

**The use of fecal calprotectin testing in paediatric disorders. A position paper of the ESPGHAN Gastroenterology Committee**

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“ESPGHAN is not responsible for the practices of physicians and provides guidelines and position papers as indicators of best practice only. Diagnosis and treatment is at the discretion of physicians”.

**Abbreviations:**

AA: acute appendicitis

AD: atopic dermatitis

CD: coeliac disease

CDI *Clostridium difficile* infection

CMP: cow's milk protein

CMPA: cow's milk protein allergy

CRP: C-reactive protein  
CrD: Crohn's disease  
EEN: exclusive enteral nutrition  
ESR: erythrocyte sedimentation rate  
FC: faecal calprotectin  
FAPDs: functional gastrointestinal disorders  
GER (D): gastroesophageal reflux (disease)  
GoR: grade of recommendation  
IBD: inflammatory bowel disease  
LoE: level of evidence  
MS: mean score  
NSAIDs: non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs  
OR: Odds Ratio  
PPI: proton pump inhibitor  
RCT: randomized controlled trial  
SBS: short bowel syndrome  
SD: standard deviation  
SIBO: small intestinal bacterial overgrowth  
UC: ulcerative colitis  
WBC: white blood cells

## **Abstract**

**Objectives:** To review the evidence regarding the clinical use and value of faecal calprotectin (FC) measurements in different gastrointestinal disorders in children.

**Methods:** A literature search was conducted in the PubMed, MEDLINE, EMBASE and Cochrane databases until 31 October 2019. Subtopics were identified and each assigned to individual authors.

**Results:** A total of 28 recommendations were voted on using the nominal voting technique. Recommendations are given related to sampling, measurement methods and results interpretation. The 14 authors anonymously voted on each recommendation using a 9-point scale (1 strongly disagree to 9 fully agree). Consensus was considered achieved if at least 75% of the authors voted 6, 7, 8, or 9.

**Conclusions:** Consensus was reached for all recommendations. Limitations for the use of FC in clinical practice include variability in extraction methodology, performance of test kits as

well as the need to establish local reference ranges due the influence of individual factors such as age, diet, microbiota and drugs. The main utility of FC measurement at present is in the diagnosis and monitoring of IBD as well as to differentiate it from functional gastrointestinal disorders. However, FC has no utility in the diagnosis of infantile colic, nor to differentiate between functional and organic constipation. A rise in FC concentration, may alert to the risk of developing necrotizing enterocolitis and help identifying gastro-intestinal involvement in children with Henoch-Schönlein purpura. FC measurement is of little value in Cow's Milk Protein Allergy, coeliac disease and cystic fibrosis. FC does not help to distinguish bacterial from viral acute gastroenteritis, nor to diagnose Helicobacter Pylori infection, small intestinal bacterial overgrowth, acute appendicitis or intestinal polyps.

#### **What is known**

- Limitations to the interpretation of FC results include variability in extraction methodology, performance of test kits and the need to establish local reference ranges.
- The main utility of FC measurement at present is in the screening and monitoring of IBD

#### **What is new**

- Although FC may be considered as a tool to differentiate functional gastrointestinal disorders from organic diseases, it has not proven its value in this respect apart from identifying possible IBD within these common clinical presentations.
- A rise in FC concentration over serial readings may alert to the risk of developing necrotizing enterocolitis.
- Other than IBD, the applicability of FC measurement in GI inflammatory and immune-mediated conditions remains to be defined

## **Introduction**

Since its first description in 1980 by Fagerhol, calprotectin has seen unprecedented use in clinical practice across a wide variety of conditions ranging from inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) to functional gastrointestinal disorders (FAPDs).

Calprotectin is a 36 kDa calcium and zinc binding heterocomplex protein with 2 heavy and 1 light chain proteins belonging to the S100 protein family (S100 A8/A9) with regulatory functions in inflammatory reactions (1). Variably named 'L1 protein', MRP-8/14, calgranulin and cystic fibrosis antigen (2,3) it is present in tissues and fluids and especially abundant in neutrophils and monocytes (4). Calprotectin has numerous biological functions such as antimicrobial and antifungal activity (5). It is relatively resistant to enzymatic degradation and, therefore, preserved and easily measured in stools for periods of time sufficient to allow for collection and analysis, a property which underlies its clinical utility (6,7).

In inflammatory diseases of the intestinal tract defined by mucosal neutrophil aggregation (8) the activation and death of these cells releases high amounts of calprotectin into the intestinal lumen, which is then excreted in the faeces (9). High faecal calprotectin (FC) levels are described in children and adults, in diverse pathological conditions such as: Crohn's disease (CrD), ulcerative colitis (UC), cystic fibrosis, rheumatoid arthritis, bacterial infections, and gastric cancer (8,10). FC levels correlate well with Indium white cell scans and also gut permeability measured by other means (11). FC is considered a useful marker for intestinal inflammation, especially as it is stable and its measurement is non-invasive, simple, easy to perform, rapid and reproducible. Despite this, little is known about the determinants of levels in normal subjects, especially children, and contradictory data on sensitivity and specificity are reported for different conditions. A comprehensive review by van Rhee et al, for example, found that for suspected inflammatory bowel disease, screening with FC in children has a similar sensitivity as in adults but a lower specificity (12).

The aim of this paper is to review the evidence of the value of FC in different gastrointestinal disorders in children and formulate, where possible, consensus-based recommendations for its use.

## **Methods**

### **Composition of the author group**

The members of the ESPGHAN Gastroenterology Committee are representative of the majority of ESPGHAN working groups dealing with the main gastrointestinal disease groups being addressed in this paper. All authors and/or working group representatives are involved with the utility of FC in clinical practice. Some non-committee members, deemed to be more expert in the FC field (and with recent publications on the subject), were asked to join the authorship to reinforce the expertise. The final authorship acknowledges that outside this author group there are many other experts we were not able to include.

## Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted by 2 of the authors (CR and ED) in the PubMed and Cochrane databases, until 31 August 2019, firstly looking for all publications relating to faecal calprotectin OR calprotectin, followed by searching specifically for Calprotectin in the context of specific conditions namely: Celiac disease, Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD), FAPDs, Cow's milk protein allergy (CMPA), Food Allergy, Cystic Fibrosis, Infectious Gastroenteritis, Parasitosis, Appendicitis, Helicobacter Pylori, Malnutrition, Obesity, Necrotizing Enterocolitis, Polyposis, Autism, Small Intestinal Bowel Overgrowth, Hirschsprung disease, Henoch-Schönlein purpura and Short bowel syndrome. An initial list of 425 titles was retrieved, the oldest dating from the year 1984.

A review and preliminary sorting of selected articles was then performed looking into their titles and abstracts and those articles that did not specifically address the topic were discarded. A further detailed review of content then removed studies addressing exclusively basic science without clinical application and/or those not related to gastrointestinal conditions. Publications not written in English were not considered. Particular focus was given to studies of paediatric populations or those including a mix of adults and children. Where no paediatric data were available adult studies were included. The final number of publications selected was 172 (Fig1).

Papers from the total pool were classified according to subtopics based on a set of specific questions formulated and agreed upon by the authors. Individual authors were assigned topics and then provided with the abstracts related to these. Authors then completed further literature searches; Firstly, by extending the search to October 31<sup>st</sup> 2019 on their specific topic (s), as a result of which 28 papers were added, and secondly, by searching for any additional papers through the EMBASE database, adding a further 5 papers. These took the final number of included papers to 205 (Fig 1).

## Formulation of recommendations

Validated methods for determining the strength of the recommendation are available only for questions related to therapy. In keeping with other ESPGHAN guidelines (13) recommendations were classified according to the quality of available evidence including the methodology and outcomes assessed.

We categorized the grade of the recommendation (GoR) as:

**Strong:** if there were adequately powered, prospective studies supporting the conclusions.

**Moderate:** if there were large retrospective studies or small prospective studies supporting the evidence.

**Weak:** if there were only retrospective studies or expert opinion supporting the results.

**Strong** or **Moderate** recommendations are formulated as '*the ESPGHAN expert group recommends to or not to...*' (strong / moderate recommendation).

**Weak** recommendations are formulated as '*the ESPGHAN expert group suggests to or not to...*' (weak recommendation).

The 14 authors anonymously voted on each recommendation using a 9-point scale (1 strongly disagree to 9 fully agree). Consensus was considered achieved if at least 75% of the authors voted 6, 7, 8, or 9. Percentage of authors voting 6 or above, i.e. percentage of agreement, as well as the mean score (MS) for each recommendation are specified; the number of abstentions if any are quoted. A total of 28 recommendations were voted upon.

### **Faecal calprotectin measurement and reference values**

FC measurement is dependent on the collection of appropriate stool samples and analysis using validated tools.

### **Collection and handling of stool samples**

In general, FC tests are performed on 50 mg to 100 mg samples of stool. Given that FC is reported to be evenly distributed in faeces (14), homogenization of the stool to be sampled from, or indeed the sample, is not thought necessary (6). Although there are suggestions that the sample should be taken in the morning, there appears not to be a specific reason to restrict the use of samples taken at other times of the day (15,16). Once collected, a body of literature does suggest that FC appears stable at room temperature between three to seven days (17,18)(6) suggesting samples can even be sent to the laboratory by ordinary mail. Haisma et al., however, found that FC concentrations decline from the first day on in stool samples at room temperature and remain stable at 4°C (7). Overall, most analysis methods, recommend to keep faecal samples for up to 2-3 days at room temperature, 5-7 days in a fridge (4°C) or frozen (-20°C or -4°C) for long term storage (18). As for the extracts, different storage conditions are recommended by the different manufacturers ranging from storage at room temperature for a few days to keeping samples in the fridge or frozen should immediate analysis not be possible (18).

The levels of FC seem to be influenced by stool consistency, presumably relating to water content, but there are contradictory results reported by several authors (6,19). For young infants the fact that the concentration of FC may artificially increase by 30% by the absorption of water in the diaper must be taken into account (20). FC values also show large variation during bowel cleansing and for a few days after a lower bowel endoscopy, hampering the interpretation of results (21).

It has been suggested, that menstrual or nasal bleeding as well as anal fissures and haemorrhoids influence FC levels, by contaminating the stool sample (22). However, from a previous study in adults it was calculated that a blood loss  $\geq 100$  ml is needed to increase FC levels above the reference value (10); no similar studies in paediatric population were identified.

#### **Statement 1**

1(a) There is no evidence to suggest that FC samples are best taken at a specific time of the day.

1(b) FC concentrations in diaper collected faeces may be artificially elevated by the absorption of water into the diapers/nappies.

1(c) FC levels are affected by bowel cleansing.

1(d) FC concentrations may be elevated due to the presence of blood in stool samples also for reasons other than intestinal inflammation, like haemorrhoids, anal fissures or menstruation.

### **Recommendation 1**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to

1(a) Collect samples for FC at any time of the day directly from the stool without any prior processing. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement: 100% MS: 8.9**

1(b) NOT obtain samples for FC measurement from diapers/nappies especially when stool consistency is loose. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 92.9 % MS 7.7**

1(c) NOT obtain samples for FC measurement during or following bowel cleansing and/or lower endoscopy. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 100% MS 8.7**

1(d) NOT keep the samples for FC measurement for more than 3 days at room temperature prior to processing or for more than 7 days if refrigerated immediately. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 100% MS 8.7**

### **Calprotectin measurement**

The first method for quantifying FC in stools was developed by Roseth in 1992 (14). Improved and validated enzyme-linked immunosorbent assays (ELISA) methods were developed later using better extraction techniques and measuring FC in mg/kg (18). Such ELISA methodology is now commonly used for FC measurement, with several commercial kits from different companies available on the market (Table 1).

In some studies, semiquantitative and qualitative point-of-care assays have been evaluated and the results are comparable to ELISA testing especially at low levels (23,24),(25).

