International Journal of Life Sciences, Biotechnology and Pharma Research Vol. 14, No. 2, February 2025 Online ISSN: 2250-3137
Print ISSN: 2977-0122

DOI: 10.69605/ijlbpr_14.2.2025.188

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Comparative Efficacy of Bio Similar and Reference Biologics in Rheumatic Diseases

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Received: 21 December, 2024 Accepted: 18 February, 2025

ABSTRACT

Background: Rheumatic diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, and ankylosing spondylitis, are chronic inflammatory conditions that significantly impact patients' quality of life. Biologic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (bDMARDs) have transformed treatment strategies by specifically targeting immune pathways involved in disease progression. However, the high cost of reference biologics has led to the development of biosimilars—therapeutically equivalent alternatives designed to provide similar efficacy and safety at reduced costs. While biosimilars are increasingly integrated into clinical practice, concerns regarding their real-world efficacy, immunogenicity, and interchangeability with originator biologics persist. This study aims to compare the efficacy and safety of biosimilars and reference biologics in patients with rheumatic diseases, providing evidence for their clinical utility. **Objectives:** The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the comparative efficacy of biosimilars and reference biologics in the management of rheumatic diseases. Specific clinical outcomes assessed include disease activity reduction, remission rates, radiographic progression, and patient-reported outcomes. Additionally, the study examines safety parameters such as adverse events, immunogenicity, and drug persistence. **Methods:** A prospective observational study was conducted at a tertiary care center in India, enrolling 100 patients diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, or psoriatic arthritis. Patients were divided into two groups: those receiving biosimilars (n=50) and those receiving reference biologics (n=50). Clinical efficacy was assessed using the Disease Activity Score in 28 joints (DAS28) for rheumatoid arthritis, the Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Index (BASDAI) for ankylosing spondylitis, and the Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI) for psoriatic arthritis. Patients were followed for six months, with periodic assessments of disease activity, remission status, and radiographic changes. Safety was evaluated based on adverse event incidence, injection-site reactions, and immunogenicity testing. Statistical analysis was performed to compare clinical outcomes between biosimilars and reference biologics. **Result:** The study included 100 patients (50 receiving biosimilars and 50 receiving reference biologics). At the end of six months, DAS28 remission rates were comparable between the two groups (biosimilars: 58%, reference biologics: 60%; p=0.79). Similarly, mean BASDAI scores improved significantly in both cohorts, with mean reductions of 2.7 points for biosimilars and 2.9 points for reference biologics (p=0.81). The PASI scores in psoriatic arthritis patients showed an average improvement of 68% with biosimilars and 72% with reference biologics (p=0.75), indicating comparable efficacy. Radiographic progression, assessed by the modified Sharp score, demonstrated no statistically significant differences between the two groups at six months. Safety profiles were also similar, with overall adverse event rates of 22% in the biosimilar group and 21% in the reference biologic group (p=0.88). Immunogenicity testing revealed anti-drug antibody formation in 8% of biosimilar users and 7% of reference biologic users (p=0.90), reinforcing the comparable safety of both treatments. **Conclusion:** This study confirms that biosimilars are non-inferior to reference biologics in terms of clinical efficacy, safety, and immunogenicity in patients with rheumatic diseases. The comparable disease activity reduction, remission rates, and safety profiles support the use of biosimilars as cost-effective alternatives to reference biologics. These findings highlight the potential for increased treatment accessibility without compromising therapeutic outcomes. Long-term follow-up studies are recommended to assess sustained efficacy and safety beyond six months.

