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Humoral response after mRNA COVID-19 primary vaccination and single booster dose in people living with HIV compared to controls: A French nationwide multicenter cohort study—ANRS0001s COV-POPART

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ABSTRACT

Background: This study aimed to compare the humoral responses to mRNA COVID-19 vaccination in people living with HIV (PWH) and HIV-negative individuals.

Methods: We included PWH with an undetectable viral load under ART and HIV-negative participants from the French nationwide ANRS COV-POPART cohort who had received two doses of vaccine as a primary vaccination. We compared humoral response between controls and PWH, stratified by CD4 cell count ($<200/\text{mm}^3$ and $\geq 200/\text{mm}^3$ CD4 cell counts) at 1, 6, and 12 months after primary vaccination.

Results: A total of 1776 participants were included in this analysis, 684 PWH (99% were on ART, median CD4 counts $673 \text{ cells}/\text{mm}^3$) and 1092 controls. At 1 month, after adjustment on age, sex, and BMI, PWH had lower seroneutralization titers than controls, and PWH with $<200 \text{ CD4 cell}/\text{mm}^3$ had lower anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies. Same results were found at 6 months. However, in participants who received a booster dose between 6 and 12 months postprimary vaccination, we did not observe differences between PWH and controls at 12 months.

Conclusion: PWH had high responses to primary mRNA COVID-19 vaccination. In those who received a booster dose after 6 months, the humoral response at 12 months increased to similar levels to controls, even in those with low CD4 counts at baseline.

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Introduction

People living with HIV (PWH) are historically considered to have a lower and shorter response to vaccines compared to HIV-negative individuals [1,2]. These findings have led to recommendations for the use of vaccine regimens with higher antigen doses or adjuvants, exemplified by the recommendations for enhanced hepatitis B vaccination [3–6].

Besides known factors such as age and sex, markers of immunosuppression such as the nadir of CD4 T cell counts, CD4 T cell counts, and HIV viral load at vaccination, are the main predictive factors of vaccine response in PWH [7,8].

In the era of broad access to combined antiretroviral therapies (ART) and high compliance to ART in high-income countries, there is still uncertainty on differences in vaccine response between PWH and HIV-negative people. As an example, recent studies in PWH with CD4 cell counts above $350/\text{mm}^3$, and undetectable HIV-RNA showed similar 1 and 5-year immunogenicity following Yellow fever vaccination compared to healthy controls [9]. Recent meta-analyses showed that short-term immunogenicity following the COVID-19 vaccine primary series is slightly lower in PWH than controls, especially those with lower CD4 cell counts [8,10].

In France, the COVID-19 pandemic provided the opportunity to vaccinate a high portion of PWH, who were initially deemed to be at risk of severe forms of COVID-19, along with the general population. Both groups received the same vaccines and vaccination schedules, primarily consisting of mRNA COVID-19 vaccines.

We aimed to (i) compare the humoral response in PWH with suppressed HIV viral load with HIV-negative controls 1 and 6 months after mRNA COVID-19 primary two-dose vaccination, and at 12 months in those who received one mRNA vaccine booster dose, (ii) compare the neutralizing activity against variants of concern in a subset of PWH and HIV-negative controls.

Methods

Study design

ANRS0001S-COV-POPART (NCT04824651) is a multicenter prospective cohort study conducted in France, assessing the humoral immune response to COVID-19 vaccination in 11 specific populations and a control group. Participants from the ANRS0001S COV-POPART were included between March 25, 2021, and December 31, 2021, and followed for 24 months. The study design is fur-

ther described in Supplementary Materials (Methods/Description of the ANRS0001S COV-POPART cohort) and previous publications [11,12].

In this study, we present the results of the cohort for up to 12 months.

Participants

In this study, we included PWH and HIV-negative control participants who received two doses of mRNA COVID-19 vaccines (BNT162b2 or mRNA-1273) 4 weeks apart as a primary vaccination, and whose antibody responses at 1 month after the second dose were available.

PWH with detectable HIV-RNA or other chronic conditions (e.g., diabetes mellitus, obesity, or immunosuppression [solid cancer, solid organ transplant]) known to impact the vaccine response [13] were excluded. The details on the chronic conditions are displayed in Supplementary Table 1.

