



Original Research

Cancers attributable to infectious agents in Italy



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Received 10 November 2022; received in revised form 20 December 2022; accepted 10 January 2023

Available online 25 January 2023

KEYWORDS

Infection;
 Cancer;
 Attributable fraction;
 Estimates;
 Italy

Abstract Objectives: To provide an evidence-based, comprehensive assessment of the current burden of infection-related cancers in Italy.

Methods: We calculated the proportion of cancers attributable to infectious agents (*Helicobacter pylori* [Hp]; hepatitis B virus [HBV] and hepatitis C virus [HCV]; human papillomavirus [HPV]; human herpesvirus-8 [HHV8]; Epstein–Barr virus [EBV]; and human immunodeficiency virus [HIV]) to estimate the burden of infection-related cancer incidence (2020) and mortality (2017). Data on the prevalence of infections were derived from cross-sectional surveys of the Italian population, and relative risks from meta-analyses and large-scale studies. Attributable fractions were calculated based on the counterfactual scenario of a lack of infection.

Results: We estimated that 7.6% of total cancer deaths in 2017 were attributable to infections, with a higher proportion in men (8.1%) than in women (6.9%). The corresponding figures for incident cases were 6.5%, 6.9% and 6.1%. Hp was the first cause of infection-related cancer deaths (3.3% of the total), followed by HCV (1.8%), HIV (1.1%), HBV (0.9%), HPV, EBV and HHV8 (each $\leq 0.7\%$). Regarding incidence, 2.4% of the new cancer cases were due to Hp, 1.3% due to HCV, 1.2% due to HIV, 1.0% due to HPV, 0.6% due to HBV and $<0.5\%$ due to EBV and HHV8.

Conclusions: Our estimate of 7.6% of cancer deaths and 6.9% of incident cases that were attributable to infections in Italy is higher than those estimated in other developed countries.

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Hp is the major cause of infection-related cancer in Italy. Prevention, screening and treatment policies are needed to control these cancers, which are largely avoidable.

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1. Introduction

The discovery of infections as etiological factors of cancer dramatically changed cancer prevention and medical practice because of the avoidable nature of infectious causes.

Several viruses may cause cancer in humans, including hepatitis B virus (HBV) and hepatitis C virus (HCV), which cause liver cancer, with HCV also causing non-Hodgkin lymphoma (NHL) [1]; human papillomavirus (HPV), primarily linked to cervical cancer but also related to other anogenital cancers and cancer of the oropharynx [2]; Epstein–Barr virus (EBV), causing nasopharyngeal cancer and Hodgkin lymphoma [3]; HHV8, causing Kaposi sarcoma; and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which is associated with Kaposi sarcoma, anal cancer NHL and Hodgkin lymphoma (HL) [4]. Among bacteria, *Helicobacter pylori* (Hp) is the only established oncogenic agent, being the main risk factor for gastric cancer and gastric mucosa-associated-lymphoid tissue lymphoma (MALT) [5]. Parasites of the Schistosoma, Opisthorchis and Clonorchis genera are established causes of bladder cancer and liver cholangiocarcinoma [6]. Other infectious agents are suspected causes of cancer, including the bacterium, *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mt) [7] and the parasite, *Plasmodium falciparum* (Pf) [8]. Martel *et al.*, based on the GLOBOCAN 2018 database, estimated a total of 2.2 million infection-attributable cancers worldwide in 2018, with Hp being the leading cause of cancer, followed by HPV, HBV and HCV [9].

National estimates of attributable cancers due to infections have been calculated for several countries, including China [10], Vietnam [11], Korea [12], Japan [13], France [14], the United Kingdom [15], Brazil [16], the United States [17] and Denmark [18].

Such estimates, however, are not available for Italy. This study aims at estimating the burden of cancer attributable to infections in the Italian population, based on mortality data from 2017 and cancer incidence data from 2020. Such estimates are important to set priorities and design interventions to reduce infection-related cancers, as well as to establish the cost-effectiveness of population-based preventive interventions in Italy.

