USA). Children's  
79 and adults' results were analysed separately. Haemoglobin levels were mean centred for easier  
80 interpretation. Anaemia was defined using haemoglobin levels in g/dL after altitude adjustment

81 following WHO guidelines [8]. A constant value 0.5 was subtracted from haemoglobin levels for  
82 altitude adjustment, the results were then categorised into normal and anaemic using the following  
83 cut-off values: 11.0 for pregnant females and children below 5 years, 11.5 for children 5 to 11 years,  
84 12.0 for children 12 to 14 years and other females 15 years and above, 13.0 for males 15 years and  
85 above. These WHO haemoglobin reference ranges used to define anaemia may not be  
86 representative of African populations, as previously reported [9, 10], because they are based on  
87 western population data. We therefore analysed haemoglobin both as a continuous variable and as  
88 categorised into normal and anaemic using separate regression models.

89

90 Linear regression with bootstrapped confidence intervals was used for antibody levels analysis,  
91 because they were severely skewed. Logistic regression was used for seroprevalence analysis,  
92 furthermore, we adjusted for clustering at the village level using survey commands. We assessed  
93 interaction between age and haemoglobin levels, as well as between age and anaemia in relation to  
94 anti-K8.1 antibody levels, anti-ORF73 antibody levels and KSHV prevalence based on *a priori*  
95 suspicions of interaction, using likelihood ratio tests.

96

## 97 **Results**

98 The characteristics of the individuals analysed are shown in supplementary Table 1. We analysed  
99 results from 3149 adults and 4134 children. This analysis included children aged 1 to 17 years and  
100 adults aged 18 to 103 years (supplementary Table 1).

101

### 102 **Risk factors for KSHV prevalence and antibody levels among adults**

103 KSHV prevalence was 91% in all adults (2871/3149) (supplementary Figure 1). Every 1g/dL decrease  
104 in haemoglobin values was associated with increased odds of being KSHV seropositive (OR=0.86  
105 (0.77, 0.96), P=0.006 and anaemic individuals were more likely to be KSHV seropositive compared to

106 people with normal haemoglobin values, but this association was not statistically significant OR=1.25  
107 (0.87, 1.79), P=0.229 (Table 1A).

108

109 We then analysed antibody levels to K8.1 and ORF73 proteins as continuous variables without  
110 categorising participants as seropositive or seronegative. Anaemic adults had higher antibodies to  
111 ORF73 protein compared to individuals with normal haemoglobin values (coef. 0.28 (0.16, 0.39),  
112 P<0.0001. Similarly, every 1g/dL decrease in haemoglobin was associated with an increase in ORF73  
113 antibody ODs (Table 1B). The association between haemoglobin and antibodies to ORF73 protein  
114 was strongest among older people (Table 1C). Conversely, anti-K8.1 antibody levels were not  
115 significantly associated with either haemoglobin levels or anaemia (Table 1B). This might be  
116 attributed to the relative abundance of LANA compared to late lytic proteins such as K8.1, even  
117 during KS disease [11].

118

119 Compared to HIV negative adults, HIV positive adults had lower antibodies to KSHV, especially those  
120 with CD4 counts of 500cell/ $\mu$ L or less (Table 1B). This may be due to B cell dysfunction caused by HIV  
121 infection, and consequent decreased antibody responses [12, 13]. On the other hand, HIV positive  
122 adults with CD4 counts above 500cells/ $\mu$ L, compared to HIV negative adults were more likely to be  
123 KSHV seropositive (Table 1A), which may be due to antiretroviral treatment.

124

### 125 **Risk factors for KSHV prevalence and antibody levels among children**

126 We then investigated associations between KSHV prevalence and antibody levels and risk factors  
127 among children. Overall, KSHV prevalence was 51% (2117/4134) in the children, the prevalence  
128 increased with age, rising from 31% among 1-5 year olds, to 53% among 6-12 year olds, to 73%  
129 among 13-17 year olds (supplementary Figure 1). We first adjusted for HIV status, age and sex, then  
130 malaria parasitaemia and anaemia/haemoglobin levels were added in the full models. In the first  
131 analysis, haemoglobin levels, malaria parasitaemia and age were strongly associated with KSHV

132 prevalence (Table 2A). Every 1 g/dL decrease in haemoglobin levels increased the odds of being  
133 KSHV seropositive by 11% ( $P<0.0001$ ) and the odds of being KSHV positive if anaemic compared to  
134 with normal haemoglobin levels was 1.42 (1.18, 1.71) ( $p<0.0001$ ). The odds of being KSHV  
135 seropositive, if malaria infected, compared to the uninfected were 2.26 (1.85, 2.77) ( $P<0.0001$ ) and  
136 every annual increase in age was associated with a 17% increased risk of being KSHV seropositive  
137 (Table 2A).