Participants with COVID-19 infection defined as positive SARS-CoV-2 anti-nucleocapsid (NCP) antibodies or virologically confirmed COVID-19 before vaccination were excluded from the primary analyses. SARS-CoV-2 NCP antibodies were tested at each visit. Those with COVID-19 (virologically confirmed COVID-19 or positive NCP antibodies) during the follow-up were excluded from the subsequent analysis to describe vaccine-induced responses only. Complementary results, including these participants are presented in Supplementary Table 2.

Samples collection and laboratory assays

Serum samples were collected at inclusion and 1-, 6- and 12-months postsecond dose of COVID-19 vaccination. The samples analyzed as part of the study were managed and stored within the “Biobanque ANRS” before being sent for serological analyses to the “Unité des virus émergents” (Aix-Marseille Université, Institut de Recherche pour le Développement 190, Inserm 1207, Institut Hospitalo-Universitaire Méditerranée Infection—Marseille, France). Details on laboratory assays are available in Supplementary Materials (Methods/Laboratory Assay).

Outcomes

The main outcomes, compared between PWH and controls, were the raw percentage of responders (positive anti-Spike SARS-

CoV-2 IgG antibodies [ELISA], as defined by EuroImmun serology), geometric mean titers of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies expressed in BAU/mL, and anti-SARS-CoV-2 specific neutralizing antibodies (nAbs) (*in vitro* neutralization assay for the original SARS-CoV-2 strain) at 1 month (21–56 days), at 6 months (+/–30 days) and at 12 months (+/–30 days) after the second dose of the primary vaccination regimen in those who received a vaccine booster dose after 6 months. Seroneutralization was performed only in participants with positive anti-Spike or anti-RBD SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies. For undetectable antibodies, half of the detection cut-off was imputed (i.e., 17.6 BAU/mL for anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and a titer of 10 for seroneutralization antibodies).

Proportions of responders and geometric mean titers of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and anti-SARS-CoV-2-specific nAbs were estimated according to CD4 cells count (<200/mm³ and ≥200/mm³ CD4 cell count) in PWH, at 1 and 6 months after primary vaccination and at 12 months after primary vaccination in those who received a booster after 6 months.

In vitro neutralization assays for the original SARS-CoV-2 strain and Delta and Omicron BA.1 variant were assessed in a subset of PWH and controls (the first 50 participants included in each group and having a positive serology [Spike or RBD] 1 month after the second dose).

Statistical analyses

The proportions of responders and their 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) were estimated using the Wilson score. The geometric mean of antibody titers and their 95% CI were estimated using a Student distribution. Humoral responses were compared between PWH and controls at 1, 6, and at 12 months only in those who received an mRNA booster dose after the 6-month visit using chi-square tests and Student's *t*-tests on log-transformed values of antibody titers.

Furthermore, we assessed the humoral response at 1 month following primary vaccination in PWH and controls using linear regression models. Separate models were used for anti-Spike and seroneutralization antibodies. The following variables were included in the models: a qualitative variable with 3 modalities (<200 CD4 cells/mm³, ≥200 cells/mm³, controls) an indicator variable allowing to compare controls with PWH with <200 CD4 cells/mm³, and those with ≥200 cells/mm³, sex (M/F), age (in years), BMI (underweight, normal, overweight) allowing for an adjusted comparison between PWH and controls. The response variables were log-transformed to respect underlying model assumptions. Model predictions were used to plot antibody titers by PWH CD4 groups and controls and by age for men and women separately in those with normal BMI. All statistical analyses were conducted with SAS (version 9.4).

Ethics

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before enrollment, taking into account the GDPR (European Union General Data Protection Regulation) requirements. The protocol (N° EudraCT/ID-RCB: 2021-A00348-33) was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the French law for research involving human subjects (known as Loi Jardé). The protocol was approved by Ethics Committees: the Committee for protection of persons engaged in Research “CPP Nord-Ouest IV” (file number: 21.02.12.47147) and the National Commission for Data Protection “CNIL” (Commission Nationale Informatique et Liberté, authorization number 921111v1).

Results

Characteristics of participants

Overall, 1776 participants were included in this analysis, 684 PWH, and 1092 controls (Figure 1). The median age was 51.2 years (interquartile range: 40.9–59.1) and 1061 (59.7%) were male. PWH were older than controls, more frequently males, and had more frequently CRP levels above the threshold limit (Table 1).