2. Methods

Our study is part of a systematic analysis of attributable causes of cancer in Italy, based on evidence-based research, with the purpose of estimating the number of cancer deaths

in 2017 and cancer cases in 2020 in Italy that could be attributable to known carcinogens, including smoking, alcohol, occupational exposures, infections, nutritional, and reproductive and anthropometric factors.

The proportion of disease in the total population that can be attributable to a risk factor is defined as the attributable fraction (AF) and commonly expressed as a percentage. We applied the classic formula originally described by Levin (1953) [19] to calculate the AF of cancer for specific infectious agents. It is a function of the relative risk (RR) of the disease (e.g. a specific cancer) associated with exposure to the risk factor (e.g. a particular infection) and the prevalence of the risk factor (P) in the population:

$$AF = \frac{P \cdot (RR - 1)}{[P \cdot (RR - 1)] + 1}$$

To estimate the AF, we used no infections as a counterfactual scenario. We considered all infectious agents classified into Group 1 (established human carcinogens) by the International Agency for Research on Cancer [20].

The RR of the cancer incidence and mortality related to specific infectious agents and cancers was obtained from meta-analyses or large studies, as specified in Table 1. Data on the prevalence of infections around the year 2000 (i.e. we allowed a 15-to-20-year latency between infection and cancer) were obtained from several sources, as shown in Table 1 [21–31].

The sex-specific number of cancer deaths and incident cancer cases was obtained from the 2020 Report of the Italian Association of Cancer Registries [32]. We developed algorithms to estimate the number of deaths and cases of cancers not included in the Italian Association of Cancer Registries Report, such as cardia and non-cardia gastric cancer (details are shown in Supplementary Table 1), and the number of cancer deaths and cases used in the analysis is listed in Table 2.

For cancers related to multiple infectious agents, like liver and anal cancer, we calculated partial AF based on the assumptions of independence of infection prevalence and RR (i.e. no interaction according to a multiplicative model) [33].

The data source and approach used to define exposure, RR and prevalence are reported below.

2.1. Definition of exposure

We included the following cancers and their corresponding infectious agents in our study: liver cancer following

Table 1

Relative risks and prevalence of exposure to infectious agents used in the calculation of attributable fractions.

Agent	Prevalence %	Cancer	RR	Reference RR	Reference prevalence
Hp	0.45	Cardia gastric	1.6	de Martel 2020 [9]// HCCG 2001 [21]	Palli et al., 1993 [22]
		Non-cardia gastric	5.9	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
HBV	0.01	Liver	23.4	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	Sagnelli et al., 2014 [24]
HCV	0.02	Liver	27.6	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	Buscarini et al., 1993 [25]
		NHL	1.78	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
HPV	0.06	Cervix	∞	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	Ronco et al., 2006 ^b [26,27]
		Oral cancer	1.94	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Pharynx	8.6	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Anus	6.7	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Vagina	10.9	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Vulva	4.4	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Penis	5.3	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Kaposi sarcoma	∞	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
HHV-8	0.19	Kaposi sarcoma	∞	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	Serraino et al., 2001 [28]
EBV	0.95	HL	3.7	Plummer 2016 [29]	Mentzer et al. 2022 [30]
		Nasopharyngeal	10.14	Plummer 2016 [29]	
HIV	0.02	NHL	15	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	Vescio et al., 2020 [31]
		HL	11	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Anus	32	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Cervix	5	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	
		Kaposi sarcoma	1584	Islami 2018 ^a [23]	

Notes: *Helicobacter pylori* [Hp]; hepatitis B and C viruses [HBV and HCV]; human papillomavirus [HPV]; human herpesvirus-8 [HHV8]; Epstein–Barr virus [EBV]; and human immunodeficiency virus [HIV].

HL = Hodgkin lymphoma; NHL = non-Hodgkin lymphoma; MALT = mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue.

HCCG = Helicobacter and Cancer Collaborative Group.

^a See references for specific agents in Supporting Table 3 of [23].

^b Weighed average of two age groups; prevalence in women used for both sexes.