The different tests are very sensitive for detecting mucosal inflammation, but major differences exist in specificity and absolute values. Diverse extraction devices and methods have been tested and these have an impact upon the stability of faecal extracts. Regarding rapid home tests, it has been shown that results from laboratory-performed extraction and patient-performed extraction correlate significantly (26,27). Bourdillon has shown that absolute FC concentrations measured by different kits, even produced by the same manufacturer, may not be comparable (28). As a consequence, for results to be comparable, it is highly advised to use the same extraction methodology and test kit for follow-up and disease activity monitoring in the same patient over time (28,29).



### **Statement 2**

There is considerable variability in extraction methodology and performance of test kits even from the same manufacturer.

### **Recommendation 2**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to use the same extraction methodology and test kit for the measurement of FC for the purposes of diagnosis and assessing disease activity in an individual patient over time. (GoR: Strong) **Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.6. Abstentions:1

### **Reference values**

In early studies, the median stool FC concentration in healthy adults was 2 µg per litre of faecal homogenate with a suggested cut-off for a positive test of 10 µg/L (14). In newer assays, results are expressed per gram of faeces and the suggested upper limit of normal has been increased by a factor of five, to 50 µg/g (22). Currently the normal range for FC is considered <50 µg/g of faeces by many manufactures of the test kits (Table 1); however, the size of the reference cohort is seldom reported, and it is apparent that there is a great variability within healthy populations. Additionally the test appears to have better diagnostic precision for IBD at a cut-off of 100 µg/g than at 50 µg/g (30). Several factors including age, gender, diet, microbiota and certain drugs may influence FC levels.

### **Recommendation 3**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends that the laboratory in each centre establish its own normal values for FC. (GoR: Strong)

**Agreement 100%** MS: 8.6

### **Effect of age and gender**

It is well recognized, that in a general population FC values are higher in children than in adults. The most relevant results from the literature are summarised in table 2. Although there is a tendency towards lower values with increasing age, there are no well-established cut off levels for specific age ranges (31). Published studies by different authors have considered a wide spectrum of age ranges and performed diverse statistical analysis however the majority of studies established a difference considering children under 4 and above 4 years of age (32).

Davidson et al (32) assessed FC in healthy children across 3 age range groups, with a median FC of 77 µg/g for children aged 1-3.9 years, 62 µg/g for 4-17.9 years; and 61 µg/g for those older than 18 years. No significant differences were found between the 4-17.9 years and >18 years age groups. Joshi et al evaluating paediatric and adult healthy volunteers found a median FC of 34 µg/g in the 2 to 9 years age group and 22 µg/g in those aged 10-59 years (31). In a study in South Korea the median FC concentration in samples from 234 healthy children aged between 6 months and 4 years was 245 µg/g (range 12-1033 µg/g, mean 68.5 µg/g, SD 123µg/g) (33). These children were further analysed by dividing them into six age groups showing a trend towards negative correlation between age and the FC

concentration (the upper limit of 95% CI of median FC values was 135 µg/g in the 7-12 months group and 12 µg/g in the 37-48 months group).

A study (34) in 173 healthy Chinese children aged 1 to 18 months, also found a downward trend in FC values with increasing age but greater than normal levels in healthy adults with a median FC concentration of 174.3 µg/g (range: 6.0-1097.7 µg/g). The same authors went on to analyse a bigger group of 274 children aged 1 to 4 years and found a median FC concentration of 83.19 µg/g (range 4.58 to 702.50 µg/g) (35).

In more recent work Roca et al (36) developed a useful nomogram that was based on the results of a regression analysis. A total of 174 healthy children aged 0 to 12 years were divided into 3 age groups: from 0 to 12 months, 1 to 4 years and 4 to 12 years. Cut off levels established for the 3 different groups based on the lower value of 95th percentile for FC in each group, were 910, 286 and 54 µg/g respectively. A high interindividual variability was observed in infants below 1 year of age (36). Oord T (37) also established cut off levels for FC based on the 97.5% percentiles of FC in different age groups: 538 µg/g (1-6 months), 214 µg/g (6 months -3 years) and 75 µg/g mg/kg (3-4 years). Fagerberg et al (22) had earlier suggested that the cut-off level for adults as recommended by the manufacturer' (<50µg/g) could also be used for children aged 4 years and older; they found in their study group of 117 children, aged 4-17 years, that the median FC concentration was 13.6 µg/g. Peura et al studied FC levels in 84 individuals across four different time points during the first two years of life; they confirm that the high values at neonatal age decrease fast and apparently stabilises at one year of age (38).

FC levels depend on gestational and postnatal age. Although extreme preterm infants have particularly low FC levels (39), premature babies and term infants before the age of one-year have significantly higher levels compared to healthy children, through a downward trend with increasing age (34,37,38,40). The FC levels observed in healthy preterm infants were higher than those reported for adults and children (40-44); means from 98-122 µg/g (SD between 68 -98 µg/g) and medians from 150-253 µg/g (range <15 -1867µg/g) have been reported in preterm infants (age 3-18 days to maximum 1-8 weeks) (41). For full term newborns younger than 3 months, mean FC levels from 145-277 µg/g (SD between 46 -109 µg/g) and medians from 167 - 269 µg/g (range 31 - 2880 µg/g) have been reported in a comprehensive literature review (41). Due to the wide variety in population size as well as in age range in the retrieved studies, no definite cut off can be established neither in preterm infants nor in infants younger than 1 year of age.

Levels of FC do not appear to be related to gender (22,36).

#### **Statement 4**

With regards to the screening of patients for the presence of disease

4(a) Due to high interindividual variability especially at young ages any decision for clinical intervention should be based not only on FC levels but additionally on the global clinical context.

4(b) In preterm and infants younger than one year of age FC may be elevated without any known cause for inflammation and until a normal range for this age group is firmly established, FC levels should be interpreted with particular caution.

4(c) In children older than 4 years of age cut off values of 50 mg/g, as in adults, can be used, although healthy children may have FC levels up to 100µg/g or even higher.

#### **Recommendation 4**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends for the screening of paediatric patients for evidence of a GI disease to

4(a) Always pay equal emphasis to the clinical context as to the absolute FC values  
(GoR: Strong)

**Agreement 100%** MS 9

4(b) Not use a cut off level <100 µg/g for children younger than 4 years of age because of the wide variability in FC values detected in healthy children in this age range (GoR: Strong)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.3

4(c) Exert caution when using a cut off level of < 50 µg/g (as recommended in adults) for children > 4 years of age as reference values at this age range have not been irrefutably established.

(GoR: Strong)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.3

#### **Effect of geographical area and socio-economic status**

In a rural population in Guatemala (45,46) the median FC level in children aged 2 to 7 years was 58 mg/g. In Uganda (47) 472 healthy children were evaluated with median FC concentrations of 249 mg/kg in 0-1 year old, 75 mg/kg in 1-4 year olds and 28 mg/kg in 4-12 year olds (n=159). The authors concluded that FC concentrations amongst healthy children, living in rural areas or low-income countries, were comparable to those in healthy children living in high-income countries. Liu JR (48), however, found a significantly higher FC in healthy infants and children from rural China, as compared to urban ones (median FC respectively 420.9 and 140.1 µg/g, P < 0.0001).

#### **Statement 5**

5(a) Living in an urban or rural area seems to have no impact on FC levels.

5(b) FC concentrations are likely not related to socio economic status

### **Recommendation 5**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT take into consideration geographical area or socio-economic status when interpreting FC results

(GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 85.7%** MS 7.9 Abstention: 1

### **Effect of diet**

There are several studies that refer to the relationship between diet and FC, mainly comparing FC levels in breastfed infants with those receiving mixed-feeding or only formula. Most authors found that FC was significantly higher in the exclusively breastfed group (49-52) although others stated that FC levels appear not to be influenced by breastfeeding (53) nor by the type of formula (standard *versus* prebiotic supplemented formula) (54). In preterm infants a positive correlation was found between FC levels and the volume (ml/kg/d) of enteral feeding needed (55).

In adults aged 50-70 years Poulis et al. (56) observed a 10% decrease in FC levels per daily portion of fibre consumed; they found an inverse relationship between FC and fibre ( $P = 0.02$ ) or vegetable intake ( $P = 0.04$ ) but no relation to the proportion of fruits or fats consumed in the diet. No data in paediatric populations are reported.

### **Statement 6.**

There is contradictory evidence on the effect of breast milk and diet on FC levels.

### **Recommendation 6**

The ESPGHAN expert group suggests to NOT advise a specific diet before sampling for FC (GoR: Weak)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.3

### **Effect of concomitant drugs**

The effect on drugs on FC levels has been mainly studied in the adult population. Relevant findings are summarised in table 3. Adult patients taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) have higher FC levels apparently related to drug-induced enteropathy at different levels of the GI tract even though concentrations were considerably lower than in patients with active ulcerative colitis (UC) or CrD (57,58) (Table 1). Of 90 patients (median age 9.1 years) with juvenile idiopathic arthritis, 40% complained about abdominal pain with only one-third of these showing elevated FC values ( $>100 \mu\text{g/g}$ ). For most of them FC values declined with the discontinuation or reduction of NSAIDs (59). Although FC has been shown to significantly increase in adults after exposure to both ibuprofen (60) and celecoxib (61) the

increase was much lower in the latter and some specific Cox-2 inhibitors show no increasing effect at all (60,62) (Table 2). The effect of NSAIDs on FC may be seen as early as a few days after the initiation of these medications (58). FC has therefore been used in several publications as a marker of NSAID enteropathy. Accordingly, it is recommended that patients on a NSAID, who are assessed for a non-drug related inflammatory condition, cease taking the drug for 3 weeks before collecting a sample for FC measurement.

Low-dose acetyl salicylic acid (ASA) (100 mg/d, for 14 days) also appears to induce a significant increase in mean FC in healthy adult volunteers suggesting the development of intestinal inflammation; however there was no strict correlation between FC levels and mucosal abnormalities of the GI tract (63). The use of proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) has also been shown to be associated with higher levels of FC in an adult population but not related to the presence of dyspepsia (64,65). However, a recent prospective study in 51 children aged 3-18 years with gastrointestinal symptoms of whom 37 were treated by PPIs, failed to show evidence of intestinal inflammation related to PPI use through FC measurement (66).

#### **Statement 7**

Elevated FC levels might be found in patients using any drug having an inflammatory effect on the gastrointestinal tract.

#### **Recommendation 7**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to exert caution when interpreting mildly elevated FC levels whilst a patient is on non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, acetyl salicylic acid and/or proton pump inhibitors. (GoR: Moderate) **Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.4  
Abstentions: 1

#### **Other factors**

Levels of FC appear to associate with the microbiome profile (67,68), with studies describing subsets of taxa most likely to reflect the level of inflammation and, in turn, to levels of FC. In the study by Quince et al (67), the gradient of increasing intestinal inflammation amongst IBD children was associated with reduced microbial diversity, abundance of butyrate producers and relative abundance of Gram-positive bacteria. Thus, FC appears to be a valuable surrogate marker of inflammation when exploring the role of microbiome in IBD.

There is very scarce published information on the effect of environmental factors on FC and little reference to the paediatric population (69). In a healthy general population of 300 adults, age range 50-70 years, a significant positive relationship between FC and increasing age ( $P = 0.002$ ), physical inactivity ( $P = 0.01$ ) and obesity ( $P = 0.04$ ), was observed although the latter was attenuated by controlling for serum C-reactive protein

(CRP). The authors conclude FC levels were associated with lifestyle risk factors for colorectal cancer (56).

## **FC levels in specific GI diseases**

### **Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD)**

#### **FC as a screening tool for IBD**

FC is reported to be a better screening tool for the presence of IBD in undiagnosed patients than blood inflammatory markers such as CRP or erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) (70). FC could thus help to select those children in whom IBD needs to be evaluated (71,72).