Among PWH, 99% were on ART (10 participants were “elite controllers”), and median CD4 count was 673 (496–856) cells/mm³. Participants in both groups mainly received (*n* = 1629, 92%) two doses of BNT162b2 as the primary vaccination.

Raw humoral response at 1 month in PWH and controls

The percentage of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibody responders at 1 month after the second dose of COVID-19 vaccine was lower in PWH than in controls (98.98% [97.9; 99.5] vs 99.91% [99.5; 99.9], *P* = 0.0066). Only seven PWH were nonresponders, 5 of whom had a CD4 cell count below 200/mm³ (characteristics of the nonresponders are displayed in Supplementary Table 3).

Geometric means titers of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and anti-SARS-CoV-2-specific nAbs for the original SARS-CoV-2 strain were lower in PWH than in controls (1064.4, 95% CI [989.9–1144.6] vs 1500.3 95% CI [1435.8–1567.7], *P* ≤ 0.0001 and 162.1 95% CI [147.8–177.9] vs 336.0 95% CI [315.7–357.7], *P* ≤ 0.0001, respectively).

Among the 18 PWH with less than 200 CD4 cells/mm³, 5 (27.8%) had negative anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and 1 (7.7%) had positive anti-Spike antibodies but negative seroneutralization titers (vs 0.3% and 1.1% in those with ≥200/mm³).

Impact of baseline CD4 T cell count in humoral response to two doses of COVID-19 vaccines in PWH

After adjustment for age, sex, and BMI, anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies were similar to those of controls in PWH with CD4/mm³ cell counts above 200. Conversely, PWH with a CD4/mm³ cell count below 200 had a lower level of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies than controls. While serum neutralization titers were higher in controls than in PWH, whatever the CD4 cell count at the time of vaccination, these titers were higher in PWH with a CD4 count >200 compared with those with a count <200 (Figure 2). Furthermore, anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and seroneutralization titers against the original SARS-CoV-2 strain 1 month after the second dose were higher in women and decreased with age in both sexes, both in controls and in PWH. The estimated parameters of the linear regression models are displayed in Supplementary Tables 4 and 5.

Raw humoral response at 6 and 12 months in PWH and controls who received a booster dose after 6 months

At 6 months after the second dose of vaccine, before the booster dose, geometric mean titers of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and anti-SARS-CoV-2-specific nAbs for the original SARS-CoV-2 strain were lower in PWH than in controls (133.3 [123.2–144.1] vs 197.7 [186.2–209.9], *P* ≤ 0.0001 and 43.7 [39.7–48.1] vs 64.9 [59.4–71.1], *P* ≤ 0.0001, respectively) (Figure 3). Titers were slightly but non significantly lower in PWH with CD4 count <200/mm³ compared to PWH with CD4 count >200/mm³ (Figure 4).

Overall, 85% of PWH and 82% of controls received an mRNA booster dose after a median time of 6.2 months (6.0; 6.8) and 6.0

