

# Novel biomarkers for the early prediction of pediatric cystic echinococcosis post-surgical outcomes

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## 1 Novel biomarkers for the early prediction of pediatric cystic echinococcosis

2 post-surgical outcomes

3 **Running title: Early biomarkers to predict CE post-surgical outcomes** 

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- 42 Declarations of interest: none

#### 43 Summary

Objective: This study aims to search for reliable serological biomarkers allowing the
 early prediction of cystic echinococcosis (CE) post-operative outcomes.

Methods: We applied immunoprecipitation (IP) of Echinococcus granulosus 46 protoscolex antigens with pediatric CE patients' plasma collected at 1-month and 1-47 year post-surgery, followed by Liquid Chromatography with tandem mass 48 spectrometry (LC-MS/MS). We compared IP proteomic content from relapsed 49 patients within the first-year post-surgery (RCE) to cases with no relapses until 3 50 post-operative years (NRCE). Selected proteins were recombinantly synthesized and 51 assessed for their prognostic performance by Enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay 52 (ELISA). 53

**Results**: A total of 305 immunoreactive parasitic proteins were identified, 59 of which 54 were significantly more abundant in RCE than NRCE for both time-points. Four 55 proteins showed the most promising characteristics for predicting CE outcomes: 56 cytoplasmic malate dehydrogenase (Eg-cMDH), citrate synthase (Eg-CS), Annexin 57 A6 and severin. ELISA-IgG against the four markers were significantly lower at 1-58 year post-surgery than 1-month in NRCE, in contrast to RCE that displayed either 59 stable or higher levels. The Eg-cMDH and Eg-CS showed the best prognostic 60 performance, with respective probabilities of being "relapse-free" of 83% and 81%, if 61 a decrease of IgG levels occurred between 1-month and 1-year post-surgery. 62

Conclusion: The Eg-cMDH and Eg-CS are promising biomarkers to predict early CE
 post-surgical outcomes.

Keywords: predictive biomarkers, serological follow-up, cystic echinococcosis, post surgical outcomes, pediatric patients, proteomics, ELISA.

#### 67 Introduction

Cystic echinococcosis (CE) is a neglected helminthic zoonosis caused by the larval 68 stage of the tapeworm Echinococcus granulosus sensu lato (E. granulosus). The 69 70 parasitic life cycle comprises a definitive host (canids) harboring *E. granulosus* adult tapeworms and an intermediate host (herbi- or omnivores) where the metacestode 71 develops after ingestion of eggs shed in the definitive host's faeces. Humans become 72 73 accidentally infected following the consumption of food and/or water contaminated with parasite eggs or through close contact with soiled surfaces or animals. Viable 74 eggs hatch in the stomach and small intestine, releasing oncospheres which 75 penetrate the gut wall, travel via blood or lymph to finally reach internal organs and 76 develop into hydatid cyst. Months to years post-infection, these cysts internally 77 produce parasite forms called protoscoleces, which are infectious for new definitive 78 hosts [1]. Most CE cases remain asymptomatic for a long time period, and can be 79 incidentally disclosed upon imaging investigations requested for unrelated complaints 80 [2]. Despite global efforts, CE continues to be a serious public health burden 81 worldwide [3]. One key feature that marks the post-surgical period of CE-treated 82 cases is the high rates of relapses [4]. Up till now, the follow-up of CE primarily relied 83 84 on imaging [5]. Serology plays a complementary role, but could be extremely useful, particularly in areas where access to imaging facilities is difficult [4]. Serological tests 85 are mainly based on the detection of antibodies against the hydatid fluid, or native 86 and recombinant antigens derived from E. granulosus [4], but performance is 87 hampered either by the relatively low number of responsive patients, the long-term 88 persistence of anti-hydatid fluid antibodies after effective clinical cure or limited value 89 for detecting recurrences [6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12]. Other markers, such as cytokines 90 [13], parasite-derived circulating DNA [14] and Micro-RNAs [15] are promising but 91

pitfalls related to test standardization and potential cross-reactivity were highlighted.
Thus, there is an urgent need for the identification of novel parasite-specific
biomarkers with enhanced sensitivity for predicting CE post-surgical development
and suitable for routine application in the underprivileged endemic areas.