The reported sensitivity and specificity of the FC test, in line with negative and positive predictive values, depends on the studied patient cohort, including the number of patients with causes other than IBD that could result in elevated FC values (e.g. bacterial or viral gastroenteritis (73) juvenile polyp (74,75)). A thorough review (76), found the best cut-off value in IBD screening for abnormality to be 212  $\mu\text{g/g}$  corresponding with a sensitivity of 0.90 (95% CI 0.87-0.93) and specificity of 0.87 (95% CI 0.81-0.88). In several reports the cut-off for a raised value is 100  $\mu\text{g/g}$  (77,78). As discussed earlier, there is some evidence that younger children may have a wide normal range of levels of FC, however, there is no strong evidence indicating that where IBD is suspected that the cut-off should vary according to age. There are no data or studies that have assessed cut-offs for IBD in different age groups.

To date, there is only a single published study on the cost-effectiveness of FC measurement to identify adults and children who require endoscopic examination compared to direct endoscopy evaluation alone to assess the presence of inflammation (79). A pre-test probability for IBD less than 65% made FC screening cost-effective in children but if it was more than 78%, FC measurement was calculated to be cost ineffective given the delay in reaching the diagnosis in evident cases while waiting for the results of FC measurement (79).

FC reflects the mucosal influx of inflammatory cells (mostly neutrophils and monocytes) and therefore, disease activity appears to be the most important denominator of the observed levels. Disease extent, however, does not necessarily correlate with levels, i.e. whether the disease is pancolitis or left-sided colitis cannot be differentiated based on FC values alone. In isolated proctitis, the levels may be within normal range (80).

There has been some debate on whether the performance of FC as a screening method differs between UC (or IBDU) and CrD. In the first reports on FC in paediatric IBD, UC and CrD patients were both included and there were no major differences in the performance of FC between the patient groups (81,82). A multi-centre study on paediatric CrD showed good performance of the test in paediatric patients with Crohn's colitis or terminal ileal disease (83), confirming the previous findings of comparable levels in UC and CrD (84). In CrD without colonic involvement, elevated levels of FC may indicate active disease in the small intestine (80,83,85,86). Isolated upper gastrointestinal CrD is rare, and we did not find any paediatric reports on the performance of FC in such cases. Based on adult series, the levels of

FC may be low in patients with CrD limited to the ileocecal valve and showing non-inflammatory behaviour (87). In children, such a disease subtype is rare.

It is generally accepted that elevated values of FC correlate with intestinal inflammation at the histological level (81,82,88-91) but the absolute levels, as such, cannot be used to categorise disease activity (e.g. high, moderate or low) unless endoscopy is performed. In UC, only few patients reach complete remission according to FC when on maintenance therapy (92). Although normalisation of FC is rare, most patients with UC in clinical remission, however, have FC levels lower than the suggested cut-offs for an increased risk of a relapse, i.e. 500 (93) or 800 ug/g (94). In acute severe colitis, the absolute level is not associated with prognosis and cannot be used to anticipate therapeutic response (95). In a single-centre study in paediatric patients on Infliximab therapy, a cut-off of > 250 µg/g was associated with risk of clinical relapse within three months (96).

Albeit accepting the above, patients strongly suspected to have IBD, especially those presenting with alarm symptoms or signs such as bleeding, iron deficiency anemia, weight loss, and fever, should undergo endoscopic examination regardless of FC value (78).

Other neutrophil-derived markers of IBD such as e.g. myeloperoxidase, lactoferrin, S100A12 or matrix metalloproteinase 9 (MMP-9) perform in a similar manner to FC but provide no additional value when used in combination with FC (95,97,98)

#### **Statement 8.**

8(a) FC is a better indicator of the possibility of IBD than serum inflammatory markers and should be obtained to decide whether an endoscopic examination is warranted. However, where IBD is strongly suspected and the screening FC result not available in a timely fashion the diagnostic endoscopy should not be delayed.

8(b) The degree of elevation in the concentration of FC cannot be used for the differential diagnosis of IBD from non-IBD causes of inflammation or to differentiate UC from CrD or to ascertain the extent of disease.

8(c) There is not enough data about FC levels in CrD patients with isolated upper GI involvement

8(d) In acute severe colitis, the level of FC is not associated with therapy outcome.

#### **Recommendation 8**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to

8(a) Perform a diagnostic endoscopy where IBD is strongly suspected and not to wait for FC results prior if these cannot be obtained in a timely fashion, to avoid any delay in confirming the diagnosis

(GoR: Strong)

**Agreement 100%** MS 8.7

8(b) NOT use FC as a prognostic marker in acute severe colitis. (GoR: Strong) **Agreement**  
**100%** MS 8.7

### **FC in the follow-up of IBD patients**

FC has provided an additional tool for monitoring paediatric IBD patients. In both adults and in children FC levels have been shown to correlate with disease activity as defined by clinical parameters, endoscopic findings and histology (77,78,99-101).

In the ECCO/ESPGHAN guideline for management of CrD it is stated that FC is particularly useful for children as a way of monitoring resolution or recurrence of intestinal inflammation, although the specific cut-off value for management decisions has not been defined (102). According to the updated (2020) ECCO/ESPGHAN CrD guidelines (103) the closer the calprotectin value gets to 50 µg/g, the higher the likelihood for complete endoscopic healing (104). The UC guideline (105), however, proposes the need for an endoscopic evaluation in those patients in clinical remission and with a FC concentration >250 µg/g, as this FC value predicts mucosal inflammation more accurately.

More recently, no correlation was found between capsule endoscopic scores and biochemical inflammatory parameters including FC (106). Nevertheless, from adult studies, if no findings in endoscopy are reported, the frequency of detecting lesions when performing capsule endoscopy correlates with increasing FC values (FC<50 µg/g 10%, FC 50-100 µg/g 25%; FC>100 µg/g 62%; (107). With a rapid-onset therapeutic agent, such as Infliximab, the FC levels may drop back into the normal range within two weeks (80,108), although with exclusive enteral nutrition (EEN) the decline may be less clear and occur over a longer period of six to eight weeks of therapy (70,109-112). The reduction of FC values during EEN, however, is lost rapidly after food re-introduction (109,113). Intriguingly, partial enteral nutrition with exclusion diet (114) or a personalised exclusion diet (115) may also result in mucosal healing and decline in FC. In most patients, regardless of the given therapy, the FC values remain somewhat elevated indicating ongoing inflammatory activity at the tissue level (histological disease activity). There is no consensus on what level is acceptable for patient outcome unless the FC level is within the normal range (92,102,105,116). A recent report on magnetic resonance imaging enterography-based follow up of paediatric patients with CrD reported a FC cut-off below 300 µg/g to identify children with mucosal healing (assessed by endoscopy) and below 100 µg/g to screen for IBD to identify children with deep healing (assessed by endoscopy plus MRE) (117). The reports on FC values in predicting a disease flare (in conservatively treated disease) show values ranging from 400 to 800 µg /g in paediatric CrD and UC (93,94,118) but as low as 300 µg /g in adult UC and CrD (119,120). However, FC levels start to rise before clinical or endoscopic relapse as shown in a group of adult IBD patients with FC-based, endoscopy confirmed remission (121). The authors conclude that FC can be used for identifying patients requiring close follow-up in clinical practice (121).



### **Statement 9**

9(a) In IBD patients in clinical remission with minor or absent clinical symptoms, FC may be used to confirm remission.

9(b) Upon follow up in the presence of repeatedly high FC levels endoscopy should be considered.

9(c) The optimal interval for FC follow-up is not determined and should be decided upon on an individual basis

### **Recommendation 9**

The ESPGHAN expert group suggests to

9(a) Include FC measurement in the laboratory investigations of IBD patients at least every 6 months during follow-up, even in remission, unless clinical picture suggests a relapse, where earlier investigation may be indicated. (GoR: Weak) **Agreement 100%** MS 8.2

9(b) Consider endoscopic evaluation in IBD patients in clinical remission with a FC > 300 µg/g as this cut off level accurately predicts mucosal inflammation. (GoR: Weak).

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8 Abstentions: 1

### **FC in the follow-up of Crohn's disease patients after intestinal resection**

FC measurement has also been reported to provide a non-invasive means to follow up paediatric IBD patients after intestinal surgery (122-124). Thus, monitoring of FC may aid in timing of the follow-up endoscopy. If a patient is doing well and the FC level is normal, the endoscopy may be postponed or conversely, in a symptomatic patient with an elevated FC level, there is an immediate need for an endoscopic evaluation (124).

### **Statement 10**

FC measurement may help establish the right timing to perform a follow up endoscopy after intestinal resection

### **Recommendation 10**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to measure FC repeatedly after intestinal resection since it is superior to CRP to detect early asymptomatic relapse requiring endoscopic evaluation (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 100%** MS 8.4

### **FC in post-colectomy patients**

In post-colectomy patients with J-pouches, FC levels increase in the presence of pouchitis. Also, in patients with recurrent pouchitis, the levels of FC were higher in a cross-sectional study of 32 paediatric patients after restorative proctocolectomy compared to patients with no history of pouchitis or reporting a single episode (122). The FC values decline accordingly along attenuation of inflammation in a pouch. Serial measurement of FC is an approved strategy to detect pouchitis and inflammation in the stapler line (cuffitis) in adults (125). ECCO/ESPGHAN UC guidelines for UC management (105) recommend that FC may be used to assess pouch inflammation to minimize repeated pouchoscopies in recurrent pouchitis and to monitor response to treatment. Calprotectin >300 µg/g is suggestive of pouchitis although lower levels do not preclude it.

#### **Statement 11.**

FC levels can be used to assess the possibility of pouch inflammation and response to treatment in endoscopic assessed pouchitis and most likely also for the presence of cuffitis.

#### **Recommendation 11.**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to use FC levels after colectomy to screen for pouchitis and inflammation at the anastomosis (GoR: Moderate) **Agreement 100% MS 8.1**

### **FC in perianal disease**

The data on FC in perianal disease is sparse (126). Seton drainage in combination with infliximab therapy is used with the same indications as in adults (124). FC values decline along with mucosal healing when elevated at management initiation and increase in relapse (126). However, for evaluating the response in routine practice clinical assessment in combination with MRI or anal sonography is recommended (117).

### **Functional Gastrointestinal Disorders**

The revised Rome IV criteria provide symptom-based guidelines by which functional gastrointestinal disorders (FAPDs) can be diagnosed in children from 0 to 18 years of age (127,128) FAPDs include a variable combination of, often age dependent, chronic, or recurrent gastrointestinal symptoms, such as infant colic, regurgitation, abdominal pain, diarrhoea and constipation not explained by obvious structural or biochemical abnormalities.

#### ***Infant colic***

In infant colic as defined by the Rome IV criteria the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms are not well understood although neurogenic, gastrointestinal, microbial, and psychosocial factors have been proposed (127). A possible candidate mechanism is gut inflammation, although there is inconsistent data. FC was measured by an ELISA kit in spot stool samples of 76 infants diagnosed with infant colic and compared with 27 healthy infants (20). In this study the mean FC concentration in infants with colic was not different from that in healthy infants ( $278 \pm 105$  vs  $277 \pm 109$  mg/kg,  $p = 0.97$ ). Furthermore, the FC level was similar in boys and girls and fell significantly with increasing age ( $p = 0.04$ ). In contrast other

studies have shown elevated concentrations of FC in infants with colic (129-131). Roods et al. found elevated amounts of *Klebsiella spp.* associated with low grade gut inflammation (not assessed by endoscopy) as demonstrated by FC levels which were 2-fold higher in infants with colic compared to control infants ( $413 \pm 71$  vs  $197 \pm 46$   $\mu\text{g/g}$ ,  $P = .042$ ). (129) reported that FC levels after 1-month of treatment with either *Lactobacillus reuteri* (treatment group  $n=31$ ) or placebo ( $n=34$ ) were similar. However, infants in both groups with at least a 50% reduction in duration of crying or fussing at 1 month had significantly lower FC levels than non-responders (responders  $n=50$ , non-responders  $n=52$ , mean difference 96.6 mg/kg, 95% confidence interval 5.1 to 188.1,  $p=0.04$ ) (131). It, perhaps, remains to be established whether gut microbiota alterations in colicky infants cause gut inflammation, or whether dysbiosis is a result of intestinal inflammation.