138

139 After adjusting for malaria parasitaemia, the risk of being KSHV seropositive for every 1 g/dL  
140 decrease in haemoglobin reduced to 7% ( $p=0.005$ ). Similarly, the odds of being KSHV seropositive in  
141 comparing anaemic individuals to people with normal haemoglobin levels reduced to 1.23 (1.01,  
142 1.49)  $p=0.037$ . After adjusting for haemoglobin levels, the odds of being KSHV seropositive  
143 comparing people with and without malaria parasitaemia changed little (OR=2.12 (1.75, 2.57),  
144  $p<0.0001$ ) (Table 2A). Every annual increase in age remained strongly associated with increased  
145 KSHV prevalence risk, OR=1.18 ( $P<0.0001$ ) even after adjusting for malaria parasitaemia and  
146 haemoglobin (Table 2A).

147

148 We then finally investigated associations between the same risk factors and KSHV antibody levels  
149 (OD) as continuous variables without categorising participants as seropositive or seronegative. Only  
150 malaria parasitaemia was associated with both anti-K8.1 and anti-ORF73 antibody levels in the fully  
151 multivariate analysis (Table 2B).

152

### 153 **Discussion**

154 We observed a significant association between haemoglobin levels and KSHV prevalence among  
155 children and adults, where people with low levels of haemoglobin were more likely to be KSHV  
156 seropositive. As a categorical variable, anaemia was associated with KSHV prevalence among  
157 children. Reduction in haemoglobin has been shown to cause hypoxia/low tissue oxygen, while

158 hypoxia has been shown to reactivate KSHV *in-vitro* [4]. We therefore hypothesise that low  
159 haemoglobin levels leads to reactivation of KSHV through hypoxia. Increased reactivation may help  
160 spread the virus during initial infection. Alternately, hypoxia may enhance initial infection of cells,  
161 possibly through upregulation of the replication and transcription activator [14]. In this cross  
162 sectional study, we did not directly measure KSHV reactivation or KSHV viral load in blood or plasma,  
163 although antibody levels may be viewed as a surrogate marker for frequent reactivation. The  
164 connection between KSHV reactivation, hypoxia and anaemia requires further investigation.

165

166 We showed that children infected with malaria are more likely to be KSHV seropositive. Additionally,  
167 the effect of anaemia and/or haemoglobin levels on KSHV prevalence and antibody levels reduced to  
168 about 50% after adjusting for malaria infection. Malaria causes anaemia, and in part the anaemia  
169 effect in children could be explained (confounded) by malaria infection. The consistent association  
170 between malaria infection and KSHV prevalence suggests malaria may be driving KSHV transmission  
171 in malaria endemic areas. This might imply that exposure to malaria significantly impacts on KSHV  
172 reactivation, which might also have long lasting effects. The mechanism through which malaria may  
173 reactivate KSHV requires further investigation.

174

## 175 **Conclusion**

176 Findings from this study suggest malaria infection as a risk factor for KSHV prevalence. Malaria  
177 associated anaemia is one mechanism that likely contributes to this association but cannot entirely  
178 explain it. In KSHV and malaria endemic areas, a number of other parasite co-infections such as  
179 helminths, which cause anaemia and/or immunomodulation are common. The role of multiple  
180 parasitic infections and KSHV transmission and pathogenesis warrants further careful study.

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183 Word count: 1976

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223

224 Supplementary Figure 1 title: KSHV prevalence and 95% confidence intervals across ages 1 to 103  
225 years among individuals from the General Population Cohort in south-western Uganda  
226 Supplementary Figure 1 legend: KSHV seroprevalence defined as antibody reactivity to either K8.1 or  
227 ORF73 antigens. Anti-K8.1 and anti-ORF antibodies detected using ELISA.  
228

229 Footnote page

230 All authors have declared that they have no association which may cause any conflict of interest.

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