Previous studies on the *E. granulosus* proteome have shown that protoscolex proteins are highly immunogenic [16, 17]. The protoscolex is an interesting sample to investigate since it could be studied with minimal host protein contamination and, although not the infective form for humans, it can generate a hydatid cyst when released in a tissue site [18]. Indeed, secondary cysts usually develop after accidental spillage of protoscoleces during the surgical procedure, which is the most frequent reason for CE post-operative relapses [2].

103 The aim of this study was to develop a simple serological test for the early prediction of CE post-surgical outcomes. Hence, we first developed a proteomic approach 104 105 based on immunoprecipitation (IP) of protoscolex antigens followed by LC-MS/MS 106 analysis, then we (i) compared the protein content of IP-eluates obtained with plasma of pediatric CE patients relapsing within the first-year post-surgery versus patients 107 with no detectable relapses after 3.5 post-operative years (ii); subsequently we 108 selected and produced 4 recombinant proteins particularly interesting to predict the 109 occurrence of CE relapses, and finally (iii) we developed an ELISA to assess its 110 predictive value for human CE post-surgical outcomes. 111

- 112 Materials and Methods
- 113 Echinococcus granulosus proteins

*E. granulosus* protoscolex soluble and membrane antigenic extracts (PSMAs) were obtained after collection of protoscoleces from infected livers of freshly slaughtered sheep (G1 genotype), as previously described [10].

#### 117 Plasma specimens

For proteomic analyses, 20 plasma samples were collected from 10 Tunisian 118 pediatric CE-confirmed patients aged from 6 to 16 years (thus 2 temporally different 119 plasma samples per patient). All cases had CE1 active cysts, according to the current 120 WHO-IWGE (Informal Working Group on Echinococcosis) classification system, and 121 at least one pulmonary location [19]. All cysts were surgically removed from all 122 patients. Blood specimens were obtained from each patient at 1-month (1M) and 1-123 year (1Y) post-surgery. Based on the respective post-operative clinical development, 124 patients were clustered into two groups: patients with no relapses detectable after 3.5 125 years post-surgery (Non-relapsed (NRCE); n = 5). The 5 other patients showed 126 127 radiological evidence of relapse within the first post-surgical year (Relapsed (RCE); n = 5). An additional post-operative albendazole medication was prescribed for 3/5 and 128 2/5 of NRCE and RCE, respectively. 129

For assessing the ELISA predictive performance, the same plasma collection was 130 used as described in our two previous studies [9, 10]. Briefly, 153 plasma samples 131 were collected from 51 CE-surgically treated young patients who were categorized to 132 NRCE (n = 34) and RCE (n = 17) based on the above-mentioned criteria (15/34 and 133 2/17 NRCE and RCE patients, respectively, received a post-operative prophylactic 134 medication with albendazole). Specimens were collected at 3 time-points: pre-135 operatively (D0), 1M, and 1Y post-surgery. With regards to cyst stages, CE1 was the 136 most representative, detected in 27 and 16 NRCE and RCE patients, respectively, 3 137 NRCE had a unique CE2 cyst and 4 had CE3a cysts. The latter stage was observed 138

only in one RCE patient. Diagnosis, surgical treatment, and follow-up of young
patients were carried out at the Pediatric Surgery Department of Fattouma-Bourguiba
Hospital, Monastir, Tunisia. The negative control consisted of a human plasma pool
collected from 18 healthy blood donors. This study was approved by the Ethics
committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Monastir, Tunisia (Acceptance Report IORG
0009738 N°22/OMB 0990-0279).

#### 145 **Immunoprecipitation (IP)**

IP was performed using the Dynabeads<sup>™</sup> Protein G Kit (ThermoFisher Scientific) 146 according to the manufacturer's instructions. A total of 21 IP reactions were 147 performed, 20 reactions with plasma from the 10 CE pediatric patients (as described 148 in the previous section) and 1 reaction with the pool of controls. Briefly, magnetic 149 beads were incubated with plasma samples to coat antibodies. After 3 washings, 150 PSMAs sample was incubated to catch only immunoreactive proteins. A final elution 151 152 step permitted the obtention of the target antibody-antigen complex (see Supplementary Methods). IP eluates were treated under reducing conditions and 153 separated by SDS-PAGE. Gel bands were then excised for LC-MS/MS analyses. 154