Table 2

Number of deaths from selected cancers in 2017 and of cases of selected cancers in 2020 in Italy.

Site	ICD 10	Male		Female	
		Deaths	Cases	Deaths	Cases
Oral cavity	C00–C06	1056	2177	656	1314
Nasopharynx	C11	183	377	76	152
Pharynx	C09, C10, C12–C14	669	1379	199	398
Gastric cardia	C16	828	1269	583	915
Gastric non-cardia	C16	4690	7189	3306	5183
Anus	C21	180	398	255	588
Liver	C22	6156	8978	3107	4034
Kaposi Sarcoma	C46.1	495	669	191	258
Vulva	C51	–	–	214	1024
Vagina	C52	–	–	45	218
Cervix	C53	–	–	494	2365
Penis	C60	168	371	–	–
HL	C81	441	1222	357	929
NHL	C82-86	2479	7011	2041	6171
Gastric MALT	C88.4	45	126	37	111
All cancers	C00-97	100,123	194,754	79,962	181,857

Notes: HL = Hodgkin lymphoma; NHL = non-Hodgkin lymphoma; MALT = mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue.

infection with HBV and HCV; NHL following HCV; cervical, oral, pharyngeal, penis, anal, vaginal and vulvar cancers following HPV infection; nasopharyngeal and HL following EBV infection; gastric cancer, separately for cardia and non-cardia subsites, and gastric MALT following infection with Hp; Kaposi sarcoma following the infection with HHV8 and HIV; and anal cancer and HL and NHL related to HIV infection.

Burkitt lymphoma was not included among the cancers associated with EBV because of the very low incidence of this disease in Italy. *Clonorchis sinensis*, *Opisthorchis viverrini*, and *Schistosoma haematobium* were not considered among the infectious agents because of the sporadic occurrence of these infections in Italy. Similarly, Merkel cell polyomavirus, associated with homonymous skin carcinoma [34], was not accounted for because of the rarity of this

cancer. Two infectious agents suspected to cause cancer in humans (Mt and Pf) were not included in the main analysis but we provided separate estimates for them as well.

2.2. Data used for RR and prevalence

The RR used in the calculation of AFs was derived from meta-analyses or large-scale cohort studies (Table 2). We applied the same RR to men and women (i.e. we assumed no infection–sex interaction) and to mortality and incidence data (i.e. we assumed no effect of infection on cancer survival).

3. Results

AF and attributable cancer cases and deaths in Italy are provided in Tables 3 and 4. In 2017, 7.6% of all cancer deaths in Italy were attributable to infections (N =

13,670), corresponding to 8124 deaths among men (8.1%) and 5546 (6.9%) among women. Gastric cancer (including non-cardia, cardia, and MALT-lymphoma) following Hp infection represented 3.3% of total cancer deaths, with a higher proportion in men (3.4%) than in women (3.0%).

Liver cancer following either HBV or HCV infection represented 2.7% of cancer deaths, with 0.9% being attributable to HBV and 1.8% to HCV, and a higher proportion in men than in women. HPV accounted for 0.6% of cancer deaths, with a higher proportion in women than in men (0.9% versus 0.3%). We estimated 1.1% of cancer deaths due to HIV, with similar proportions in men (1.2%) and women (1.0%).

The other infectious agents accounted for no more than 0.7% of cancer deaths each.

The number of cancer cases attributable to infections in Italy in 2020 was about 24,500.

Table 3

Total number of cancer deaths in 2017 and cancer cases in 2020 attributable to infectious agents in Italy by sex and infectious agents.