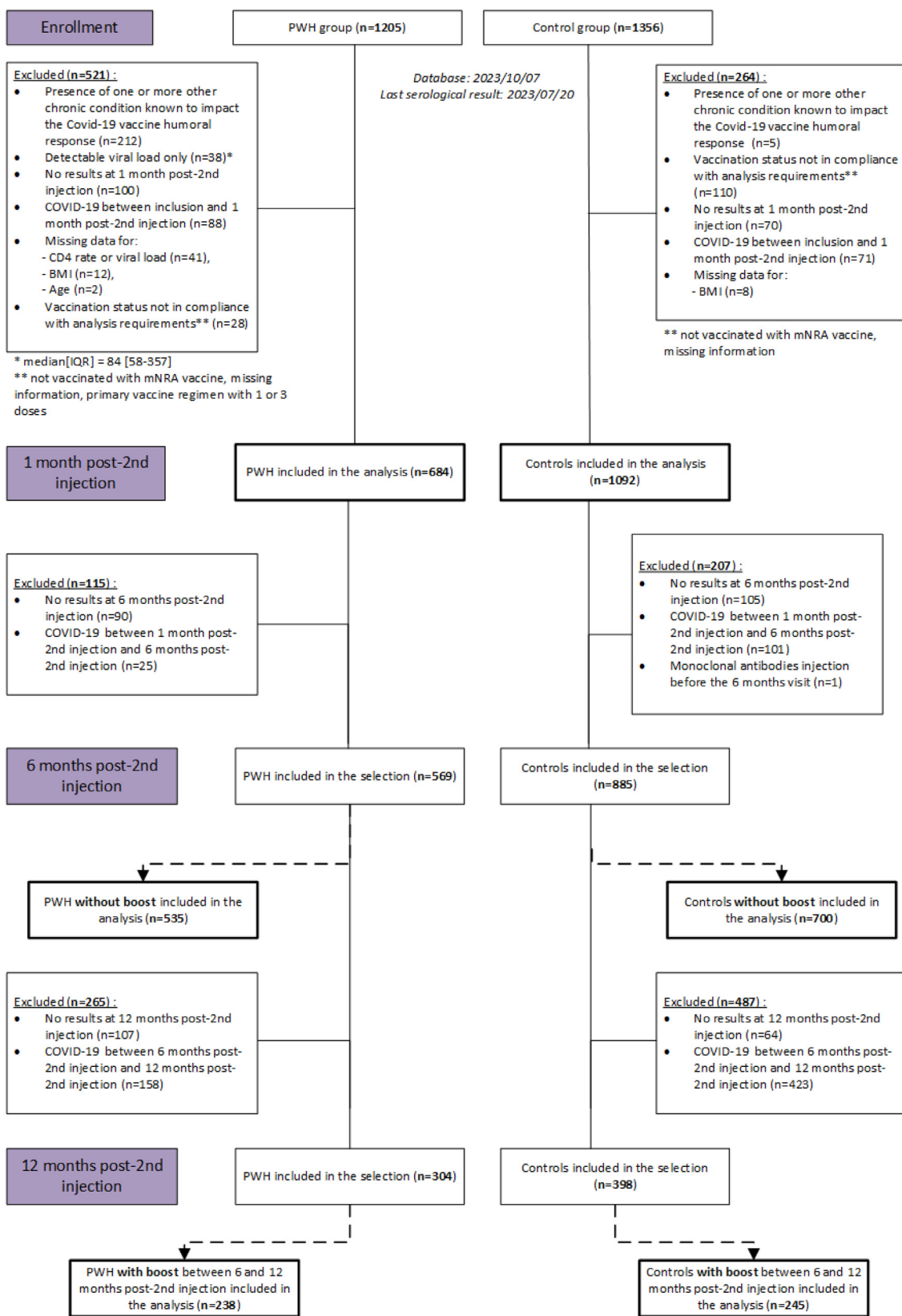


Figure 1. Flowchart of the participants included in the PWH sub-study of the ANRS COV-POPART cohort.

Table 1
Characteristics of PWH and controls included in the PWH sub-study of the ANRS COV-POPART cohort.

Characteristics median (IQR) or n (%)	PWH		Controls	
	N = 684		N = 1092	
Age (years)	55.4	(50.0-60.8)	46.3	(36.3-56.2)
Men	529	(77)	532	(49)
Body mass index	23.8	(21.8-25.8)	23.4	(21.4-25.9)
CDC stage				
A	424	(62)	-	-
B	112	(16)	-	-
C	137	(20)	-	-
NA	11	(2)	-	-
Antiretroviral therapy	674	(99)	-	-
CD4 count at inclusion (cells/mm³)	673	(496-856)	-	-
CD4 count <200 cells/mm³	18	(3)	-	-
C Reactive Protein at inclusion >5 mg/L	62	(9)	49	(5)
Primary vaccination regimen (2 doses)				
BNT162b2 + BNT162b2	645	(94)	984	(90)
mRNA-1273 + mRNA-1273	37	(5)	100	(9)
BNT162b2 + mRNA-1273	1		4	(0.5)
mRNA-1273 + BNT162b2	1		4	(0.5)
Number of days between the two doses of the primary vaccination regimen	28	(28-38.5)	39	(28-42)
Number of participants who received a booster dose	580	(85)	897	(82)
Booster type				
BNT162b2	490	(85)	551	(62)
mRNA-1273	77	(13)	317	(35)
Not available	13	(2)	29	(3)
Number of months between second dose and booster	6.2	(6.0-6.8)	6.0	(5.6-6.2)
Number of months between booster and sample collection at 12 months	6.3	(6.0-6.7)	6.5	(6.1-6.9)

PWH, people living with HIV.