#### **Statement 12**

Inconsistent data exist regarding the correlation between FC levels and infant colic.

#### **Recommendation 12**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to  
NOT use FC in babies with infantile colic. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.9 Abstentions: 1

#### ***Functional abdominal pain***

Since 2016 the Rome IV criteria recognizes 4 different functional abdominal pain disorders (FAPDs): functional dyspepsia, irritable bowel syndrome, abdominal migraine and functional abdominal pain - not otherwise specified (128). The aetiology and pathogenesis of these FAPDs are still largely unknown, but a growing body of evidence suggests a disordered brain-gut communication with evidence for a role of visceral hypersensitivity, altered conscious awareness of gastrointestinal sensory input, gastrointestinal microbiota and gastrointestinal dysmotility (132).

Differentiation between FAPDs and IBD is sometimes difficult, because symptoms can be non-specific and frequently overlap. Olafsdottir et al. compared 19 children with recurrent abdominal pain as defined by Apley and Naish (mean age 11.5 y) with 17 children with IBD (mean age 11.1 y) of whom 10 had CrD and 7 UC as well as with 24 healthy children (mean age 5.3 y) (20,133). Children with IBD had FC levels ( $293 \pm 218$   $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) significantly higher than healthy children ( $40 \pm 28$   $\mu\text{g/g}$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ) or children with recurrent abdominal pain without identified organic disease ( $18 \pm 24$   $\mu\text{g/g}$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Studies from Norway and Poland confirmed these findings (134,135) Eighty-three of 126 Norwegian children with the 4 different FAPDs (66%) had FC concentrations below the detection limit of 16  $\mu\text{g/g}$  while nine (7%) had levels between 50 and 100  $\mu\text{g/g}$  (five IBS, two functional abdominal pain and two functional dyspepsia), and three had levels above 100  $\mu\text{g/g}$  (one aerophagia, one functional abdominal pain, one functional constipation). Flagstad 2010<sup>9</sup> There was no significant differences in median concentrations between the different

FAPDs. In a Polish study, all 22 healthy controls and 33 patients with FAPDs had FC levels below 100 µg/g, whereas in most patients with IBD the FC were markedly above the cut-off value (median level 1191.5 µg/g; 25–75 percentile range: 265.2 µg/g–1684.9 µg/g) (135). In contrast to these, an American study showed that FC levels in 93 children with IBS/FAP, were significantly higher compared with healthy controls;  $65.5 \pm 75.4$  µg/g vs  $43.2 \pm 39.4$  µg/g ( $P < 0.01$ ) (19). Moreover, they showed that FC levels correlated with pain-related interference of daily activities ( $P = .01$ ).

Di Nardo et al. demonstrated that mast cell-nerve interactions, suggesting low grade immune activation and neuroimmune interactions within the colonic mucosa resulting in hypersensitivity in IBS patients, were increased in the ileocolonic mucosa of children with IBS compared with controls (136). In addition, they showed that this close spatial association was related to intensity and frequency of abdominal pain. However, and in contrast with the study by Shulman et al., they neither found differences in FC concentration in children with IBS compared with controls nor statistical correlation between FC and abdominal pain or stool pattern (136).

Lastly, Diederer et al. investigated the prevalence of IBS-type symptoms in children with IBD in clinical remission (137). A total of 184 patients (92 female; mean age: 14.5 years) with IBD of whom 123 had CrD and 61 UC were included. Respectively 71.5% and 60.7% of the children with CrD and UC, were in clinical remission. The prevalence of IBS-type symptoms in this latter group was 6.4% (95% CI: 2.5–11.1%; CD: 4.5%; UC: 10.8%). Biochemical remission was defined as FC level  $< 250$  µg/g, this cut-off being predictive of endoscopic disease activity (138). No difference in FC or CRP was found between patients in clinical remission with or without IBS-type symptoms (FC: IBS symptoms median 58 µg/g, no IBS symptoms median 221 µg/g,  $p = 0.12$ ; for CRP: median levels were 1.4 mg/L, and 1.1 mg/L respectively,  $P = 0.63$ ). Based on these findings the authors suggested that persistent symptoms in children with IBD in remission appear to be unrelated to on-going inflammation. Interestingly, IBD patients with IBS-type symptoms were less frequently using IBD-related medication, compared to those without IBS-type symptoms which may imply that anti-inflammatory treatment may prevent or reduce IBS-type symptoms.

#### **Statement 13**

- 15 (a) FC levels in children with FAPDs are similar to healthy controls.
- 15 (b). FC levels in children with IBS symptoms are slightly higher than in healthy controls but lower compared to children with IBD.

#### **Recommendation 13**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to use FC as a tool to differentiate functional abdominal pain disorders from organic diseases. (GoR; Strong)

**Agreement 92.9%** Mean 8.3 Abstentions: 1

## Functional constipation

Constipation is characterised by infrequent evacuation of hard and painful stools, frequently accompanied by faecal incontinence and/or abdominal pain. In more than 95% of constipated children, no organic cause can be found, and affected children are defined, according to the Roma IV criteria as functional constipation (127,128). Although the exact pathophysiological mechanisms underlying functional constipation are unknown, gut inflammation has not been associated.

FC levels were measured in stool samples from 100 children aged 5–17 years (100). No differences in FC levels were found between healthy controls (median 15.6µg/g, range 15.6–39µg/g, n=7,  $p < 0.0001$ ) and children with constipation (median 15.6µg/g, range 15.6–63.1µg/g, n=31,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Of the children with constipation, 3/31 (9.7%) had  $FC \geq 50$  µg/g, but none of these children had a  $FC \geq 200$  µg/g. These data were confirmed by another study including 76 children, age 1-120 months, suspected of Hirschsprung disease (139). In the 19 patients diagnosed with Hirschsprung disease, the median FC concentration was 20µg/g (under 0.5 to 106.0 µg/g), whereas in the 57 children with functional constipation, the median was 4 µg/g (under 0.5 to 110.8 µg/g).

### Statement 14

FC levels in most children with functional constipation are not different from controls.

### Recommendation 14

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT measure FC in children with constipation as it cannot differentiate between functional and the majority of organic causes (e.g. Hirschsprung's disease). (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 87.7%** MS 8.3 Abstentions: 1

## Cow's milk protein allergy (CMPA) / Food Allergy

In developed countries, an estimated 5%–10% of children are reported to suffer from food allergy (140,141) with cow's-milk protein allergy (CMPA) being the most common food allergy in infants and children younger than 3 years (142,143). The gastrointestinal manifestations of CMPA are nonspecific and most commonly not mediated via IgE and therefore, the only definitive way to confirm the diagnosis is by elimination of allergens in the diet to see if symptoms resolve and assess for relapse after reintroduction of the food allergen (144). FC has received attention due to its altered levels in children with food allergy. In 2011, Waligora-Dupriet et al. (145) reported that the concentrations of FC in infants with food allergy were 2-fold higher compared with healthy controls (145). Later, Beser et al. (146) evaluated, in a randomized controlled study, FC concentrations in 32 infants with newly diagnosed CMPA: 24 infants with IgE-mediated disease (mean age 12.5 months) and 8 infants with non-IgE-mediated disease (mean age 2.87 months) and compared them to 39 healthy controls (mean age 11.5 months). Infants with non-IgE CMPA had higher FC concentrations compared to healthy controls ( $886 \pm 278$  µg/g *versus*  $296 \pm 94$  µg/g

respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as to infants with IgE-mediated CMPA both at baseline ( $886 \pm 278 \mu\text{g/g}$  versus  $392 \pm 209 \mu\text{g/g}$  respectively;  $p = 0.025$ ) and after the elimination diet ( $359 \pm 288 \mu\text{g/g}$  versus  $218 \pm 90 \mu\text{g/g}$ , respectively,  $p = 0.001$ ). In contrast, a very recent study (147) in a small group of 17 infants with non-IgE-mediated CMPA aged up to 2 years, showed that FC levels in these patients were not different compared to 10 age-matched healthy controls: median (range) FC were  $47.25 \mu\text{g/g}$  (28.80–106.10) versus  $68.40 \mu\text{g/g}$  (30.38–76.73) respectively,  $p = 1.00$ .

Merras-Salmio et al (148) assessed FC during elimination diets and after double blind placebo controlled food challenges (DBPCFC), in 55 Finnish infants and young children with a median age of 8 months and gastrointestinal symptoms attributed to CMPA (such as excessive crying, fussiness, vomiting or loose stools). Only 32% of the patients (median age 8.4 months) had positive DBPCFC's. The authors reported that FC levels were higher in the challenge positive group ( $n = 18$ ) than in the negative group ( $n = 37$ ), with respective geometric means during cow's milk free diet of  $55 \mu\text{g/g}$  (95% confidence interval 38-81) and  $29$  (24-36)  $\mu\text{g/g}$  respectively;  $p = 0.0039$ . In children with gastrointestinal symptoms suggestive of non-IgE CMP allergy there were no differences in FC concentrations measured during CMP free diet and DBPCFC: median (range) FC concentrations were  $52 \mu\text{g/g}$  (33-86) versus  $60 \mu\text{g/g}$  (30-122) respectively;  $p = 0.5995$ , while in healthy controls, median (range) of FC were  $25 \mu\text{g/g}$  (13-50). The fact that the difference between the groups was small, the within-group variation in both patient groups was high, no increase in FC levels was found after DBPCFC and that most FC values still remained within the normal range, makes it difficult to draw conclusions from this study and raises the need for future studies in this patient group.

Baldassarre et al. (149) assessed FC in 30 infants with suspected CMPA before and after 4 weeks of CMP elimination diet compared with that of healthy controls. FC in infants with haematochezia was significantly higher than in healthy controls (mean  $\pm$  SD  $325.89 \pm 152.31$  versus  $131.97 \pm 37.98 \mu\text{g/g}$  stool,  $p < 0.0001$ ). After 4 weeks of elimination diet, a 50% decrease in FC was observed but the levels still remained significantly higher compared to healthy controls ( $157.5 \pm 149.13$  versus  $93.72 \pm 36.65 \mu\text{g/g}$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ). Interestingly, a significant decrease in FC was also observed in the control group.

Another study in 29 breastfed infants (mean age 4 months) with CMP allergy manifesting with bloody stools reported that, despite clinical improvement in the infants, FC levels showed a non-significant decline 2 and 6 weeks following the initiation of CMP free diet by the lactating mothers: median (SD) of FC levels ( $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) at baseline, 2 and 6 weeks following the initiation of CMP free diet were  $209.1$  (SD: 387.9),  $189.5$  (SD: 382.4) and  $125.2$  (SD: 105.4), respectively ( $p = 0.741$  and  $p = 0.284$  respectively). The authors concluded that FC was not a good indicator of clinical response to CMP-free diet in infants with CMP allergy (150).

Winberg et al. (151) assessed FC and eosinophil-derived neurotoxin levels at diagnosis and after a 3-session DBPCFC in 12 year old children from a population-based cohort, reporting complete avoidance of milk, egg, cod or wheat, due to perceived hypersensitivity to these foods, manifested as eczema, urticaria, vomiting, diarrhoea or

flatulence. Six of the above patients had a positive and 6, a negative DBPCFC. Both at baseline and post challenge, the FC levels in children with a positive DBPCFC tended to be higher compared to children with a negative DBPCFC although the difference did not reach statistical significance: median FC ( $\mu\text{g/g}$  stool) at baseline was 25.8 *versus* 16.45 respectively,  $p = 0.150$  while, after challenge 24.10 *versus* 8.82 respectively,  $p = 0.078$ . The limitation of the study was that the study groups were small and heterogeneous with regards to the type of food allergy, challenge food and the serving order of active and placebo substances during the DBPCFC series (151).