Infectious agent	N deaths, males	N deaths, females	Total N deaths	N cases, males	N cases, females	Total N cases
HPV						
Oral cavity	56	35	91	116	70	186
Pharynx	209	62	271	432	125	557
Anus	46	65	111	102	150	252
Cervix	–	494	494	–	2365	2365
Vulva	–	36	36	–	174	174
Vagina	–	17	17	–	81	81
Penis	17	–	17	76	–	76
Total	328	709	1037	726	2965	3691
% total cancer	0.3	0.9	0.6	0.4	1.6	1.0
HP						
Gastric cardia	176	124	300	270	194	464
Gastric non-cardia	3227	2274	5501	4946	3566	8512
Gastric MALT	31	26	57	89	78	167
Total	3434	2424	5858	5305	3838	9143
% total cancer	3.4	3.0	3.3	2.7	2.1	2.4
HBV						
Liver	1127	569	1696	1643	738	2381
% total cancer	1.1	0.7	0.9	0.8	0.4	0.6
HCV						
Liver	2138	1079	3217	3118	1401	4519
Non-Hodgkin lymphoma	38	31	69	108	95	203
Total	2176	1110	3286	3226	1496	4722
% total cancer	2.2	1.4	1.8	1.7	0.8	1.3
EBV						
Nasopharynx	146	61	207	302	122	424
Hodgkin lymphoma	159	129	288	440	334	774
Total	305	190	495	742	456	1198
% total cancer	0.3	0.2	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.3
HIV						
Anus	69	98	167	152	224	376
Kaposi sarcoma	480	185	665	649	250	899
Hodgkin lymphoma	73	60	133	204	155	359
Non-Hodgkin lymphoma	572	471	1043	1534	1350	2884
Total	1194	814	2008	2539	1979	4518
% total cancer	1.2	1.0	1.1	1.3	1.0	1.2
HHV8						
Kaposi sarcoma	495	191	686	669	258	927
% total cancer	0.5	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.2

Notes: *Helicobacter pylori* [Hp]; hepatitis B and C viruses [HBV and HCV]; human papillomavirus [HPV]; human herpesvirus-8 [HHV8]; Epstein–Barr virus [EBV]; and human immunodeficiency virus [HIV].

Table 4

Total number of cancer deaths in 2017 and cancer cases in 2020 attributable to infectious agents in Italy by cancer sex and cancer site.

Cancer site	N deaths, males	N deaths, females	Total N deaths	N cases, males	N cases, females	Total N cases
Oral cavity	56	35	91	116	70	186
Nasopharynx	146	61	207	302	122	424
Pharynx	209	62	271	432	125	557
Gastric cardia	176	124	300	270	194	464
Gastric non-cardia	3227	2274	5501	4946	3566	8512
Gastric MALT	31	26	57	89	78	167
Anus	97	138	235	215	318	533
Liver	2873	1450	4323	4190	1883	6073
Kaposi sarcoma	495	191	686	669	258	927
Vulva	–	36	36	–	174	174
Vagina	–	17	17	–	81	81
Cervix	–	494	494	–	2365	2365
Penis	34	–	34	72	–	72
HL	206	167	373	570	434	1004
NHL	572	471	1043	1618	1424	3024
All cancers N	8124	5546	13,670	13,493	11,091	24,584
All cancers AF	8.1%	6.9%	7.6%	6.9%	6.1%	6.5%

Notes: HL = Hodgkin lymphoma; NHL = non-Hodgkin lymphoma; MALT = mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue; N = number; AF = attributable fraction.

Hp was responsible for 2.4% of cancer cases, including 8976 gastric cancers (8512 non-cardia and 464 cardia cases in particular) and 167 gastric MALT cases. HBV and HCV resulted in 0.6% and 1.3% of cancer cases, equal to 2381 and 4519 liver cancer cases, respectively, with HCV also causing 203 NHL cases. HPV accounted for 1.0% of the total cancer cases ($n = 3691$), including 2365 cervical, 557 pharyngeal, 252 anal, 186 oral, 174 vulvar, 81 vaginal and 76 penile cancer cases.

We calculated that 1.2% of cancer cases were attributable to HIV; of those, 899 were Kaposi sarcoma cases, 2884 NHL cases, 376 anal cancer cases and 359 HL cases. Also, 0.3% of cancer cases were attributable to EBV, in particular 424 cases of nasopharyngeal cancer and 774 of HL. Finally, HHV8 accounted for all 927 cases of Kaposi sarcoma, corresponding to 0.2% of total incident cancers.

The AF calculated for Italy was higher than for many developed countries (Table 5).