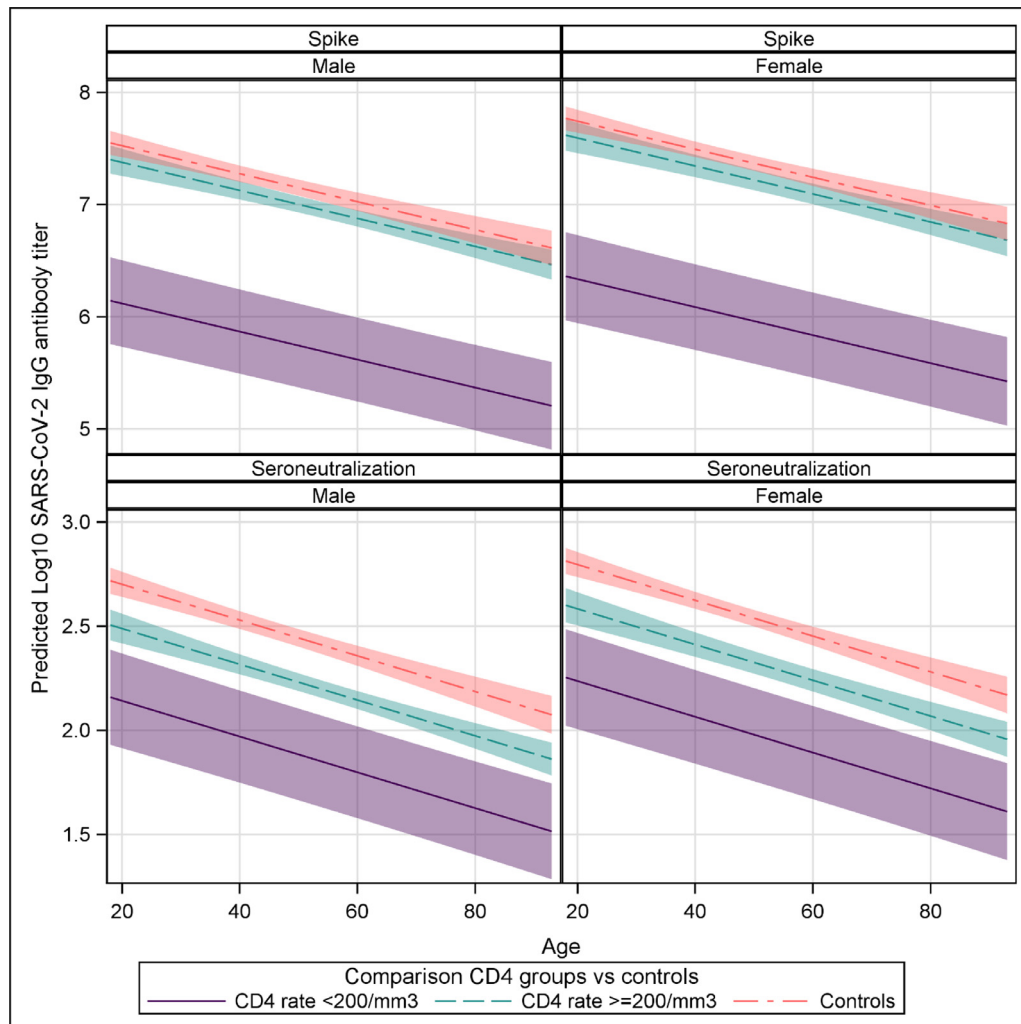


Figure 2. Prediction trends with 95% CI of linear regression analysis for age and sex of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibody titers and seroneutralization (against original strain) at 1 month following mRNA COVID-19 primary vaccination in PWH and controls with normal BMI in the PWH sub-study of the ANRS COV-POPART cohort.