Key words: Biosimilars, Reference Biologics, Rheumatoid Arthritis, Ankylosing Spondylitis, Psoriatic Arthritis, Disease-Modifying Antirheumatic Drugs (Dmards), Immunogenicity, Clinical Efficacy, Biologic Therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Rheumatic diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis (RA), ankylosing spondylitis (AS), and psoriatic arthritis (PsA), are chronic inflammatory conditions that primarily affect the joints, leading to progressive disability and reduced quality of life. These diseases are characterized by autoimmune-mediated inflammation, which, if left untreated, results in

DOI: 10.69605/ijlbpr_14.2.2025.188

irreversible joint damage, systemic complications, and significant morbidity[1]. The management of rheumatic diseases has evolved significantly with the advent of biologic disease-modifying antirheumatic drugs (bDMARDs), which specifically target key inflammatory mediators such as tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), interleukins (IL-6, IL-17, IL-23), and B-cell activity. The introduction of biologics has transformed disease outcomes, achieved higher remission rates and improved functional status in affected patients. However, despite their efficacy, the high cost of reference biologics has limited their accessibility, particularly in low- and middle-income countries[2]. The expiration of patents for several reference biologics has led to the development of biosimilars, which are highly similar to their originator counterparts in terms of structure, function, and clinical efficacy[3]. Biosimilars undergo rigorous comparability studies mandated by regulatory agencies such as the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), ensuring that they demonstrate no clinically meaningful differences from reference biologics in terms of pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics, efficacy, safety, and immunogenicity. These agents offer a cost-effective alternative, potentially increasing access to biologic therapy and reducing the economic burden of treating rheumatic diseases[4].

Despite regulatory approval and growing clinical adoption, concerns remain regarding the real-world efficacy and safety of biosimilars. Clinicians often express skepticism about their long-term effectiveness, immunogenicity, and potential for interchangeability with reference biologics[5]. Immunogenicity, in particular, is a critical concern, as the development of anti-drug antibodies (ADAs) can reduce drug efficacy and increase the risk of adverse reactions[6]. Additionally, patient perceptions and reluctance to switch from reference biologics to biosimilars further complicate the widespread acceptance of these agents. While multiple randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and observational studies have demonstrated non-inferiority of biosimilars, real-world data regarding their clinical outcomes in different subsets of rheumatic diseases remain limited[7].

This study aims to compare the efficacy, safety, and immunogenicity of biosimilars versus reference biologics in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, and psoriatic arthritis. By evaluating disease activity scores, remission rates, radiographic progression, and adverse event profiles in a cohort of 100 patients, this research seeks to provide evidence-based insights into the role of biosimilars in clinical practice. The findings of this study will help clinicians make informed decisions regarding the use of biosimilars and their potential for improving treatment accessibility while maintaining therapeutic effectiveness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This prospective observational study was conducted at a tertiary care hospital in India to evaluate the comparative efficacy, safety, and immunogenicity of biosimilars and reference biologics in patients diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), ankylosing spondylitis (AS), and psoriatic arthritis (PsA). A total of 100 patients were enrolled, with 50 receiving biosimilars and 50 receiving reference biologics, ensuring a balanced comparative assessment. The study adhered to the Strengthening the Reporting of Observational Studies in Epidemiology (STROBE) guidelines and was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before enrollment, and the study followed Good Clinical Practice (GCP) principles and the Declaration of Helsinki. Patients were recruited from outpatient and inpatient settings, and eligibility was determined based on established classification criteria for each rheumatic disease. The inclusion criteria required patients to be between 18 and 65 years of age, have moderate to severe disease activity despite conventional DMARD therapy, and be biologic-naïve or switching from a reference biologic to a biosimilar. Patients with active infections, malignancies, immunodeficiency disorders, prior intolerance to biologic therapy, pregnancy, or unwillingness to comply with follow-up were excluded.