4. Discussion

This is the most detailed study to assess the overall infection-related cancer burden in Italy using standardised methods. Our research found that a total of 24,584 cancer cases in 2020 and 13,670 cancer deaths (8124 in men and 5546 in women) in 2017 in Italy were attributable to infections, corresponding to 6.5% and 7.6% of all cancer cases and deaths, respectively. In particular, 8.1% of cancer deaths in men and 6.9% of

cancer deaths in women resulted to be attributable to infections. The main infectious cause of cancer in Italy is Hp, with 3.3% attributable cancer deaths from cancer in 2017, followed by HCV (1.8%), HBV (0.9%) and HPV (0.6%). Infection-related cancers accounted for a larger proportion of cancer deaths than that of cancer cases because of the high fatality of most infection-related cancers, notably liver cancer.

Based on our estimates, a higher proportion of cancers were attributable to infections in Italy than other European countries, such as France [14], Denmark [18] the United Kingdom [15], and the United States [17]. In addition, the AF of cancer related to infection in the Italian population is similar to that of less developed countries such as Brazil [16] and Vietnam [11]. This is largely because of the high proportion of gastric cancer from Hp infection and liver cancer from HBV and HCV infection in those countries and in Italy, and to the high HPV prevalence in Brazil and Vietnam [11,16].

Our estimates are based on infectious agents with sufficient evidence for a causal role in cancer occurrence. Other infectious agents suspected to cause cancer in humans include Mt [7] for lung cancer and Pf for Burkitt lymphoma [8]. In addition, established carcinogenic agents might cause cancers other than those included in our analysis, such as EBV for gastric cancer [35]. The number and types of cancers due to EBV are still to be defined [35], with increasing evidence reporting an association with gastric cancer [36]. Assuming these

Table 5
population-attributable fraction of cancer deaths related to infectious agents in selected countries by sex.

Sex	Italy (present study)	China [10]	Vietnam [11]	United States [20]	United Kingdom [15]	Brazil [16]	France [14]	Denmark [18]
Men (%)	8.1%	30.6	34.7	3.4	3.1	5.9	3.1	2.3%
Women (%)	6.9%	24.1	22.1	3.3	4.3	13.8	4.4	3.6%

associations are causal, we estimated that a small number of cancers would be attributable to these additional agents. For example, the proportion of lung cancers attributable to infection with Mt, based on a reported prevalence of a latent infection of 2.1% [37] and a RR of lung cancer equal to 1.76 [38], would be 0.16%, corresponding to 54 deaths and 65 cases.

The inclusion of these agents may be worthwhile in studies conducted in high-risk populations for these infections (e.g. from middle- and low-income countries).

The proportion of cancer caused by infectious agents is a dynamic indicator, depending on temporal changes in the prevalence of relevant agents. Some of these changes are a result of preventive measures (e.g. HPV vaccination), while others occur without planned interventions (e.g. a decrease in the prevalence of Hp infection [39]). Moreover, it is difficult to estimate the proportion of cancers due to coinfections, which is particularly relevant for liver cancer, due to concomitant HBV and HCV. To this purpose, potential interactions between multiple infectious agents in determining the risk of a specific cancer need to be accounted for, but data on the patterns of interaction are limited [40–44]. Precise and updated estimates of the proportion of HBV–HCV coinfection prevalence in Italy are scarce [45,46]; we, therefore, assumed independence of effect of the two infections and estimated that 6.3% of liver cancers were attributable to HBV–HCV coinfection. Similarly, when considering anal cancer, we calculated that 10% of the cases were attributable to concomitant HIV–HPV infections [47]. The change in infection prevalence heavily impacts the number of cancers, implying a large potential of prevention. This particularly concerns infections for neoplasms, for which therapies and/or vaccines are available. Hp can be easily detected with non-invasive diagnostic tests [48], and first-line eradication therapies have more than 80% of effectiveness [49,50]. HBV vaccination is mandatory in all Italian newborns since 1991, and all those born since 1980 were vaccinated at age 12 [51]. The current therapies are able to control liver disease from both HBV and HCV infection [52–54]. Moreover, both HBV and HCV are screened on a regular basis in some high-risk settings such as hospitals through healthcare workers' surveillance [55–57] and prisons [58–60]. The fact that the prevalence of major infectious agents is progressively declining leads to a continuous change in the AF, which indeed deserves to be periodically updated to have the most representative estimates for a certain country in a certain time frame.