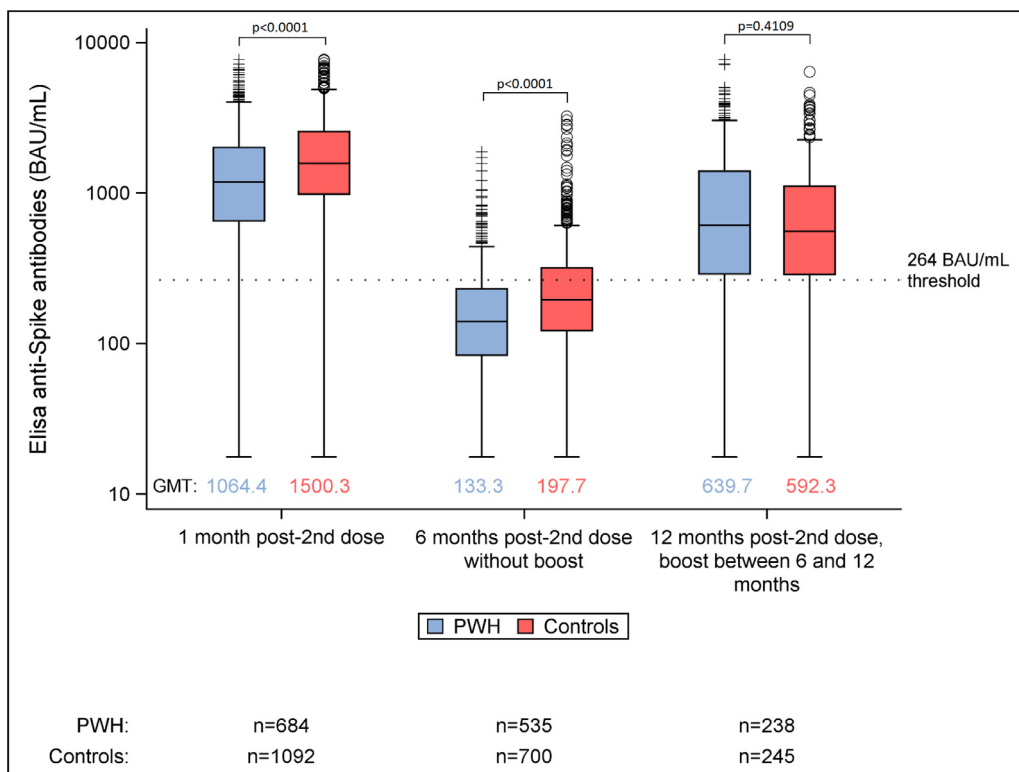


Figure 3. Median (IQR) and geometric mean (GMT) of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibody titers at 1, 6, and 12 months following mRNA COVID-19 primary vaccination in PWH and controls in the PWH sub-study of the ANRS COV-POPART cohort.