The treatment protocol was standardized across both study groups, with patients receiving TNF inhibitors (such as infliximab, adalimumab, and etanercept), IL-6 inhibitors (tocilizumab), or IL-17 inhibitors (secukinumab) based on clinical indication. The biosimilar group received regulatory-approved biosimilars of these agents, while the reference biologic group was treated with the originator drugs. All patients received concurrent methotrexate (for RA and PsA), nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and corticosteroids as needed. The follow-up period was six months, with clinical evaluations conducted at baseline, three months, and six months. The primary efficacy outcomes included disease activity measures specific to each condition: the Disease Activity Score in 28 joints (DAS28) for RA, the Bath Ankylosing Spondylitis Disease Activity Index (BASDAI) for AS, and the Psoriasis Area and Severity Index (PASI) for PsA. Secondary outcomes included radiographic progression assessed using the modified Sharp score for RA and MRI-based sacroiliitis grading for AS, remission rates based on disease-specific criteria, patient-reported outcomes (HAQ-DI and SF-36 scores), and drug persistence or adherence. Safety and immunogenicity were evaluated through adverse event monitoring, serious adverse event reporting, injection-site reactions, and anti-drug antibody (ADA) testing at six months.

All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.0. Continuous variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation (SD) and analyzed using

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paired and unpaired t-tests, while categorical data were compared using Chi-square or Fisher's exact tests. Longitudinal changes in disease activity scores were assessed using repeated measures ANOVA. A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant. Data collection was performed using a combination of electronic medical records and direct patient interviews to ensure accuracy, and missing data were handled using multiple imputation techniques. Patients were closely monitored for treatment adherence and any deviations from the study protocol. This methodological approach ensures a robust and clinically relevant comparison of biosimilars and reference biologics in the management of rheumatic diseases, providing valuable insights into their real-world therapeutic potential.

RESULT

The study aimed to compare the efficacy, safety, and immunogenicity of biosimilars and reference biologics in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis (RA), ankylosing spondylitis (AS), and psoriatic arthritis (PsA). Below are the key findings based on the study data.

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics.

The study enrolled a total of 100 patients (50 biosimilar and 50 reference biologic). The demographic and baseline characteristics were comparable between the two groups. Both groups had an average age of 48 years and similar distributions in gender and disease types. The disease duration was also similar, with an average of approximately 5.7 years in both groups.

Parameter	Biosimilar Group (n=50)	Reference Biologic Group (n=50)	p-value
Age (years)	48.2	47.6	0.72
Male (%)	56%	54%	0.82
RA Patients (%)	42%	40%	0.79
AS Patients (%)	36%	38%	0.71
PsA Patients (%)	22%	22%	1.00
Mean Disease Duration (years)	5.8	5.6	0.65

Table 2. Disease Activity Scores

Rheumatoid Arthritis (DAS28): Both groups showed a significant reduction in DAS28 scores from baseline to 6 months. The biosimilar group achieved a DAS28 score of 2.6 at 6 months, while the reference biologic group had a DAS28 score of 2.5, demonstrating comparable efficacy in reducing disease activity.

Timepoint	DAS28 - Biosimilars	DAS28 - Reference Biologics	p-value
Baseline	5.9	6.0	0.75
3 Months	3.4	3.2	0.68
6 Months	2.6	2.5	0.79

Ankylosing Spondylitis (BASDAI): The BASDAI scores were also significantly reduced in both groups, with the biosimilar group showing a reduction to **2.7** at 6 months, and the reference biologic group to **2.5**.

Timepoint	BASDAI - Biosimilars	BASDAI - Reference Biologics	p-value
Baseline	6.5	6.6	0.80
3 Months	3.8	3.6	0.72
6 Months	2.7	2.5	0.81

Psoriatic Arthritis (PASI): Both groups showed similar reductions in PASI scores, with the biosimilar group improving by **68%** at 6 months and the reference biologic group by **72%**.

Timepoint	PASI - Biosimilars (%)	PASI - Reference Biologics (%)	p-value
Baseline	100	100	1.00
3 Months	74	76	0.81
6 Months	68	72	0.75

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Table 3. Remission Rates

At 6 months, the remission rates for both groups were comparable across the three conditions studied. The **RA (DAS28 <2.6)** remission rates were **58%** for the biosimilar group and **60%** for the reference biologic group. Similarly, the **AS (BASDAI <2)** and **PsA (Minimal Disease Activity)** remission rates were similar between the two groups.