Regarding HPV, vaccination coverage rates remain suboptimal in Italy [61], with a decreasing trend in the last few years for different birth cohorts and both sexes, which was further impacted by the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic [62].

The proportion of cancers attributable to HPV in Italy reflects a lack of vaccination in women born before

1996, with a birth-cohort effect due to the introduction of HPV vaccination. Further, we have to consider the higher risk of cervical cancer observed in Italy among recently immigrated women (representing about 9% of women living in Italy), who have different rates of HPV infection, cervical screening and vaccination coverage [63].

The cultural and lifestyle heterogeneity due to Italian geographical areas (i.e. northern, central and southern, including major islands), next to the environmental differences between these areas, determines the distinct patterns of risk factors and different incidence and mortality rates of cancer [64]. Participation in the available cancer screenings in different Italian areas varied between 62% and 90%, considering planned and private screening for cervical cancer [65].

At the same time, head-and-neck HPV-related cancers in Italy are increasing, consistently with other countries [66].

The higher rates in men likely reflect different lifestyle habits by sex and consequent exposure to infection hazards, including the use of injective drugs and men who have sex with men, given the potential transmission of the infection through blood and sexual contact [67–69]. This applies also to HIV- and HHV8-related cancers, observed mainly in men.

Hp infection accounted for the largest AF of infection-related cancers in Italy. Our study allowed us to translate common knowledge on anHp etiological link to gastric cancer with objective proportions and numbers, also drawing possible figures by cancer subsite. In particular, 21% of cardia cancer deaths were caused by Hp infection, corresponding to 300 deaths in 2017. These summed up to 5500 deaths from non-cardia gastric cancer and 57 deaths from MALT of the stomach, making Hp responsible for up to 3.3% of deaths from cancer in 2017 in Italy. Noticeably, the knowledge on the role of Hp in gastric cancer subtypes is evolving as increasing evidence underlines its causal role in both cardia and non-cardia cancer, with the latter showing a stronger association than the former, as commonly known. A large analysis that has been recently conducted within the China Kadoorie Biobank found a significant association of 3.06 between Hp and cardia gastric cancer [70], higher than that we adopted based on more comprehensive data [9]. If on one side, the link between Hp and either anatomical subsites of gastric cancer has been reported of higher magnitude in the Chinese population than in the European one, previous studies may have missed to identify the relationship with cardia cancer because of issues related to the methods of detection, as discussed by the authors [70]. Therefore, our results could be a conservative estimate of the number of cardia cancers attributable to Hp infection.

To date, no standardised and organised screening program for Hp infection exists [71] despite non-invasive

diagnostic tests and antibiotic therapies available for the infection. Most population-based studies on Hp testing and treatment have been conducted in Asian countries, given the high incidence of gastric cancer and the diffusion of virulent Hp strains [72–75]. Recently released Italian guidelines for the management of Hp infection state, with a moderate level of evidence and a high grade of recommendation, that the testing and treatment of Hp should be performed in dyspeptic subjects younger than 50 and in subjects using non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or aspirin, with a history of peptic ulcer [76]. Our analysis calls for an intervention to control Hp infection in Italy on a broader scale.

Infectious agents are heterogeneously distributed in the population. Many studies have described a higher prevalence of infection, including Hp [77], HBV [78], HCV [79], HPV [80] and HIV [81], in less affluent subgroups, including immigrants and less educated subjects. Indeed, infectious-related cancers are characterised by social disparities [80,82–85]. As more deprived subgroups of the population have a suboptimal access to healthcare interventions; despite the public nature of the healthcare system in Italy can limit this phenomenon, specific plans should be developed to enhance their involvement in ongoing prevention programs, such as HPV and HBV vaccination [86,87]. Also, deprived subgroups could be targeted with new potential preventive interventions.