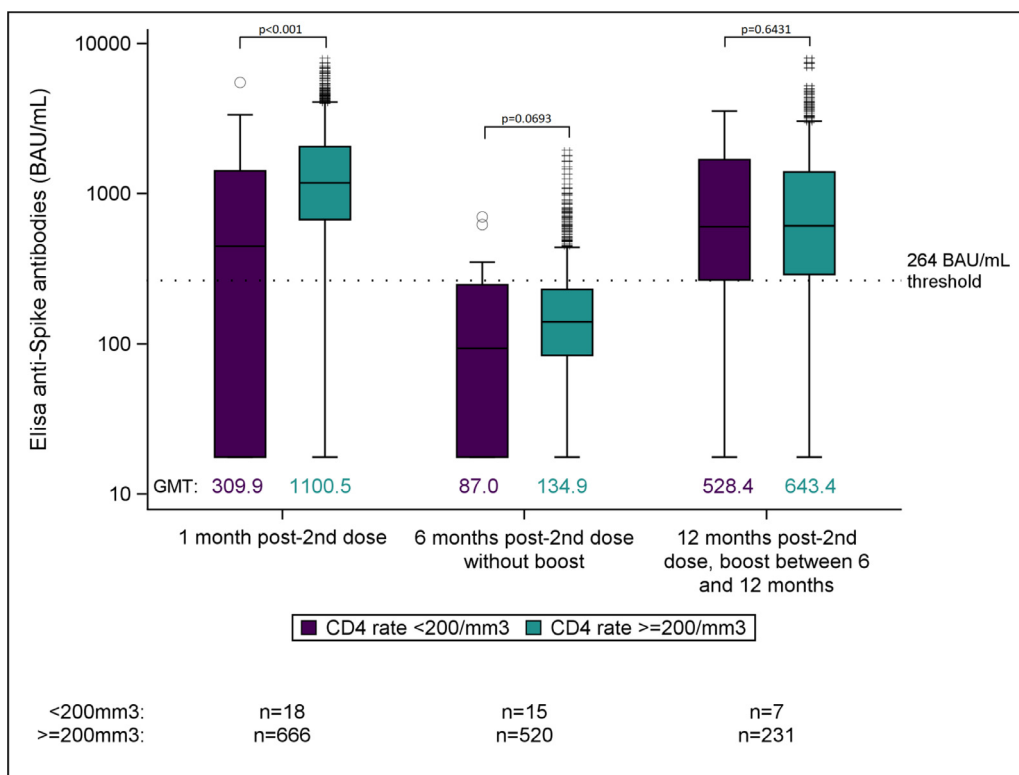


Figure 4. Median (IQR) and geometric mean (GMT) of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibody titers at 1, 6, and 12 months following mRNA COVID-19 primary vaccination in PWH and controls according to CD4 count level at inclusion in the PWH sub-study of the ANRS COV-POPART cohort.

months (5.6; 6.2) after the second dose, respectively. Characteristics of PWH and controls according to the receipt of a booster dose are displayed in Supplementary Tables 6 and 7.

In those who received the booster dose, the levels of anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies at 12-month after the second dose were similar between PWH and controls (639.7 [555.5; 736.6] vs 592.3 [526.2; 666.8] $P = 0.4109$) (Figure 3), whereas nAbs for the original SARS-CoV-2 strain were significantly higher in PWH (384.4 [309.8; 477.0] vs 273.9 [226.6; 331.1] $P = 0.0203$). There was no difference according to the baseline CD4 count level (Figure 4).

We found similar results when including participants with positive SARS-CoV-2 anti-NCP antibodies between inclusion and 12-month visit, with higher levels of anti-Spike antibodies and neutralization titers overall than in participants with negative anti-NCP antibodies (Supplementary Table 2).

Neutralization of Variants/Variants of concern

Compared to controls, PWH had significantly lower nAbs against original and Delta strains and nonsignificantly lower nAbs titers against Omicron BA.1 strain at 1 month (123.7 vs 188.7, $P = 0.0448$; 57.7 vs 99.0, $P = 0.0213$ and 12.4 vs 13.9, $P = 0.3588$) and 6 months after the second vaccine dose (35.0 vs 58.6, $P = 0.0367$; 18.3 vs 25.5, $P = 0.0682$ and 11.2 vs 10.5, $P = 0.3525$).

The booster dose received after 6 months significantly increased the titers of nAbs against original and Delta strains and, to a lesser extent, against Omicron in both groups at 12 months (Supplementary Figure 1).

Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic allowed, for the first time, the assessment of the immunological and clinical responses to a new vaccine platform, mRNA vaccines, in various populations, naïve to previous antigenic stimulation (infection or vaccination) at the time of primary vaccination.

To our knowledge, this is the largest study to date comparing humoral response to COVID-19 mRNA vaccines after both primary and booster vaccination in PWH and controls with standardized and centralized assessment of antibody responses.

Our population was representative of PWH in high-income countries, primarily males with a median age of around 55 years and high rates of viral load control under c-ART. However, in order to have a homogeneous population, we chose to exclude PWH participants with uncontrolled HIV viral load (who represented less than 5% of the PWH participants in the study, and because vaccination should be postponed until control of the viral load in these patients) or harboring other conditions known to negatively impact the humoral response. Participants with confirmed COVID-19 before inclusion or during the follow-up (based on virologically confirmed declared COVID-19 or positive anti-NCP) were excluded from the different analyses in order to assess the humoral response to the vaccine only.

We showed that the percentage of responders to two doses of mRNA COVID-19 vaccines as a primary vaccination in PWH participants was very high (despite a significant but not biologically meaningful small difference). In contrast, the quantitative response was significantly lower for anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and anti-SARS-CoV-2-specific nAbs for the original SARS-CoV-2 strain compared to controls.

The model adjusted for age, sex, BMI, and CD4 count confirmed that PWH had lower levels of neutralization titers than controls, especially in those with CD4 counts below 200/mm³. This implies the assessment of intensified vaccination protocols to improve the humoral response of people with low CD4 counts who need vaccination without waiting for CD4 restoration.