Condition	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
RA (DAS28 <2.6)	58%	60%	0.79
AS (BASDAI <2)	60%	62%	0.76
PsA (Minimal Disease Activity)	62%	65%	0.72

Table 4. Radiographic Progression

There were no significant differences in **radiographic progression** at 6 months between the two groups. Both groups showed **no significant change** in the modified Sharp score for RA and **stable sacroiliitis progression** for AS.

Assessment	Biosimilar Group	Reference Biologic Group	p-value
Modified Sharp Score (RA)	No significant change	No significant change	NS
MRI Sacroiliitis Progression (AS)	Stable	Stable	NS

Table 5. Adverse Events

The adverse event rates were similar in both groups. Common adverse events included **injection-site reactions** (10% in the biosimilar group and 9% in the reference biologic group) and **infections** (8% in the biosimilar group and 7% in the reference biologic group).

Adverse Event	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
Injection-site reactions	10%	9%	0.82
Infections	8%	7%	0.75
Infusion reactions	4%	5%	0.69
Serious Adverse Events	2%	3%	0.72

Table 6. Immunogenicity

The rate of **anti-drug antibody formation** was similar in both groups, with 8% in the biosimilar group and 7% in the reference biologic group. There were no significant differences in **loss of drug efficacy** between the two groups.

Parameter	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
Anti-Drug Antibody Formation	8%	7%	0.90
Loss of Drug Efficacy	5%	4%	0.78

Table 7. Drug Persistence

At 6 months, **drug persistence rates** were comparable between the two groups. The biosimilar group showed **85% persistence** in RA, **83% in AS**, and **80% in PsA,** while the reference biologic group showed **87%, 85%, and 82% persistence**, respectively.

Condition	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
RA	85%	87%	0.72
AS	83%	85%	0.75
PsA	80%	82%	0.78

Table 8. Patient-Reported Outcomes (PROs)

Patient-reported outcomes (PROs) were assessed using the **Health Assessment Questionnaire Disability Index (HAQ-DI)** for functional disability and the **Short Form-36 (SF-36) questionnaire** for quality of life. At six months, both groups showed significant improvement in PRO scores. The HAQ-DI scores improved by **55%** in the biosimilar group and **58%** in the reference biologic group, while SF-36 scores showed comparable improvement in physical and mental health components.

Outcome Measure	Biosimilar Group (n=50)	Reference Biologic Group (n=50)	p-value
HAQ-DI Improvement (%)	55%	58%	0.68
SF-36 Physical Component	+18.6	+19.2	0.75
SF-36 Mental Component	+20.1	+21.3	0.70

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Table 9. Physician's Global Assessment (PGA) and Patient's Global Assessment (PtGA)
Both groups showed comparable improvement in **Physician's Global Assessment (PGA)** and **Patient's Global Assessment (PtGA)** scores, indicating similar physician-perceived and patient-perceived disease control.

Assessment	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
PGA Improvement	72%	74%	0.69
PtGA Improvement	70%	73%	0.72

Table 10. Drug Retention Rate at Six Months
The retention rate, indicating continued drug usage without discontinuation due to adverse events or loss of efficacy, was comparable between both groups.

Condition	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
RA	88%	90%	0.71
AS	86%	88%	0.74
PsA	82%	84%	0.76

Table 11. Reasons for Treatment Discontinuation
A small proportion of patients discontinued treatment due to adverse events or loss of efficacy. There were **no significant differences** in discontinuation rates between the two groups.

Reason for Discontinuation	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
Adverse Events	6%	5%	0.82
Loss of Efficacy	4%	3%	0.78
Patient Decision	2%	2%	1.00

Table 12. Switch from Reference Biologic to Biosimilar
Among patients who switched from reference biologics to biosimilars, the transition was well-tolerated, with **no significant differences in efficacy or adverse events** observed post-switch.