Seo et al. compared FC levels in children with atopic dermatitis (AD) according to the severity of the disease (152). Fifty-five (84.6%) children had mild-to-moderate AD with Scoring Atopic Dermatitis (SCORAD) index  $< 40$ , while 10 (15.4%) had severe AD (SCORAD  $\geq 40$ ). The geometric mean (range of 1 SD) FC levels in severe (SCORAD  $53.0 \pm 11.8$ ) AD were significantly higher than that in mild-to-moderate (SCORAD  $19.6 \pm 9.9$ ) AD:  $66.7 \mu\text{g/g}$  (13.5-330.3) *versus*  $29.4 \mu\text{g/g}$  (10.1-85.6);  $p=0.044$  (152).

Furthermore, several studies have evaluated the possible association of early-age FC levels as an indicator of early gut inflammation, to the later development of allergic diseases (153,154) Orivuori et al. (153) measured FC at the age of 2 months in 758 infants participating in the PASTURE study (a substantial prospective birth cohort study conducted in rural areas in Austria, Finland, France, Germany and Switzerland). Pregnant women, who worked or lived on family-run farms where livestock were kept, were recruited during the third trimester of pregnancy and compared to a reference group consisting of women from the same rural areas not living on a farm. Data of environmental factors, doctor-diagnosed AD and asthma were collected by questionnaire. Increased concentrations of FC (expressed as median values with interquartile ranges) were reported in children from farming environments when compared to the non-farmers' children [FC  $181.81 \mu\text{g/g}$  (101.38/308.09) *versus*  $156.27 \mu\text{g/g}$  (76.86/261.30) respectively;  $p= 0.003$ ]; in the children with one or more siblings [FC  $165.97 \mu\text{g/g}$  (87.02/326.82) and  $185.89 \mu\text{g/g}$  (109.92/329.46), respectively], when compared to the children without siblings [FC  $140.01 \mu\text{g/g}$  (77.26/229.03);  $p< 0.001$ ]; and in breastfed children (exclusively and partially breastfed) when compared to non-breastfed children [FC  $180.27 \mu\text{g/g}$  (106.03/307.97) and  $149.57 \mu\text{g/g}$  (81.88/318.07), respectively *versus*  $104.93 \mu\text{g/g}$  (63.78/192.14);  $p< 0.001$ ]. Because the distribution of FC levels was skewed, the authors evaluated the importance of high FC levels (above the 90th percentile) that indicated high degree intestinal inflammation. The infants with FC levels at 2 months  $>90$ th percentile ( $n=75$ , FC ranging from 517.6 to 1542.0  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) had an increased risk of developing AD and asthma/asthmatic bronchitis by the age of 6 years (OR 2.02 (1.06–3.85) and 2.41 (1.25–4.64), compared to infants ( $n=80$ ) who had FC levels  $<90$ th percentile (FC ranging from 39.2 to 490.3  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ). Only thirty-nine of 75 (52%) children who had FC above the 90th percentile were from a farming environment indicating that high levels of FC were not explained by the farming environment (153). In the same study, only the very high levels of FC in the whole cohort, above the 90th percentile, were associated with asthma and AD later on in life. It should be noted however, that no linear association between the levels

of FC and the allergic diseases was found. The authors suggested that early changes in the gut immune system had long-term effects on the development of allergic diseases.

In contrast, a randomized DBPC allergy-prevention trial in 237 infants in Finland (148) using a combination of four probiotic strains pre-natally and during the first 6 months from birth, reported that high FC concentrations ( $>51 \mu\text{g/g}$ ) at the age of 6 months were associated with a significant reduction of the risk for any IgE-associated atopic diseases (unadjusted OR: 0.49) as well as a tendency to reduce the risk of having any allergic disease up to the age of 2 years (unadjusted OR: 0.52; 95% CI: 0.26–1.04,  $p=0.066$ ). The mean FC concentrations however, between the two groups at 3 and 6 months of age were comparable: at 3 months of age mean FC was  $180 \mu\text{g/g}$  (95% CI 154-212  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) in infants who developed allergic diseases up to the age of 2 years compared to  $152 \mu\text{g/g}$  (95% CI 127-183  $\mu\text{g/g}$ )  $p=0.357$  in those who did not. At 6 months of age mean FC concentrations were  $31 \mu\text{g/g}$  (95% CI 25-38  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) compared to  $36 \mu\text{g/g}$  (95% CI 127-183  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) respectively,  $p=0.357$ .

#### **Statement 15**

FC levels show considerable variability in children with atopic diseases making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions regarding the efficacy of this test in diagnosis or management of atopic conditions.

#### **Recommendation 15**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT use FC either as diagnostic tool or as prognostic marker of CMPA in children (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.4 Abstentions: 1

#### **Coeliac disease**

Limited data is available about the use of FC in children with coeliac disease (CD). The published literature in this area is scarce and heterogeneity in the detection methods used makes difficult to reach conclusions.

FC values are significantly higher in CD patients at diagnosis especially in those with higher levels of serological markers or classical symptoms (155,156) however, no correlation was found either with histological findings\_(155). Contradictory results have been reported related to the correlation between FC and with anti-transglutaminase antibody levels (155,157). Although FC values were only around  $100 \mu\text{g/g}$  on average in all reviewed studies, FC was significantly elevated in CD patients at diagnosis when compared with controls. Four to 12 months after commencing a gluten free diet this difference disappeared (88,88,155,158). Overall values of FC show a wide individual variability with an overlap between active CD and controls.



Potential use of FC to assess dietary compliance and histological recovery has been evaluated but no association between FC level and the histological lesion has been found (156). According to published results there is

no added benefit of FC measurement either at diagnosis or for follow up over and above currently employed serological markers.

**Statement 16**

FC is elevated in CD patients at diagnosis, but individual variability is high.

**Recommendation 16**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT use FC as a marker for the diagnosis or monitoring of coeliac disease. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.8 Abstentions: 1

**Cystic Fibrosis**

Cystic Fibrosis (CF) is the most common cause of exocrine pancreatic insufficiency in children and is treated with pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy (PERT). In CF, 85% of patients are pancreatic insufficient (PI) and 15% pancreatic sufficient (PS).

Despite adequate PERT, many subjects with CF continue to suffer from gastrointestinal symptoms including steatorrhoea and abdominal pain. It has been established that the intestine is abnormal in CF. Murine models have shown abnormal mucous accumulation, predisposing to gut dysmotility and abnormal microbial colonization in the intestine (159). Whole gut lavage of CF patients has shown increased immunoglobulins and inflammatory biomarkers such as IL-8 in the stool as compared to controls (160). Capsule endoscopy findings in CF have shown a variety of inflammatory changes including mucosal breaks and mucosal ulceration giving rise to the coining of the term "CF Enteropathy" (161). Nonetheless, gastrointestinal symptoms in CF patients are generally less severe than those observed in IBD.

FC levels have been determined in several studies in CF. Bruzesse et al. showed FC to be elevated in 27 of 30 children with CF (162). In 10 patients, FC normalized after treatment with Lactobacillus GG suggesting that bacterial overgrowth is a possible aetiology of CF enteropathy. Werlin et al. showed CF enteropathy in both PI and PS patients but FC was markedly raised only in the PI patients (161). In a subsequent study (163), FC was found to be equivalently elevated in PI and PS patients supporting the concept of a generalized CF enteropathy unrelated to exocrine pancreatic status. In an Australian study, however, Dhaliwal et al. reported increased FC in PI patients but examined only 6 children with PS (164). In a subsequent larger study from the same group, Garg et al. reported age-related variations in FC. For the first years of life FC levels were lower than controls and only began to increase after 4 years of age. This low value did not occur in PS patients (n=9, 16 samples). However, after 4 years of age there was an increase in FC in both PI and PS indicating generalized CF enteropathy (165). However, Ellemunter et al. reported in 171

patients in a longitudinal study over a median observation period of 7 years increased FC in PI compared to PS but unlike the Australian study did not find reduced levels in the younger age group (166).

In another study Adriaanse et al. reported FC levels were elevated in 40 CF patients (93%) with higher values in PI compared to PS patients. FC correlated positively with age ( $r = .321$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) while no association was found with gender ( $p = 0.67$ ). Although FC levels correlated inversely with lung function in CF patients (FEV1  $r = -.428$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), after dividing the study population into children and adults a significant inverse correlation (higher FC in worse lung function) between FC and lung function was found only in adult CF patients (FEV1  $r = -.484$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ; FVC  $r = -.304$ ,  $p = .207$ ; FEV1/VC  $r = -.509$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $n = 19$ ); no correlation was found in children (167). The relationship between FC level and nutritional status was assessed, the latter being considered to be negatively influenced by intestinal inflammation. In CF children, weight-for height Z-score was positively (higher FC in children with better Z-score) correlated with FC ( $r = .531$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $n = 23$ ), whereas in adult CF patients no significant relation was found between BMI and FC ( $r = -.346$ ,  $p = .147$ ); thus the correlation of FC with nutritional parameters is not conclusive. Linear regression showed that CFRD (Cystic Fibrosis Related Diabetes), proton pump inhibitors (PPI) use and PI were associated with elevated FC in CF patients (167). The correlation between FC and intestinal inflammation was not confirmed by other studies (163,166).

Calprotectin is not only produced by neutrophils in the intestine, but also by those in the lung, and expectorated sputum containing calprotectin may be swallowed, and subsequently detected in the faeces (163). There is, however, little evidence clarifying how, or to what degree, sputum calprotectin contributes to calprotectin recovered in faeces. For example, it is possible that swallowed sputum-derived calprotectin may be denatured to some extent within the acid environment of the stomach and limit its detection in faeces. This might make it difficult to make a clear distinction between intestinal and pulmonary inflammation by using FC. Even with this potential drawback, FC could be a practical parameter to monitor intestinal inflammation in trials with modulators and potentiators. In a recent published trial treatment with Ivacaftor, a CFTR potentiator, improved pulmonary and nutritional status and in 16 patients FC was significantly decreased following treatment 154.4 [102.1-284.2] *versus*. 87.5 [19.5-190.2] mg/kg,  $P = 0.03$  (168).

There is not enough evidence of a correlation between FC and endoscopic or, histological lesions, nor has any relationship between FC and clinical symptoms associated to enteropathy been demonstrated. Larger, multi-centre prospective studies may help determine if serial FC measurement is clinically relevant as a marker of intestinal inflammation in CF or whether it can be used as a marker of recovery / improvement of CF enteropathy in treatment trials.

#### **Statement 17**

FC may be considered a marker of intestinal inflammation in CF but there is not enough evidence of a correlation between FC and enteropathy; more studies are required to verify the

status of FC in PS patients and age-related values as well as the contribution of confounding factors such as lung calprotectin on FC levels.

### **Recommendation 17**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to be cautious when interpreting individual FC values as a marker of enteropathy in Cystic Fibrosis (GoR: moderate).