## 155 Mass spectrometry and proteins' selection strategy

Briefly, the gel pieces were destained, subjected to standard tryptic "in-gel digestion" 156 and then analyzed by LC-MS/MS. Proteins identification was performed on XTandem 157 Pipeline [20]. The False Discovery Rate (FDR) levels were estimated to 0.6% for 158 peptides and 0.0% for proteins using Xtandem "include reverse" option. The protein 159 quantification was determined after analysis of the total number of tandem mass 160 spectra (SN). The mass spectrometry proteomics data have been deposited to the 161 ProteomeXchange Consortium via the PRIDE [21] partner repository with the dataset 162 identifier PXD028301. More details are provided in supplementary methods. 163

We applied a selection strategy to search for candidate proteins most useful for the 164 prediction of CE outcomes as follows: Firstly, after eliminating proteins identified with 165 less than 5 spectra and with a foldchange less than 1.5, heat was performed using 166 heatmap.2 from ggplots with Euclidean distance. Secondly, clustering was performed 167 using sota from clValid [22]. The proteins were quantified after analyzing the total 168 number of tandem mass spectra per sample. This spectral counting (SC) has been 169 based on a comparative approach between NRCE versus RCE groups and 1M 170 samples versus 1Y specimens. To identify proteins showing a significant modification 171 of abundance, we performed a generalized linear model and selected proteins with 172 173 P-Value adjusted less than 0.05 [23]. The protein cluster revealing the best discrimination between the groups for both dates was retained. Out of this cluster, 174 non-specific proteins identified with SN > 5 in the control's sample and proteins with 175 176 non-significative p-value, as shown with the generalized linear model, were eliminated. Subsequently, we considered together a high average of SN calculated 177 on the 1Y post-surgery from RCE patients in comparison with NRCE and the fact that 178 most elevated SN was only obtained for NRCE samples. Then, among the remaining 179 proteins, function of each protein was considered to estimate non-deleterious effect 180 on *Escherichia coli* strains during stages of recombinant antigens production. 181

### **182 Production of recombinant antigens**

Recombinant vectors synthesized with encoding sequence of the selected proteins
were transfected into *Escherichia coli* BL21 strains. Transformants were grown in a
large volume of LB medium and induced by Isopropyl β-D-1-thiogalactopyranoside
(IPTG). Recombinant proteins were purified using a chromatography method (see
Supplementary Methods).

#### 188 ELISA

We performed ELISA for the detection of IgG against the 4 recombinant *E. granulosus* antigens that were produced. ELISA plates were incubated overnight at  $4^{\circ}$ C with 5 µg/ml of the recombinant protein per well, diluted in the carbonatebicarbonate buffer, pH 9.6. The plasma samples, as well as negative and positive controls were tested by IgG-ELISA and results were expressed as previously described [9].

#### 195 Statistical analyses

Protein quantification was performed and illustrated by the heat-map tool. More 196 details are described in the supplementary methods. The Wilcoxon test was used to 197 assess IgG levels in NRCE and RCE patients. In addition, a Mann-Whitney U test 198 was performed to compare IgG levels regarding each monitoring time-point in NRCE 199 versus RCE. IgG levels were further assessed in NRCE patients treated exclusively 200 by surgery (n = 19) versus NRCE with adjuvant albendazole chemotherapy (n=15)201 202 using the Mann-Whitney U test. However, we could not assess the IgG antibody 203 response in the RCE (n= 2) versus NRCE (n =15) patients treated with adjuvant albendazole chemotherapy due to the unbalanced constitution of the two sub-groups. 204

The receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve was used to determine a cut-off 205 value to distinguish between NRCE and RCE patients. We further assessed the 206 ELISA using each of the recombinant antigens for the prediction of relapse/no 207 relapse at 1Y post-surgery by evaluating the evolution of the antibody levels between 208 1M and 1Y post-surgery as a decrease, an increase, or a stability as follows: a factor 209 of  $\pm 2$  coefficient of variation (CV)% was applied on the first time point (D030) level 210 and compared to the second one (D365). If the second level was higher than the 211 previous one by +2CV%, the level was considered as increased. If it was lower than 212 the previous level by -2CV%, we considered it as a decrease in level, and if it was 213

between high and low ranges, it was considered stable. The chi-square test was
applied to compare the number of NRCE versus RCE patients presenting either an
increase, a decrease, or a stability of IgG levels between 1M and 1Y. All tests were
two-sided, and a probability value of p < 0.05 was judged to be significant. Statistical</li>
analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism (Version 8.3.0.) and R (Version 3.6.1)
Software.