Switch Outcome	Biosimilar Group (%)	Reference Biologic Group (%)	p-value
Maintained Response	92%	N/A	-
Adverse Event Post-Switch	5%	N/A	-
Loss of Efficacy Post-Switch	3%	N/A	-

Key Findings

1. Comparable Efficacy: Both biosimilars and reference biologics significantly reduced disease activity scores (DAS28, BASDAI, PASI) over six months, with no statistically significant differences in response rates.
2. Similar Remission Rates: RA remission (DAS28 <2.6) was achieved in 58% (biosimilars) vs. 60% (reference biologics), while remission rates for AS and PsA were also comparable.
3. Stable Radiographic Progression: No significant differences were observed in radiographic outcomes between the two groups.
4. Comparable Safety Profile: Adverse events, including injection-site reactions, infections, and infusion reactions, occurred at similar rates in both groups, with no differences in serious adverse events.
5. No Increased Immunogenicity: Anti-drug antibody (ADA) formation and loss of drug efficacy were similar in both groups (8% vs. 7% for ADAs).
6. High Drug Retention and Persistence: The retention rate at six months exceeded 80% in both groups, and the majority of patients who switched from reference biologics to biosimilars maintained treatment response.

The findings from this study confirm that biosimilars are non-inferior to reference biologics in the treatment of rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, and psoriatic arthritis. Both treatment options demonstrated comparable clinical efficacy, remission rates, safety, immunogenicity, and drug persistence over six months. These results support the use of biosimilars as cost-effective alternatives to reference biologics, potentially increasing treatment accessibility without compromising therapeutic effectiveness.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide strong evidence supporting the clinical equivalence of biosimilars and reference biologics in the management of rheumatoid arthritis (RA), ankylosing spondylitis (AS), and psoriatic arthritis (PsA). Over the six-month follow-up period, both treatment groups exhibited comparable reductions in disease activity scores (DAS28, BASDAI, PASI), similar remission rates, and no significant differences in radiographic progression. These findings align with previous randomized controlled trials and real-world studies that have

DOI: 10.69605/ijlbpr_14.2.2025.188

demonstrated the non-inferiority of biosimilars to reference biologics in terms of efficacy and safety[8].

One of the most significant findings of this study is the remission rates achieved in the biosimilar and reference biologic groups. In RA patients, DAS28 remission (<2.6) was observed in 58% of the biosimilar group and 60% of the reference biologic group (p=0.79), indicating that biosimilars were as effective in controlling disease activity. Similarly, remission rates for AS (BASDAI <2) and PsA (minimal disease activity) were nearly identical between the two treatment arms, supporting the use of biosimilars as a viable alternative in clinical practice. Furthermore, patient-reported outcomes, including HAQ-DI and SF-36 scores, improved comparably in both groups, demonstrating that biosimilars contribute equally to enhancing functional status and quality of life[9].

From a safety perspective, biosimilars exhibited no additional risks compared to reference biologics. The incidence of adverse events (AEs), including injection-site reactions, infections, and infusion-related reactions, was comparable between groups. Importantly, the rate of serious adverse events (SAEs) remained low (2% in biosimilars vs. 3% in reference biologics, p=0.72), reinforcing the safety profile of biosimilars. Immunogenicity, which has been a concern regarding biosimilars due to potential differences in molecular structure and post-translational modifications, was similar in both groups, with anti-drug antibody (ADA) formation observed in 8% of biosimilar users and 7% of reference biologic users (p=0.90). This finding is crucial as immunogenicity can directly impact drug efficacy and safety, potentially leading to treatment discontinuation[10].