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.3 Abstentions: 1

### **Infectious Gastroenteritis: Viral, bacterial and parasitic**

In acute gastroenteritis (AGE) distinguishing between bacterial and nonbacterial causes is relevant to gauge the most appropriate management. In the literature, there is little data comparing acute infectious diarrhoea in children (viral or bacterial) and FC values as a function of the various pathogens and severity of the acute illness course. Sykora et al. suggested that FC facilitates early discrimination between bacterial and viral causes of AGE in children before the age of 3 years. In particular, by combining FC with CRP, they observed an overall diagnostic accuracy up to 94% in discriminating between bacterial and viral AGE (169). Similarly, Duman et al. showed that FC levels are significantly higher in patients with positive stool microscopic examination especially in proven bacterial gastroenteritis, such as *Salmonella* and *Shigella* infections, compared to patients with Rotavirus, Adenovirus, and Norovirus infections. In the diagnosis of bacterial AGE, they found that the area under the ROC curve for FC was 0.867 (95% CI, 0.763-0.971), sensitivity was 88.9%, and specificity was 76.0% when the threshold was taken as 710 mg/L (170). By contrast, in children with AGE needing hospitalization, no significant differences were found in the performance of FC (or pyruvate kinase isoform M2, an enzyme present in leukocytes) between children with AGE caused by Rotavirus and those with *Salmonella enteritidis* (171). Higher concentrations of FC in Rotavirus AGE in the present study can be partially explained by the context of the study, given that only hospitalized patients were recruited, and these can be assumed to have greater gastrointestinal inflammation compared to patients managed in primary care. These findings are consistent with those obtained by Shastri et al. in a large cohort of hospitalized adult patients (172).

The role of FC as biomarker of AGE severity is controversial. Indeed, FC seems to be correlated with clinical severity (e.g., Vesikari score) of AGE, providing information for disease management in children, although seemingly not in *Clostridium difficile* infection (CDI) in adults (73). Both FC and faecal lactoferrin increase during CDI, especially in those with detectable toxin in faeces, and distinguish between CDI cases and antibiotic-associated diarrhoea (173,174). Although lactoferrin but not FC levels seem to be associated with disease severity, both parameters show high inter-individual variability. Thus, FC and lactoferrin seem unlikely to be useful as biomarkers of complicated CDI disease (173).

Publications evaluating the role of FC in parasitic gastroenteritis are scarce. In one study, FC levels were significantly associated with active schistosomiasis as detected by eggs in stool with a significant decrease in test positivity after praziquantel treatment (175).

Sorokman et al found significantly higher FC levels in 90 symptomatic children aged 6-18 years with giardia duodenalis infection, as compared to 110 children negative for the parasite (176).

#### **Statement 18**

FC is significantly higher in bacterial in comparison to viral and no detectable pathogen in Acute Gastroenteritis. However, as Acute Gastroenteritis management guidelines do not recommend performing microbiological studies routinely in non-hospitalized children, FC measurement in Gastroenteritis in clinical setting has a low utility.

#### **Recommendation 18**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT use FC in Acute Gastroenteritis to distinguish bacterial from viral gastroenteritis in children. (GoR: Moderate) **Agreement 100% MS 8.5**

#### **Appendicitis**

Acute appendicitis (AA) may be missed at initial clinical examination in 28% to 57% of children aged 12 years or younger and in nearly 100% of children under 2 years old (177,178). Given these concerns, especially in the paediatric age group, a non-invasive and cheap screening tool would be extremely useful. Various markers that are products of the inflammatory reactions have recently been proposed, including procalcitonin, interleukin 6, interleukin 8, haptoglobin, granulocyte colony-stimulating factor, lactoferrin and calprotectin, but their role in diagnosing AA is still controversial (179). Since AA primarily begins at the level of the mucosa, it is plausible that FC could have a diagnostic value in patients with suspected AA. This hypothesis was tested in a qualitative analysis using calprotectin specific antibodies in the vermiform appendix. Strong immunostaining was recorded in specimens from patients with AA while no reaction was seen in uninflamed appendix (180,181). The accumulation of calprotectin-carrying cells in AA supports the study of FC as a new diagnostic tool in patients with suspected appendicitis.

Recently, favourable test performance characteristics of serum calprotectin for diagnosing appendicitis have been described. In children, Kharbanda et al. reported that median plasma calprotectin levels were higher in appendicitis *versus* non-appendicitis, and it was also higher in perforated appendicitis compared to no perforated appendicitis. In the same study, at a cut-off value of 159 ng/mL, plasma calprotectin provided a sensitivity of 100 % and a specificity of 27 % to identify children at risk for AA (182). Nevertheless, a more recent study determined the serum calprotectin levels at the cut-off value of 670 ng/ml as 73.3 % sensitive and 100 % specific (183). Considering these data, the use of calprotectin alone for the diagnosis of AA has not been demonstrated to be more effective than classical inflammatory markers. For this, combinations of biomarkers such as CRP, serum calprotectin, serum amyloid A-1 and WBC have been proposed to improve the diagnostic accuracy of distinguishing AA from other causes of abdominal pain. A study in children suggested that a panel of biomarkers, including white blood cells (WBC), CRP, and serum

calprotectin yielded a sensitivity of 96.5% (95% CI, 92-99), a negative predictive value (NPV) of 96.9% (95% CI, 93-99) with a specificity of 43.2% (95% CI, 38-48). With these results, the authors affirm that the introduction of this panel of laboratory tests into the diagnostic process may reduce the use of abdominal CT scans by a large percentage (184). These findings are comparable with the data of two more recent studies, in the APPY1 test, a biomarker panel including a mathematical combination of 3 biomarkers (WBC, CRP, and serum calprotectin) demonstrated a sensitivity of 99.1 and 100% (95% CI, 94.4 to 99.9% and 95.9-100%), and NPV of 98.6 and 100% (95% CI, 91.2 to 99.9 and 89.9 - 100%) for ruling out the disease, respectively (185,186).

Data on the role of FC in the diagnosis of AA are limited. The results of a recent study in the general population showed higher FC values in patients with infectious conditions compared to those with AA. Equally, higher levels of FC in patients with AA compared to patients without clinical diagnosis of either AA or AGE were found. ROC curve showed a close to 80% specificity and sensitivity of FC for AA at a cut-off value of 51 µg/g, AUC = 0.7 (180,181). However, Sarsu et al reported that in the differential diagnosis of uncomplicated and complicated AA in children, the most accurate parameter was faecal lactoferrin with an AUC of 0.977. Whereas for FC an AUC of 0.951 in complicated AA but an AUC of 0.669 in uncomplicated AA was found (183).

#### **Statement 19**

20(a) Serum and faecal levels of calprotectin are increased in acute appendicitis.

20(b) For the diagnosis of AA, the use of serum and faecal calprotectin has not been demonstrated to be more effective than classical inflammatory markers.

20(c) Combinations of inflammatory biomarkers, including serum and FC, provided a good sensitivity but a low specificity in identifying children at risk for AA.

#### **Recommendation 19**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT use FC, either alone or in combination with other inflammatory biomarkers, in screening children with abdominal pain for the presence of acute appendicitis. (GoR: Moderate) **Agreement 100%** MS 8.8

#### ***Helicobacter pylori* infection**

Only two studies addressing FC concentrations with *Helicobacter pylori* (HP) infection in children were identified. In the first study Hestvik et al. measured FC concentrations in 302 apparently healthy children aged 0 to 12 years in Uganda, and tested their faeces for HP with a rapid monoclonal antigen test as well as for enteropathogens and parasites (47). Since FC concentrations were higher in children under the age of 4 years, only values in children above this age were used for the analysis of the influence of different demographic factors and pathogens. The difference between FC concentrations in HP positive (78 children, mean concentration 34 mg/kg, 95% confidence interval 25-46 mg/kg) and HP negative children (81, mean concentration 26 mg/kg, 95% confidence interval 22-34 mg/kg) was not significant

( $p=0.12$ ). FC concentrations in infected with HP children were within the normal range. In contrast with the Ugandan study in symptom-free children, the second study by Sykora et al. was performed in children with abdominal pain-related functional gastrointestinal disorders according to the paediatric Rome III criteria (187). They enrolled 56 children with abdominal pain (27 with functional dyspepsia) and the same number of healthy controls. The median FC concentrations were similar in HP infected children ( $7.8 \mu\text{g/g}$ , 95% confidence interval 7.8-8.4) including those with gastritis, and controls ( $9.1 \mu\text{g/g}$ , 95% confidence interval 7.8-11.3).

#### **Statement 20**

HP infection either asymptomatic or associated with symptoms does not affect FC concentration.

#### **Recommendation 20**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT use FC measurement for screening or follow up of Helicobacter pylori infection or HP related diseases. (GoR: Moderate)  
**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.8 Abstentions: 1

### **Malnutrition**

#### **Obesity**

Obesity is associated with a chronic low-grade inflammation, which originates and resides mainly in the adipose tissue. Elevated body mass index, is associated with increased gut permeability through a variety of mechanisms, including altered bowel flora, the effects of circulating inflammatory cells and cytokines or through direct effects of dietary fats on local cytokine production (188)

Spagnuolo et al measured FC in 34 obese children (189). They found increased FC in 16 (47%). Values ranged from 15 to 270  $\mu\text{g/g}$  mean value of  $77 \pm 68 \mu\text{g/g}$ , indicating a mild increase over normal. Individual values exceeded 100  $\mu\text{g/g}$  in 12 patients (35%). A significant correlation was detected between FC and worsening obesity. It has recently also been reported that a distinct obesity related microbial profile was associated with elevated FC levels (190).

#### **Statement 21**

FC may be mildly elevated in obese children.

#### **Recommendation 21**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT use FC as a routine measurement in obese children if no other clinical condition relevant to FC measurement is suspected. (GoR Moderate)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.76 Abstentions: 1

## Undernutrition

Severe acute malnutrition (SAM) in children is frequently associated with intestinal pathology and diarrhoea. A randomised controlled trial including 95 Malawi children aged 9-23 months showed that FC is markedly increased in SAM: mean 547 (SD 744)  $\mu\text{g/g}$  stools (191). Despite a moderate clinical improvement, FC remained high after the children were administered standard WHO feeds or elemental and polymeric feeds for up to 14 days. In an observational study, Versloot et al (192) followed 47 Malawi children aged 8 to 59 months. They assessed stool pathogens and FC at admission and after clinical stabilization. FC was high in most children at admission and was higher in those still harbouring an infection (mostly parasitic) after clinical stabilization: 383  $\mu\text{g/g}$  (149-903  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) *versus* 140  $\mu\text{g/g}$  (71-300  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ). After clinical stabilization, 40% of children had FC levels above age-specific cut-offs.

### Statement 22

FC is elevated in children with SAM due to multiple factors and might remain high after different therapies addressing these factors, including after mild nutritional improvement.

### Recommendation 22

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to

Not use FC for establishing therapeutic efficacy in severe acute malnutrition. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 100%** MS 8.7

## Other conditions

### Necrotising Enterocolitis

Necrotising enterocolitis (NEC) is a severe inflammatory disease of the gut predominantly seen in preterm infants. During its early phase, FC is secreted into the intestinal lumen due to mucosal damage (193). To date there is no rapid, non-invasive test to confirm NEC in its earliest stages, as imaging may be non-specific.

Preterm infants with NEC have shown a significant transient early rise in FC compared to healthy infants of the same gestational age (194,195). When compared to gestational age-matched healthy infants, very low weight infants (<1500g) who went on to suffer moderate NEC had significantly elevated FC levels 12 to 48 hours before the onset of clinical signs (39). The median FC levels in infants with NEC were between 210 and 402.2  $\mu\text{g/g}$  stool *versus* 79.6 till 180  $\mu\text{g/g}$  stool in healthy infants (Houston JF, 2015), and at a cut-off level of 286.2  $\mu\text{g/g}$  stool the sensitivity was 0.86 and the specificity was 0.93 (196). With regards to collection. It should be noted, however, that the concentration of FC may be increased by 30% by the absorption of water in the diaper (40). FC levels were not statistically different in mild or severe NEC, and in fulminant NEC FC levels were unusually low (39). Furthermore, there seemed to be no correlation between FC levels in moderate NEC and the need for surgery (39). Interestingly, in focal intestinal perforations FC levels remained normal (40).

The disadvantage of FC for predicting severe NEC is its high inter-individual and intra-individual variability (193). In addition, in 50% of infants with NEC stool samples could not be obtained (196).