Advanced age and male sex predicted lower neutralization response in both PWH and controls, per the literature in both COVID-19 [14] and other existing vaccines [15,16].

Our results confirm results from a recent meta-analysis showing that PWH demonstrates reduced seroconversion and neutralization responses after primary vaccination when compared with controls and appear to experience more breakthrough infections, especially in the context of lower CD4⁺ T-cell counts [8,17,18].

Interestingly, receiving a booster dose on average 6 months after the end of the primary vaccination regimen increased both anti-Spike SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies and anti-SARS-CoV-2-specific nAbs at 12 months to similar or significantly higher levels compared to controls, even in those with CD4 counts below 200/mm³ at inclusion. Of note, only 7 PWH with CD4 counts <200 were included in the comparison at month 12.

Our results are in line with other studies on the benefit of a booster dose on immunogenicity in PWH [19–21] including those with low CD4 count [22]. However, these studies had a limited postbooster follow-up (4–8 weeks) except for the study by Heftdal et al., [23] which had a follow-up until 11 months after the first booster (third dose) and showed similar antibody concentrations and cellular response between PWH and controls. Our data on a large sample of PWH compared to a control group with centralized and standardized analyses and measurements of nAbs add information on the extended benefit (up to 6 months) of this booster dose.

This underlines the fact that PWH generally benefits from booster doses and is in line with what has been showed with the sub-optimal immunological response to standard HBV vaccination and the waning of hepatitis B immunity in PWH [24].

Without a clearly defined correlate of protection, it is impossible to assess whether these biological differences are clinically relevant.

The main limitations of the work are the lack of data on cellular response and clinical efficacy. This will be addressed in the future, as data collected from participants in the COV-POPART study will be linked to the French nationwide healthcare data system (<https://www.health-data-hub.fr/>), so that the humoral response of PWH participants will be correlated to clinical efficacy on COVID-19 related deaths and hospitalizations. Strengths of this multicentric study include its large sample of PWH, the use of a control group, the standardized timeline of assessment, and the standardized centralized analyses of the results.

In conclusion, these results show that PWH receiving ART and with an undetectable viral load have a good response rate but an overall lower quantitative humoral response 1 month after receiving two doses of COVID-19 mRNA vaccines than controls. CD4 count below 200/mm³, age, and male sex negatively impacted this response. A first booster dose 6 months after the primary vaccination durably increased this response to levels similar to those observed in controls at 12 months.

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Author Contributions

PL and LW drafted the first version of the manuscript; PL and LW designed the study and interpreted the data. LW and AF did all analyses and are guaranties for the analyses. Data was acquired by PL, OL, JDL, AM, AP, BD, CC, DC, DR, DZ, EB, EH, FG, FL, KL, MH, ML, SJ, VD, VP, ZM and the COV-POPART study group. OL, LW, JDL, AF,

XDL, ET, JL, MB, AM, AP, BD, CC, DC, DR, DZ, EB, EH, FG, FL, KL, MH, ML, SJ, VD, VP, ZM, critically revised the manuscript. All members of the COV-POPART writing group and study group were involved in the review of the final manuscript.

Declarations of competing interest

PL has received payment or honoraria for lectures, presentations, speakers bureau, manuscript writing, or educational events from AstraZeneca, GlaxoSmithKline, Janssen, Moderna, Merck Sharp & Dohme, Pfizer, Sanofi Pasteur, Seqirus. KL has received payment or honoraria for lectures, presentations or educational events from GlaxoSmithKline, Moderna, Merck Sharp & Dohme, Gilead. ZM has received payment or honoraria for lectures and presentations from Sanofi Pasteur, GlaxoSmithKline, Merck Sharp & Dohme, Pfizer. VP has received honoraria for lectures and presentations from Moderna. OL has received payment or honoraria for lectures, presentations, speakers bureau, or educational events from Sanofi Pasteur; Pfizer, Janssen, Moderna, Merck Sharp & Dohme, Seqirus and grants from Sanofi Pasteur; Pfizer, Janssen, GlaxoSmithKline, Moderna. The other authors declare having no conflict of interest.

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Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at [doi:10.1016/j.ijid.2024.107110](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijid.2024.107110).

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