220 **Results** 

#### 221 Immunoreactive proteins

Our proteomic analysis led to the identification of 305 proteins derived from E. 222 granulosus protoscolex. The RCE group yielded significantly higher abundant 223 proteins for both time-points of follow-up period as compared to NRCE patients (Fig. 224 225 1). Based on a comparative approach between NRCE versus RCE groups, and 1M versus 1Y samples, the analysis of SN allowed the selection of 140 among the 305 226 immunoreactive proteins which were classified into 5 clusters (Fig. 2). Higher 227 differences in protein abundance between NRCE and RCE for both follow-up time 228 points were observed in cluster 2 that included 59 proteins. Therefore, we focused 229 our ensuring proteomic analysis on cluster 2. 230

## 231 Selection of candidate proteins

Applying the criteria described above in the Methods, we retained a total of 10 proteins after the first screening (Cytoplasmic malate dehydrogenase (Eg-cMDH), Putative citrate synthase (Eg-CS), Annexin A6 (Eg-ANX A6), Severin (Eg-SVN), Calpain-A, Myoferlin, Spectrin beta chain, Alpha actinin sarcomeric, Paramyosin, and Glycogen phosphorylase), for which, the SN was significantly lower in NRCE than RCE for both time-points (**Fig. 3, supplementary Fig. S1**). Finally, for production of

recombinant antigens, we applied the above-mentioned selection criteria (SN > 3 in
1Y-eluates of all RCE patients). This led us to keep 4 proteins: Eg-cMDH, Eg-CS, EgANX A6 and Eg-SVN.

#### 241 ELISA with recombinant proteins

Significantly lower levels of IgG were observed at 1Y as compared to 1M in NRCE for the 4 antigens (approximately 0.8 times lower in terms of group median values). Anti-Eg-cMDH and Anti-Eg-CS IgG were significantly higher at 1Y as compared to preoperative levels in RCE (approximately 2 and 1.5 times higher in terms of group median values, respectively) (**Fig. 4**).

The RCE group displayed significantly higher anti-Eg-cMDH, -CS and -ANX A6 IgG levels as compared to NRCE at 1Y (Mann-Whitney *U* test < 0.01). Based on this observation, we speculated that determining a cut-off value could be helpful in predicting whether CE patients will likely develop post-surgical relapses or not. The area under the ROC curve (AUC) values for discriminating RCE from NRCE were the best for Eg-cMDH, Eg-ANX A6 and Eg-CS (0.77, 0.74 and 0.72) respectively (**Supplementray Fig. S2**).

The best performance to predict the probability of being "relapse-free" when a decrease in specific antibodies occurred between 1M and 1Y was observed with the Eg-cMDH (83%) and Eg-CS (81%) antigens (**Table 1**). For the four tested antigens, we perceived no significant differences of IgG levels between NRCE treated solely by surgery and NRCE with adjuvant albendazole chemotherapy when compared with respect to each time point of the follow-up.

We further speculated that combining Eg-cMDH and Eg-CS together, and with the two other recombinant proteins would increase the prognostic performance.

Nonetheless, we found that patients with a decrease in anti-Eg-SVN and -ANX A6 antibody level (between 1M and 1Y post-surgery) were the same as those with a decrease in Eg-cMDH and Eg-CS IgG antibodies, hence, the combination did not add any further prognostic advantage.

## 266 Discussion

The key objective of the present study was the search of reliable antigens of E. 267 granulosus to improve post- surgical monitoring of CE, using a simple and 268 standardized ELISA. The monitoring was carried out during 3.5 years for all patients, 269 patients who relapsed within the first year after surgery were clustered in the RCE 270 group, and patients without relapses during the whole period of follow-up were 271 classified as NRCE group. The comparative proteomic analysis of plasma from CE 272 273 patients with different post-surgical developments enabled the identification of 59 proteins that were notably more abundant in IP eluates of patients who relapsed than 274 275 in patients without relapses for 1M and 1Y follow-up time-points. Based on selective 276 and feasibility criteria, we retained 4 proteins (cytoplasmic malate dehydrogenase, Putative citrate synthase, Annexin A6 and Severin) which were produced as 277 recombinant antigens for a subsequent evaluation by ELISA. Our findings indicated 278 279 that a decrease of anti-Eg-cMDH or anti-Eg-CS IgG levels between 1 month and 1 year post-surgery appears as the best antigenic tool - among all tested candidates -280 to predict post-surgical outcomes (probability of being "relapse-free" at 1Y above 281 80%). We already highlighted the importance of rigorous time-based serum sampling 282 after surgery to implement a strategy based on the comparison of individual 283 serological parameters between two time-points of follow-up and these findings are in 284 line with our previous investigations [9, 10]. 285