In summary, a rise in FC at the onset of abdominal distension appeared indicative of NEC and serial FC measurements seemed to be a useful screening tool for assessing risks and benefits of stopping enteral feeds (39). FC results in this context should be made available as rapidly as possible in order to allow timely and informed critical decisions to be made. On follow-up after NEC surgery, FC showed to be a good marker to monitor improvement of intestinal inflammation (40).

### **Statement 23**

A sustained elevation or rising FC on serial measurements may indicate a risk of developing necrotising enterocolitis and may thus be useful to predict it; successive FC measurement may also be useful for monitoring patient follow-up.

### **Recommendation 23**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends considering using serial FC measurements as a non-invasive screening tool to alert to the risk of developing necrotising enterocolitis. (GoR: moderate).

**Agreement 100%** MS 7.7

### **Intestinal polyps**

Colonic juvenile polyps (CJP) have a prevalence in the paediatric population that ranges between 0.08% and 3.7%. They are most frequently diagnosed in boys, between 3 and 10 years of age (75). CJP usually present with atypical symptoms such as abdominal discomfort and painless rectal blood loss.

CJP are non-adenomatous structures characterised by high vascularity, ulceration, and the presence of tissue neutrophilia. Exfoliation of these latter cells into the stool may lead to increased FC. In keeping with this one would expect FC to return to normal once polyps are removed (40,197,198).

Until recently, only sporadic case reports/series have been published on children with CJP and elevated FC. (197,198). Olafsdottir et al. looked retrospectively at clinical data and endoscopy results of 266 children. They found CJP in 12 (4.5%). FC levels in these children (844; range 28–2287 mg/kg) and children with active IBD (962; range <20–7780 mg/kg) were similar ( $p=0.6299$ ), and higher than in children with normal colonoscopies (130; range <20–2443 mg/kg,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Three months after polypectomy, FC (measured in 9/12 children) had decreased to 49 mg/kg (range <20–281,  $p < 0.0078$ ) (75)



**Statement 24**

25 (a) Juvenile polyps are associated with increased FC, although normal FC does not exclude this diagnosis.

25 (b) FC as a screening test cannot differentiate Colonic juvenile polyps from Inflammatory Bowel Disease

**Recommendation 24**

The ESPGHAN expert group suggests to

NOT use FC as a screening tool in children with a suspicion of intestinal polyps. (GoR;Weak)

**Agreement 85.7%** MS 8.4 Abstentions: 2

**Short bowel Syndrome**

Short bowel syndrome (SBS) is defined as a spectrum of diarrhoea and malabsorption with associated complications (*i.e.* bloodstream infections and small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO) due to insufficient bowel length mainly resulting from massive small bowel resection due to NEC or congenital gastrointestinal malformations (e.g. gastroschisis, intestinal atresia). SIBO and use of parenteral nutrition (PN) are considered as inducers of systemic or local inflammation concomitant with gut barrier dysfunction (199). In a study of 10 children with SBS due to NEC on parenteral nutrition (mean age 7.2 months), FC levels were significantly higher (median 309  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ; range: 205-786  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) compared with healthy age-matched controls (median 61  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ; range: 45-214  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ). When further subdivided, children with SBS diagnosed with SIBO (breath test) had higher FC levels (median 394  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ; range 144-786  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ) compared with children with SBS without SIBO (median 154  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ; range 20-461  $\mu\text{g/g}$ ). FC levels did not have any significant correlations with the length of the remnant small intestine, blood cytokine levels or quantity of enteral feeds. In addition, a recent study of 50 children with SBS on parenteral nutrition showed that small bowel dilation was associated with higher FC (median 194  $\mu\text{g/g}$  (ranges: 76–400) *versus* 24  $\mu\text{g/g}$  (ranges 11–157)) in the non-dilated group and lower citrulline levels and more intestinal bloodstream infections and liver anomalies (128).

**Statement 25**

FC might be elevated in SBS children with small intestinal bacterial overgrowth.

**Recommendation 25**

The ESPGHAN expert group suggests to NOT use FC routinely in short bowel syndrome children (GoR Weak)

**Agreement 100%** MS 8.5

**Small intestinal bacterial overgrowth.**

There was no difference in FC levels in 58 children without previous intestinal disorders, or chronic diseases (e.g respiratory or urinary tract infections, or chronic autoimmune diseases, or intestinal surgery) affected by small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO), as diagnosed by lactulose breath test compared to a control population of 60 healthy children (median 36.0 mg/kg, mean 43.0 +/- 31.6 mg/kg and median 29.5 mg/kg mean 35.7 +/- 20.7 mg/kg respectively) (200).

**Statement 26**

There are no differences in FC levels between children with SIBO, compared to a control population.

**Recommendation 26**

The ESPGHAN expert group suggests to NOT use FC measurement for the diagnosis of SIBO in previously healthy children (GoR: Weak)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.3 Abstentions: 1

**Autism.**

Using two independent markers of intestinal inflammation, i.e. rectal NO and FC there was no apparent inflammation found in a group of 24 consecutive children with autism (aged 3-13 years), except in 2 cases with *Clostridium difficile* infection and severe constipation (201). In contrast, FC was found to be elevated in 24.4% of patients with autism and in 11.6% of their relatives, with a mean value of FC in these patients ( $159.7 \pm 74.0 \mu\text{g/g}$ ) indicating a mild degree of intestinal inflammation, although it did not correlate with abnormal intestinal permeability (IPT) (202). In a more recent study evaluating intestinal inflammation using FC in 61 children with autism and 50 non-autistic individuals with gastrointestinal symptoms, no differences were found in FC levels ( $111.10 \mu\text{g/g} \pm 21.82$  in autism *versus*  $125.57 \mu\text{g/g} \pm 27.36$  in controls) (203).

**Statement 27**

Baseline higher FC levels are not more commonly found in children with autism.

**Recommendation 27**

The ESPGHAN expert group recommends to NOT use FC measurement in children with autism unless they have symptoms suggestive of conditions relevant to FC levels. (GoR: Moderate)

**Agreement 92.9%** MS 8.8 Abstentions: 1

## Henoch-Schönlein purpura

In 66 children with Henoch-Schönlein purpura (mean age, 7.5±2.9 years) FC assessed during the first 3 days of disease onset was significantly higher in those with intestinal involvement – assessed by the presence of faecal occult blood (only found in 28% of them), gastric wall thickness and duodenal wall thickness [median 124.2(interquartile ranges 430.7) µg/g *versus* 16.57 (interquartile ranges 17.8) µg/g in those without obvious intestinal involvement; p =0.01]. The median FC [ 50.3 (interquartile ranges 241.0 µg/g in the children with mild gastrointestinal involvement was lower than the group with more severe involvement [392 (interquartile ranges 524.6) µg/g; p=.02]. The FC concentration was a better indicator for the evaluation of gastrointestinal involvement than the faecal occult blood test (204). In a recent study of 40 children with Henoch-Schönlein purpura compared to 40 controls, FC > 264.5 µg/g displayed a 93.1 sensitivity and 87.5% specificity for early diagnosis of intestinal involvement and also showed good performance for the follow- (205). None of these authors discussed an influence of intestinal bleeding, which is frequent in these patients, on the FC levels.

### Statement 28

FC is useful for identifying gastrointestinal involvement in children with Henoch-Schönlein purpura.

### Recommendation 28

The ESPGHAN expert group suggests to consider using FC measurement to identify gastrointestinal involvement in children with Henoch-Schönlein purpura in the absence of overt bleeding. (GoR: Weak)

**Agreement 100%** MS 7.7

### General Conclusions

FC measurement has seen an unprecedented rise in utility as a marker of gastrointestinal disease, specifically inflammation. There are, however, many considerations and limitations which need to be defined and acknowledged before FC measurement is used to influence clinical management. This paper has attempted to clarify these and provide the best evidence-based recommendations or, where not possible, expert consensus, for the use of FC . From the outset the authors stress that the use of FC should always be alongside and in support of good clinical judgement.

Limitations include variability in extraction methodology, performance of test kits and the need to establish local reference ranges. The latter are hampered by significant variation at and across the paediatric age range and the influence of individual factors such as age, diet, microbiota and drugs, accepting that much still needs to be elucidated in all these areas.

There is no question that the main utility of FC measurement at present is in the diagnosis and monitoring of IBD, even over and above that of established serum inflammatory markers. It, however, lacks the finesse to differentiate ulcerative colitis from

Crohn's disease or to ascertain the extent of the disease or therapy outcome. Measuring FC repeatedly may be useful in IBD patients with minor or absent clinical symptoms to confirm remission but also to suspect relapse and to consider re-evaluation or change of management.

With regards to other GI inflammatory and immune mediated conditions, however, the value of FC measurement remains questionable. There appears to be little value in using FC as a diagnostic tool or prognostic marker of Cow's Milk Protein Allergy, or for the diagnosis or monitoring of coeliac disease. In children with cystic fibrosis there is not enough evidence on a correlation between FC and enteropathy. A rise in FC concentration, however, may alert to the risk of developing necrotizing enterocolitis and in children with Henoch-Schönlein purpura and in the absence of overt bleeding FC measurement helps identifying gastro-intestinal involvement.

FC does not help to distinguish bacterial from viral acute gastroenteritis, is not useful to detect Helicobacter Pylori infection or related disease or for the diagnosis of small intestinal bacterial overgrowth. It is no more effective than classical inflammatory markers in screening for acute appendicitis. It cannot be considered as a screening tool in children with a suspicion of intestinal polyps.

Importantly, although FC may be considered as a tool to differentiate functional gastrointestinal disorders from so-called organic diseases, it has not proved its value apart from identifying possible IBD within these common clinical presentations. This may relate to the fact that in conditions such as the functional abdominal pain disorders there is increasing evidence of a low-grade inflammatory process and much still remains to be done in terms of phenotyping and classifying them. FC has no utility in babies with infantile colic, nor to differentiate between functional and organic constipation.

#### **DISCLAIMER**

“ESPGHAN is not responsible for the practices of physicians and provides guidelines and position papers as indicators of best practice only. Diagnosis and treatment is at the discretion of physicians”.

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Figure 1 . Literature search and sorting

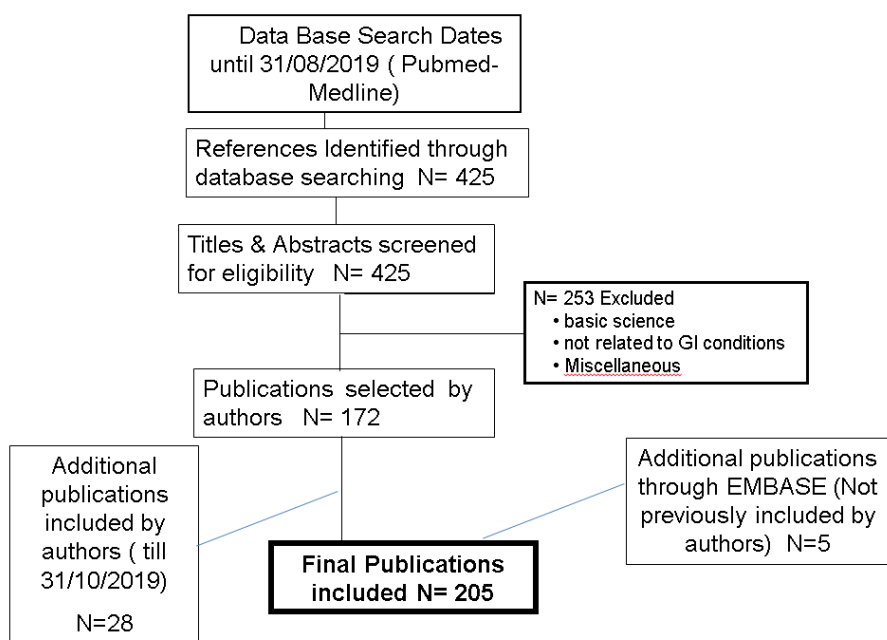


Table 1- Commercial available methods for fecal calprotectin measurement

Assay (manufacturer)	Method	Extraction method	Measurement range, µg/g	Cut off level (µg/g)	Efficacy	Comments
Calprotectin EliA Phadia/Thermo-Fisher, (Uppsala, Sweden)	EFIA	Phadia® Laboratory System	15–≥3000	> 50 positive	Sensitivity 97.7 % Specificity 89.8 % PPV 0.96 NPV 0.95 LR+ 9.58 LR- 0.03 *	
EliA Calprotectin 2 Phadia/Thermo-Fisher, (Uppsala, Sweden)	EFIA	Phadia® Laboratory System	3,8 - ≥6000	>50 positive	Sensitivity 98 % Specificity 75,9 % PPV 0.829 NPV 0.969 *	
Calfast Eurospital, (Trieste, Italy)	Semi-quantitative IC test (automated reading)	Eurospital	50–300	< 70 negative 70-100 borderline >100 positive	Sensitivity 86.4% specificity 86.6% Ref (1) NPV: 99% *	
Calprest Eurospital, (Trieste, Italy)	ELISA	Eurospital	15–500	< 50 negative 50-100 borderline >100 positive	Sensitivity 95% Specificity 93% NPV 98% *	The average value of calprotectin in healthy adults is approximately