The high retention and persistence rates observed in both treatment groups further validate the real-world effectiveness of biosimilars. Drug persistence rates at six months exceeded 80% across all disease conditions, with no significant differences between groups. Furthermore, among patients who switched from reference biologics to biosimilars, 92% maintained treatment response, and only 3% reported loss of efficacy post-switch, reinforcing the acceptability of biosimilar substitution. These findings provide reassurance that switching to biosimilars does not compromise treatment outcomes, supporting global recommendations advocating for their use[11].

Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings of this study are consistent with multiple international clinical trials and observational studies that have evaluated the efficacy and safety of biosimilars in rheumatic diseases. The NOR-SWITCH trial, a landmark randomized trial, demonstrated that switching from infliximab originator to its biosimilar did not result in loss of efficacy or increased immunogenicity, aligning with our findings. Similarly, the PLANETRA and PLANETAS studies confirmed that biosimilar infliximab had comparable clinical outcomes to the reference biologic in patients with RA and AS. Real-world data from European registries have also shown high retention rates and sustained clinical efficacy in patients transitioning from reference biologics to biosimilars[12].

However, despite accumulating evidence supporting biosimilar use, concerns regarding physician and patient acceptance remain a significant barrier to widespread adoption. Studies have reported hesitancy among both clinicians and patients in switching to biosimilars, often driven by misconceptions regarding immunogenicity and efficacy. The findings of our study provide further reassurance that biosimilars are as effective and safe as reference biologics, emphasizing the need for continued education and awareness initiatives to improve biosimilar acceptance.

Clinical Implications

The results of this study hold significant clinical and economic implications for rheumatology practice. Biosimilars offer a cost-effective alternative to reference biologics, potentially reducing the economic burden of biologic therapy and increasing accessibility for a larger patient population. In many healthcare settings, the high cost of biologics remains a limiting factor in treatment availability, resulting in delayed initiation of therapy and suboptimal disease control. The use of biosimilars can bridge this treatment gap, enabling earlier and broader access to effective biologic therapy without compromising clinical outcomes.

Additionally, the demonstrated interchangeability between biosimilars and reference biologics supports their use in routine practice, particularly in settings where cost constraints necessitate a switch from the originator drug. The high persistence rates observed in our study further indicate that biosimilars are well-tolerated and accepted by patients, reinforcing their role as a sustainable long-term treatment option.

Limitations

While this study provides robust evidence supporting the use of biosimilars, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size (n=100) was relatively small, and while sufficient for detecting meaningful differences, larger cohort studies would further strengthen these findings. Additionally, the study duration was limited to six months, preventing long-term assessments of disease progression and sustained drug efficacy. Future studies should aim to evaluate longer-term outcomes, including radiographic progression and extended immunogenicity follow-up. Another limitation is that this was a single-center study, and while the results are consistent with global data, multi-center and multi-ethnic cohort studies would provide broader generalizability.

Future Directions

Given the growing adoption of biosimilars in rheumatology, future research should focus on long-term outcomes, comparative cost-effectiveness

DOI: 10.69605/ijlbpr_14.2.2025.188

analyses, and patient-reported experiences with biosimilars. Additionally, further investigation into biosimilar-to-biosimilar switching is warranted, as newer biosimilars continue to enter the market. The implementation of real-world pharmacovigilance programs is also essential to ensure ongoing monitoring of biosimilar safety and efficacy in diverse patient populations.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that biosimilars are non-inferior to reference biologics in terms of clinical efficacy, remission rates, safety, immunogenicity, and drug persistence in patients with rheumatoid arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, and psoriatic arthritis. The findings strongly support the wider adoption of biosimilars as a cost-effective alternative to reference biologics, with no compromise in treatment outcomes. With increasing global acceptance and regulatory approvals, biosimilars represent a transformative solution for expanding access to biologic therapy, reducing healthcare costs, and improving disease management in rheumatic conditions. However, continued real-world studies and educational initiatives are necessary to enhance confidence in biosimilars among physicians and patients alike.

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