Previous proteomic studies reporting E. granulosus' antigenic proteins have, often, 286 assessed a pooled serum collected from patients with Echinococcosis [16, 24]. The 287 originality of our study is based on the search for immunoreactive proteins of E. 288 granulosus protoscolex with regards to patients' post-operative clinical development, 289 which allowed to identify proteins that could be considered as viability biomarkers. 290 Indeed, Eq-cMDH, previously assessed as a diagnostic antigen for human CE [25, 291 26] and Eg-CS evaluated for the diagnosis of ovine CE [27], are major actors in the 292 metabolic process of *E. granulosus*. Thus, cMDH plays a critical role in the reduction 293 of oxaloacetate to malate, thus generating energy to protoscolex who have 294 295 predominantly a fermentative metabolism [28]. Eg-CS was reported as ubiquitously expressed in all developmental stages of *E. granulosus* [27, 29] and as the key 296 enzyme of the tricarboxylic acid cycle [27]. 297

We hypothesize that decrease in antibody levels in non-relapsed patients could be related to a reduction or discontinuation of metabolic activity of the parasite, due to either complete surgical removal or inactivation via medication. In the same way, high levels of antibodies against Eg-cMDH and Eg-CS at 1Y post-surgery in patients who experienced relapses could be related to a persistent metabolic activity of the parasite, likely, linked to residual cysts or to the development of new lesions after accidental spillage of protoscoleces.

The ELISA using Eg-ANX A6 and Eg-SVN antigens exhibited lower performance for the prediction of surgical treatment efficacy. Some annexins were reported to maintain the parasite's structural integrity and to promote its survival through regulating host's immune responses. However, there is a paucity of information regarding the role of annexin A6 in the physiopathology of CE. Up until now, only *E. granulosus* B3, B33 and B38 annexins were investigated [30, 31]. The severin, also

known as gelsolin, is an actin-binding protein involved in actin assembly and disassembly. Little is known about Eg-SVN, yet it could play a key role in the parasite development, since the *E. granulosus* life cycle involves several morphological and physiological changes according to the different parasitic stages [32].

In our previous investigation, as well as, in the present study, we could not analyze the immune response regarding CE stages because of the enrollment of children mainly presenting active cysts (inactive and transitional cysts being less common in the pediatric population) [10]. The prognostic accuracy of the recombinant proteins should be, therefore, further assessed in larger groups of patients (especially adults) with transitional/ inactive CE cysts.

Summarized, our results suggest that Eg-cMDH and Eg-CS are promising 322 biomarkers to predict early CE post-surgical outcomes. An ELISA using these 2 323 324 antigens could be easily applicable for routine follow-up of CE cases. As next, these findings should be confirmed in larger multicenter cohort studies, in a longer follow-up 325 period to confirm the significative loss of antibodies, and also in adult CE patients 326 with cysts more frequently located in liver than in pediatric CE cases, and finally also 327 328 with CE patients being affected with other *Echinococcus* species causing CE, e.g. *E*. ortleppi and a few others. 329

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## 341 **Color for figures**

- We included this statement to indicate that all figures, the graphical abstract and the
- two supplementary figures in the "supplementary material" should be color printed.

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#### **1** Figure captions

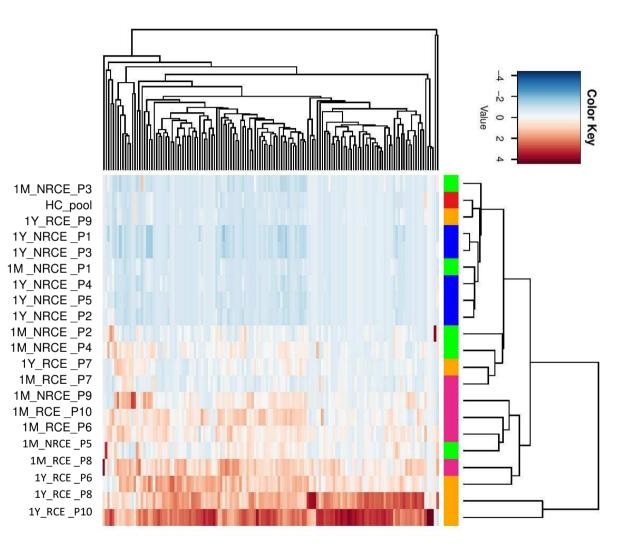
**Figure 1.** Quantitive comparison of protoscoleces proteins after immunoprecepitation (IP) with plasma of CE patients illustrated by heatmap analysis. As the color key indicates, the normalised intensity of proteins obtained in the IP of each sample is illustrated by a colored rectangle with a colorimetry gradient from low (blue) to high (red) intensity. White rectangles indicate that proteins could not be identified with IP analysis. Each line corresponds to a protein.