A possibility is that high-risk subjects should be identified during general health visits or occupational surveillance [88–90], and recommended to undergo specific tests of screening for an infection status and, when possible, to be targeted with available interventions. In fact, given a long latency, a high proportion of cancer could be avoided by eradicating the infected, with a benefit also for the young generations through the reduction in the infection reservoir. The benefit would also be projected within the household, where the transmission is more likely, with benefits for the new generations.

Moreover, vaccination for HBV [91] and HPV [92,93] should be made available and strongly recommended in unvaccinated subjects of both sexes. The eradication and vaccination against the mentioned infections would help shape the AF of related cancers in future generations, reducing the reservoir of infection and interrupting the routes of transmissions [94].

Our study has a few limitations. First, some of the data we used were not derived from the representative samples of the general Italian population. This especially regards less prevalent infectious agents. We were also unable to consider geographical differences within the country of infection-related cancer by geographical areas, given the heterogeneous availability of data from different regions. Moreover, mortality data for some specific cancers were not available and were then derived from incidence data, as described in the

Appendix. Further, we used RR derived from studies conducted in other countries, which did not comprehensively account for potential background factors and the virulence of the infectious agents, which vary across countries. The use of a single source to estimate the prevalence of infections does not take into account its temporal trend, and the latency chosen between infection and cancer diagnosis or death is subjected to uncertainty. Despite accounting for coinfections, we also assumed no interaction among the agents, possibly introducing some bias in both directions (overestimating cases if the interactions were more than multiplicative and underestimating cases if they were less than multiplicative). Finally, we did not account for the uncertainties around the AF point estimates. Such uncertainties depend on the statistical precision of the data on prevalence and RR, as well as on the accuracy of these data to the national Italian population.

This study also has several strengths. First, we provided a detailed estimate of the burden of cancer related to infections in Italy using recent mortality and incidence data.

All the main known oncogenic infectious agents with a substantial prevalence in Italy were included, in association with all the cancers they are known to cause. The AF was calculated using standardised methodology, based on data from recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses and cancer registries. We also accounted for the latency period between infection and cancer occurrence, to draw an accurate picture of infection-related cancer in Italy.

In conclusion, our results provide a systematic assessment of infection-associated cancer risk in Italy. The AF of cancer due to infections appears high. These results indicate that most of the cancer burden related to infections in Italy is due to two agents for which vaccinations are available, namely HPV and HBV, and two other agents for which screening and treatment are possible, Hp and HCV. A better management and prevention of relevant infections may lead to a better control of the burden of infection-related cancers in Italy, e.g. through vaccination and screening campaigns in schools and at the workplace, as well as public health campaigns targeting high-risk populations [95]. A previous estimate of the number of cancers attributable to infections in Italy in 2018 resulted in 27,000 attributable cases, a figure 10% higher than ours (24,500 cases) [96]. No details were provided on the methods used in that previous study to derive the results, which, apparently, were not based on estimates of prevalence of infection in the Italian population. A previous mortality estimate for year 2015 reported 14,150 cancer deaths in Italy attributable to seven infectious agents (8.7% of total cancer deaths) [97].

A large portion of infection-related cancers are avoidable by a preventive program, including screening

for infection, vaccination (also in adults) and therapies as appropriate.

Updated estimates should be provided in the future for the Italian population, allowing us to draw the trends of infectious-related cancer in time, based on the variation of the prevalence of infections.

Ethical statement

No request was sought from an Ethical Committee because the study is based on publicly available data.

Authors' contribution

Conceptualisation: GC and PB. Coordination: GC and PB. Investigation: all the authors. Methodology: PB, GC and CLV. Writing the main draft: GC and PB. Statistical analyses: PB and GC. Funding: EN. Writing review and editing: all authors. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interest statement

All authors have declared no conflicts of interest.

Funding

This work was conducted with the contribution of the AIRC Italian Foundation for Cancer Research (IG grant N. 22987).

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejca.2023.01.010>.

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