						25 µg/g
Calprotectin ELISA (APL) CALP0100 Calpro AS, (Lysaker, Norway)	ELISA	Patented Faecal Extraction Buffer	up to 1250	>50 positive	NA	
Calprotectin ELISA (HRP) CALP0300 Calpro AS, (Lysaker, Norway)	ELISA	Patented Faecal Extraction Buffer	up to 1250	>50 positive	NA	
Calprolab™ ELISA (APL) CALP0170 Calpro AS, (Lysaker, Norway)	ELISA	Calpro EasyExtract™ CAL0510	25- 2500	>50 positive	Sensitivity 83% Specificity 89% PPV 83% NPV 89% LR + 7.9 LR – 0.19 Ref (2)	Satisfactory correlation and agreement has been found between samples analyzed in CAL0100 and CALP0170
Calprolab™ ELISA (HRP) CALP0270 Calpro AS (Lysaker, Norway)	ELISA	Calpro EasyExtract	25-2500	>50 positive	Sensitivity 78.2% Specificity 74.8% PPV 0.538 NPV 0.902 LR+ 2.9 LR- 0.29 Ref (7)	CalproLab Elisa tests (ALP/HPR) has a higher dynamic range than the Calprotectin Elisa tests (ALP/HPR)
CalproSmart™ TM, Calpro AS, (Lysaker, Norway)	Semi-quantitative IC test	Calpro faecal extraction buffer.	70-1500	< 200 (Mild disease IBD, green) 200 – 500 (moderate IBD activity, yellow) > 500 (severe IBD activity, red)	Sensitivity: 82% Specificity: 85% PPV: 47% NPV: 97% (Ref 7)	Intra – assay and interassay coefficients of variation of the CalproSmart test were 4.42% and 12.49% respectively. Ref (6)  Optimal cut off at 150. Ref (6)  Smartphone application
BÜHLMANN fCAL® ELISA Bühlmann Laboratories AG (Schonenbuch,	ELISA	Calex®	10-600 30-1800	<50 negative 50–200 result uncertain >200 positive	Sensitivity: 79% Specificity: 87% Ref (3)	

Switzerland)						
Quantum Blue® fCAL Buhlmann Laboratories AG (Schonenbuch, Switzerland)	Quantitative IC test	Calex®	30–300  100-1800  30-1000	50 for adults  (can be used for children aged from 4 to 17 years)	Sensitivity 83 % Specificity 68 % PPV 0.63 NPV 0.87 LR+ 2.7 LR- 0.24 Ref (2)	Automated reading
BÜHLMANN fCAL® turbo  Buhlmann Laboratories AG (Schonenbuch, Switzerland)	PETIA	Calex ®	20-8000	50 for adults  (can be used for children aged from 4 to 17 years)	NA	
BÜHLMANN IBDoc®  Buhlmann Laboratories AG (Schonenbuch, Switzerland)	Semi- quantitative IC test	Calex ®	30-1000	>50 positive	NA	Home testing application  CalApp® app (test cassette reader)
CALcheck Blue™  Buhlmann Laboratories AG (Schonenbuch, Switzerland)	Semi- qualitative IC test	NA	NA	>50 positive	Overall agreement to ELISA: 97.6%; PPV: 92.6%; NPV: 100% *	CALcheck Blue™ has high correlation to quantitative Calprotectin ELISA and Quantum Blue® tests*
Certest Calprotectin Certest Biotec, (Zaragoza, Spain)	Semi- quantitative IC test	Certest	50-200	< 50 negative  >50-100 positive	Sensitivity 83% Specificity 84 % PPV 0.77 NPV 0.89 LR+ 5.3 LR- 0.20 Ref (2)	
Certest calprotectin 50/ 200 Certest Biotec, (Zaragoza, Spain)	Semi – quantitative IC test	Certest	NA	Two cut offs:  > 50 positive  > 200 positive	Sensitivity: > 94% Specificity: > 93% PPV: > 94%	

					NPV: > 93%*	
Calprotectin Turbilatex® Certest Biotec (Zaragoza, Spain)	Turbidimetric assay (quantitative)	NA	20-1500	> 50 positive	Sensitivity 94% Specificity >99%*	
Prevent ID® CalDetect 50/200 Preventis GmbH, (Bensheim, Germany)	Semi-quantitative IC test	PreventID® CalDetect® test device	NA	two different cut-offs (50 and 200) >50 positive >200 High positive	Sensitivity: 96% Specificity: 53% PPV: 0.44 NPV: 0.97 Ref (4)	
Prevent ID® Cal Screen® Preventis GmbH (Bensheim, Germany)	Semi-quantitative IC test	PreventID® CalDetect® test device	NA	>50 positive	Currently in review*	
PreventID® QuantOn Cal Preventis GmbH (Bensheim, Germany)	Quantitative IC test	PreventID® CalDetect® test device	up to 2000	>50 positive	NA	App home test
Biohit Calprotectin ELISA BIOHIT HealthCare Helsinki, Finland	ELISA	BIOHIT Extraction	25-2500	>50 positive	NA	
IDK® Calprotectin ELISA (K 6927) Immundiagnostik (Bensheim, Germany)	ELISA	IDK Extract®	up to 2100	<50 negative 50-100 borderline > 100 positive	NA	
IDK® Calprotectin ELISA (K 6967) Immundiagnostik (Bensheim, Germany)	ELISA	IDK Extract®	NA	<50 negative 50-100 borderline > 100 positive	NA	<b>1-point-calibration</b>
RIDASCREEN® Calprotectin R-Biopharm (Darmstadt, Germany)	ELISA	RIDA® TUBE Calprotectin	19,5-800	>50 positive (can be used for children aged from 4 to 17 years)	Sensitivity: 74% Specificity: 84% Ref (3)	

					Sensitivity: 88% Specificity: 78% PPV: 79% NPV: 87% Ref (5)	
Calprotectina test Francisco Soria Melguizo, S.A. (Madrid, Spain)	Qualitative IC test	Francisco Soria Melguizo	NA	>50 positive	>94% and 93% correlation in sensitivity and specificity, respectively, compared to other market immunoassays*	
Fecal Calprotectin ELISA kit (HK382) Hycult®Biotech, (Uden, The Netherlands)	ELISA	Fecal extraction buffer Or Roche Fecal Sample Preparation kit	16-625 (range I; 50xsample solution) 48-1875 (range II; 150xsample solution)	>50 positive	NA	
LIAISON® Calprotectin DiaSorin S.p.A. (Saluggia, Italy)	CLIA	LIAISON® Calprotectin in Stool Extraction Device	5-800	>50 positive	Sensitivity: 87.5% Specificity: 66.6 PPV 0.5 NPV 0.93 Ref (8)	
EpiTuub®Rapid Test System Epitope Diagnostics, Inc (San Diego, USA)	Qualitative IC test	NA	NA	>50 positive	NA	Distributed mainly in US
EDI™ Quantitative Fecal Calprotectin ELISA (KT-849) Epitope Diagnostics, Inc (San Diego, USA)	ELISA	KT-843 Calprotectin in Sample Collection Kit	0 - 2000	>43.2 positive	NA	Distributed mainly in US

CLIA: chemiluminescent immunoassay; EFIA: Enzyme fluoroimmuno assay; PETIA: Particle-enhanced turbidimetric immunoassay; \*: Manufacturer data; NA: not applicable; IC test: immunochromatography rapid test; Ref (1): Radillo O, Pascolo L, Martelossi S, Dal Bo S, Ventura A. Fecal Calprotectin: Diagnostic Accuracy of the Immunochromatographic CalFast Assay in a Pediatric Population; J Clin Lab Anal. 2016 Sep; 30(5):500-5.; Ref(2): Labaere D, Smismans A, Van Olmen A, Christiaens P, D'Haens G, Moons V, Cuyle PJ, Frans J, Bossuyt P. Comparison of six different calprotectin assays for the assessment of inflammatory bowel disease. United European Gastroenterol J. 2014 Feb;2(1):30-7.; Ref(3): Malickova K, Janatková I, Bortlík M, Komárek V, Lukás M.



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TABLE 2- Reference values for fecal calprotectin in healthy children according to age

Author	N of subjects	Age	Median FC (µg/g)	97.5 percentile (µg/g)	Significative differences
Fagerberg 2003	117	4-6y 7-10y 11-14y 15-17y	28 13.6 9.9 14.9	NS	NS
Joshi 2010	132	2-9 y 10-59y >60y	34 22 27	166 51 112	P= 0.004, between 2-9y and the other age groups
Oord 2014	75	1-6m 6m-3y 3-4y	192 47 36	538 214 75	NS
Li 2015	288	1-3m 3-6m 6-9m 9-12m 12-18m	375.2 219.7 123.5 109.5 177.9	962 621 362 398 501	P<0.001 between 1-3m vs 3-6m. and 1-6m vs 6-18m
Zhu 2016	274	1-2y 2-3y 3-4y	96.14 81.48 65.36	447.73* 368.04* 379.33*	P= 0.016 among the three age groups
Song 2016	234	7-12m 13-18m 19-24m 25-30m 31-36m 37-42m	78.5 29 27 27 12.5 12	135 65 55 40 21 21	P<0.01 among the different age groups
Davidson 2017	8676	1-3.9 y 4-17.9 y >18 y	49 40 56	77 62 61	P<0.005 between 1-3.9 y and the other age groups
Roca 2017	174	0-12m 1-<4y >4-12 y	NS	910* 286* 54*	P<0.001 between the older group (>4-12y) and the other groups
Peura 2018	84 (246 evaluations across time)	0m 6m 12m 24m	67 31 19 17	233 615 136 57	

N: number; y: years; m: months; NS: not stated; vs: versus; FC: fecal calprotectin

\* data corresponding to 95 percentile

TABLE 3: Effect of drugs on FC levels

Drug	Effect on FC levels	Observations	References
Lumiracoxib	No effect	No differences with placebo	Ref (1)
Naproxen plus Omeprazole	Increase		Ref (1)
Celecoxib (NSAIDS)	No effect	No differences with placebo	Ref (2)
Omeprazole plus ibuprofen	Increase	No correlation between levels and small bowel mucosal breaks	Ref (2)
Diclofenac	Increase	Adults	Ref (3)
Naproxen	Increase		Ref (4)
Nimesulide	No effect	Due to inhibition of COX- 2	Ref (4)
Aspirin (ASA)	Increase	Low-dose ASA might induce enteropathy and thus fCP increase ,	Ref (5)
Proton pump inhibitors	Increase (adults)  No effect (3-18y)		Ref (6),(7)  Ref (8)

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*Korean J Pediatr.* 2019 Jul 3. doi: 10.3345/kjp.2019.00115.