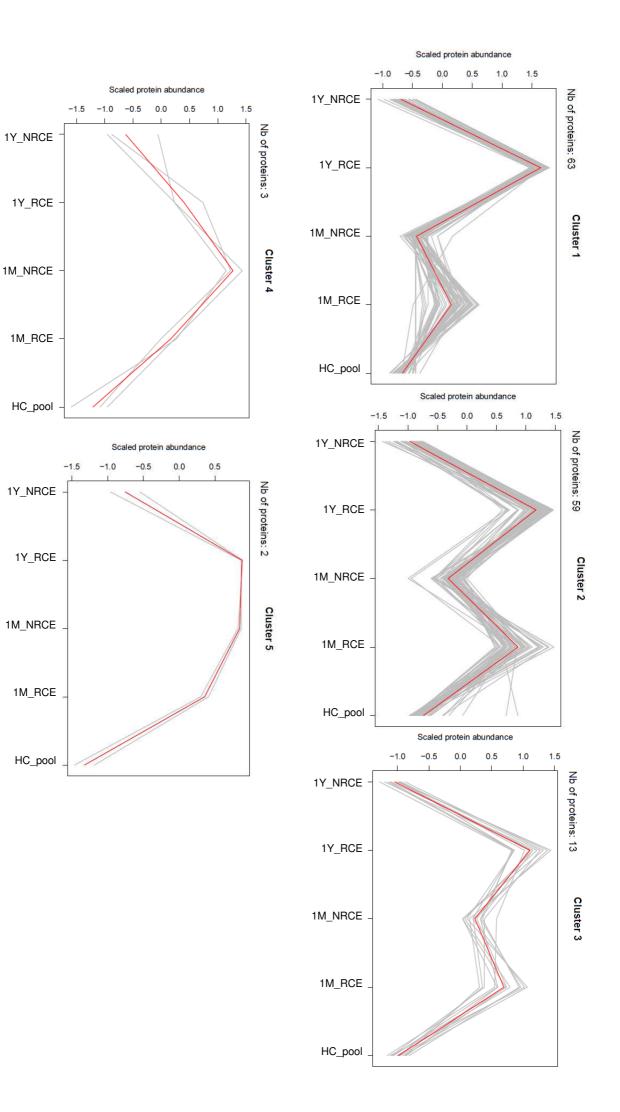
P1 to P10 designates the patients used for IP analyses. NRCE. « Non-relapsed » CE
patient, RCE. « Relapsed » CE patient, 1M. 1 Month after surgical treatment, 1Y. 1
Year post-surgery, HC\_pool. Pool of plasma of 18 healthy blood donors.

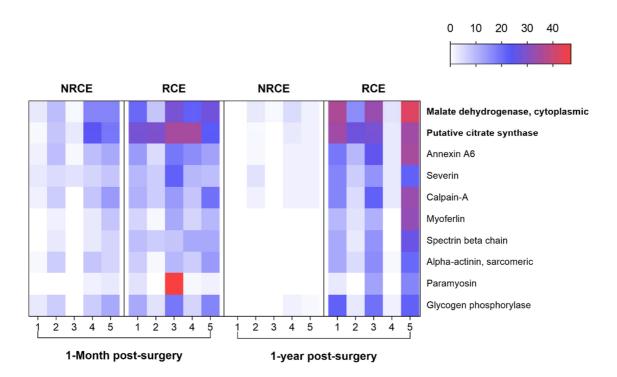
Figure 2. Classification of the abundant immunoreactive proteins derived from *Echiococcus granulosus* into 5 clusters according to the total number of tandem
mass spectra per sample (SN) and on a double comparative basis NRCE versus
RCE and 1M versus 1Y monitoring dates. NRCE. « Non-relapsed » CE patients,
RCE. « Relapsed » CE patients, 1M. 1 Month after surgical treatment, 1Y. 1 Year
post-surgery.

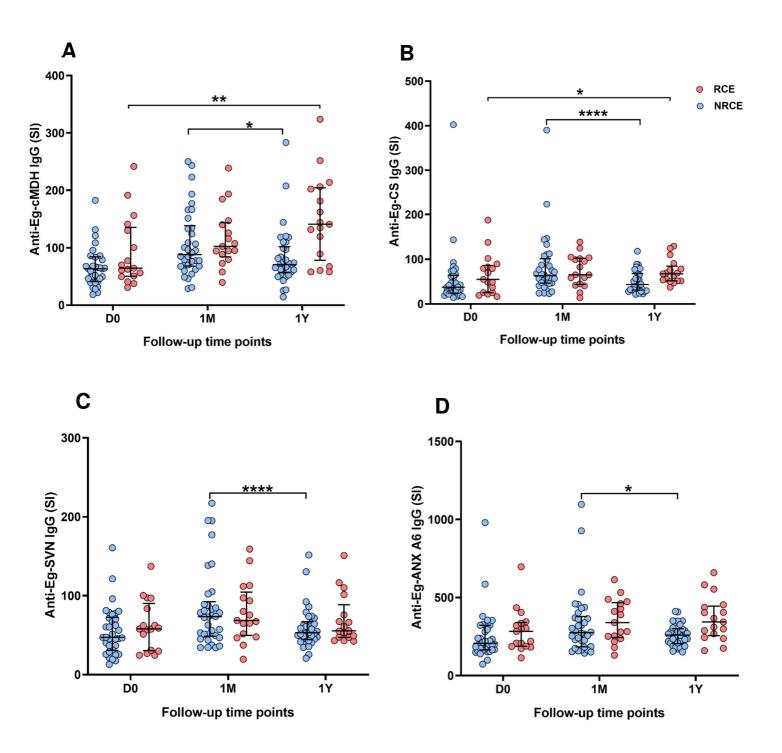
Figure 3. Differential expression of the selected immunoreactive proteins in NRCE versus RCE patients in 1M versus 1Y post-surgery. Quantification represented by the heat-map tool was based on the spectral counting of each protein. NRCE. « Nonrelapsed » CE patients, RCE. « Relapsed » CE patients.

Figure 4. Anti-Eg-cMDH (A), anti-Eg-CS (B), anti-Eg-SVN (C) and anti-Eg-ANX A6
(D) median IgG levels (SI) in NRCE and RCE patients. D0, the time of diagnosis. 1M
and 1Y; 1-month and 1-year post-surgery, respectively. NRCE. « Non-relapsed » CE
patients, RCE. « Relapsed » CE patients. \* p <0.5, \*\* p <0.01, \*\*\*\* p <0.0001.</li>









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IgG antibody	Evolution	NRCE;	RCE; n	Chi-	Probability of	Probability of
response		n (%)	(%)	square	being "relapse	being "relapsed"
against				test	free" at 1Y <sup>a</sup>	at 1Y <sup>b</sup>
Eg-cMDH	Decrease	25 (56)	6 (23)	p = 0.02	83%	
	Increase	5 (15)	8 (54)	p = 0.01		64%
	Stability	9 (29)	6 (23)	Ns		
Eg-CS	Decrease	22 (65)	5 (29)	p = 0.01	81%	
	Increase	3 (9)	4 (24)	Ns		57%
	Stability	9 (26)	8 (47)	Ns		
Eg-ANX A6	Decrease	15 (44)	6 (35)	Ns	71%	
	Increase	6 (18)	7 (41)	Ns		54%
	Stability	13 (38)	4 (24)	Ns		
	Decrease	18 (53)	7 (41)	Ns	72%	
Eg-SVN	Increase	4 (12)	2 (12)	Ns		33%
	Stability	12 (35)	8 (47)	Ns		

 Table 1. Evolution of IgG levels between 1M and 1Y post-surgery in NRCE and RCE

 patients

<sup>a</sup> The probability of being "relapse-free" was calculated as follows: number of NRCE with a decreased level between 1M and 1Y/number of all patients (NRCE & RCE) with the same status, <sup>b</sup> The probability of being "relapsed" was calculated as follows: number of RCE with an increased level between 1M and 1Y/number of all patients (NRCE & RCE) with the same status

0 10 20 30 40

