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Noninvasive diagnosis of fibrosis in non-alcoholic fatty liver disease: diagnostic accuracy of different scores

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4 **Title:** Noninvasive diagnosis of fibrosis in non-alcoholic fatty liver disease: diagnostic
5 accuracy of different scores
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ABSTRACT

Background: Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is a spectrum of pathologies characterized by liver damage without history of excessive alcohol intake. Advanced fibrosis, generally detected by transient elastography (TE), is the most significant predictor of poor prognosis and mortality among these patients. This study aimed at assessing the accuracy of 5 non-invasive methods, compared to TE, for the evaluation of severity of liver fibrosis in patients with NAFLD.

Methods: The cohort included 41 patients, in whom the result of TE was compared to AST/ALT ratio, BARD score (body mass index, AST/ALT ratio, diabetes), AST to platelet ratio index (APRI), Fibrosis 4 index (FIB 4 index) and NAFLD fibrosis score (NFS).

Results: The severity of fibrosis, assessed by TE, was the following: F0 (absence of fibrosis): 17%, F1 (mild): 39%, F2 (moderate): 17%, F3 (advanced): 10%, F4 (cirrhosis): 17%. Performances of the diagnostic scores were: 49% for AST/ALT ratio, 68% for BARD score, 73% for APRI, 59% and 71% for the lower and upper cut-off of FIB 4 index, 61% and 76% for the lower and upper cut-off of NFS.

Discussion: Considering the scores compared to TE, AST/ALT ratio was not enough sensitive, while BARD score had better diagnostic performance and APRI had a superior accuracy than the formers. However, FIB 4 and NFS were the most useful tests and their performance could be improved through the use of a single cut-off.

Conclusion: These findings demonstrated that the most accurate scores, compared to TE, were NFS and FIB 4.

Keywords: non-alcoholic fatty liver disease; fibrosis; non-invasive diagnosis; diagnostic scores; algorithm.

Introduction

Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) is characterized by steatosis in more than 5% of hepatocytes in patients without excessive alcohol intake, and ranges in severity from simple steatosis, to non-alcoholic steato-hepatitis (NASH), characterized by hepatocellular injury associated to increased risk of evolution, through to advanced fibrosis and cirrhosis. It has been estimated that NAFLD affects 20% of the general population from different Countries.¹⁻³

Although it is not uncommon in younger patients⁴, the middle-aged and the elderly are more frequently affected from NAFLD, due to the increasing prevalence of risk factors for its development, like obesity and DM, with advancing age.⁵

Most patients with NAFLD are asymptomatic: many cases are diagnosed after finding of increased serum transaminases during routine tests.⁶ The progression into the stages of advanced fibrosis and cirrhosis represents the main negative prognostic factor, associated to the reduction of life expectancy. The increased mortality, in patients with advanced fibrosis, is due beyond cardiovascular diseases to liver failure, portal hypertension and hepatocellular carcinoma.⁷⁻⁹ Hence, it is crucial to identify patients in the early stages of NAFLD.¹⁰

Liver biopsy remains the gold standard for the diagnosis of NASH and for the assessment of fibrosis. Nevertheless, this procedure is invasive, costly, and is associated with rare but potential complications and sampling errors.¹¹ Consequently, liver biopsy is not suitable for screening or monitoring in the routinely clinical setting.¹²

Since fibrosis is the key-parameter to predict a poor prognosis, there is a considerable interest in developing non-invasive, simple, accurate and cost-effective methods for its early identification and quantification.¹³⁻¹⁶

Among the existing available methods to detect fibrosis, the most widely used and validated technique is the transient elastography (TE), an ultrasound-based vibration controlled elastography (the most known is the Fibroscan[®]). This tool allows fibrosis assessment by measuring the velocity of an elastic shear wave propagation through the liver. TE is a painless, quick and non-invasive test which considers liver stiffness as a marker of liver fibrosis: harder the liver tissue is, faster the shear wave propagates.¹⁷ The principal advantages of TE include good reproducibility and high performance for detection of advanced fibrosis. In fact, it measures 1/500 liver samples, compared to biopsy, which samples 1/50000 of the liver, reducing the risk of sampling error.¹⁸

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4 Since the accuracy of other non-invasive approaches to detect fibrosis, such as diagnostic
5 scores and serologic tests, is controversial, the aim of the present study was to assess the
6 accuracy of five different diagnostic scores in identifying advanced fibrosis in patients with
7 NAFLD.
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10 11 **Methods**

12 *Patients*

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14 Patients enrollment was carried out at the Hepatology Day Service of the Internal Medicine
15 Unit III of Molinette Hospital (City of Health and Sciences), Turin (Italy), between
16 September 2016 and May 2018. Criteria for eligibility comprehended: NAFLD diagnosed by
17 ultrasonography, elevation of transaminases (aspartate aminotransferase [AST] >45 U/L;
18 alanine aminotransferase [ALT] > 40 U/L; gamma glutamyltranspeptidase [GGT] > 50 U/L)
19 and absence of other standard causes of liver diseases. Exclusion criteria comprehended viral
20 infections, hemochromatosis, Wilson disease, alpha-1 antitrypsin deficiency, autoimmune
21 hepatitis, primary biliary cholangitis, and alcohol abuse.¹⁹ Data on age, weight, body mass
22 index (BMI), glycaemia level in serum, platelets count, triglycerides and cholesterol levels
23 were collected.
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26 *FibroScan[®] and diagnostic scores*

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28 All patients were examined by TE (FibroScan[®], Echosens, Paris, France), as the best known
29 and accurate non-invasive method to detect fibrosis. Liver stiffness measurement was
30 expressed in KiloPascals (kPa), with ranges between 2.5 to 75 kPa, and related to the
31 METAVIR score (F0: absence of fibrosis; F1: mild fibrosis; F2: moderated fibrosis; F3:
32 advanced fibrosis; F4: cirrhosis).²⁰
33

34 The results of TE were compared to five diagnostic scores: the AST/ALT ratio²¹, the BARD
35 score (combination of the following variables: BMI \geq 28, AST/ALT ratio \geq 0.8 and
36 Diabetes)²², the AST to Platelet Ratio Index (APRI)²³, the Fibrosis-4 (FIB-4) index^{24,25}, and
37 the NAFLD Fibrosis Score (NFS).²⁶ It has been reported that these scores have a prognostic
38 value in patients affected by NAFLD and they can be easily calculated using laboratory tests
39 and clinical data, as shown in Table I.
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42 *Statistical analysis*

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44 Statistical analysis was performed using the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS)
45 software, version 24.0.
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4 Sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV),
5 positive likelihood ratio (LR+) and negative likelihood ratio (LR-) were calculated.
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7 The receiver operating characteristics (ROC) curve with the area under the curve (AUC)
8 index was measured to evaluate the diagnostic accuracy of each diagnostic score (AUC <
9 0.50: fail; 0.50–0.70: fair; 0.70–0.90: good; 0.90–1.00: excellent), which was calculated as
10 follows: diagnostic accuracy = (true positive + true negative) / (true positive + true negative
11 + false positive + false negative).
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15 All data were expressed as median and ranges or mean \pm standard deviation. Probability
16 values under 0.05 ($P < 0.05$) were considered as statistically significant.
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19 **Results**

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21 A total of 41 outpatients with NAFLD were included in the study. Demographic, clinical and
22 biochemical characteristics of the patients are reported in Table II.

23 In this cohort, 73% of patients (n. 30) had an absent/low stage of fibrosis (F0-F2), while 27%
24 (n. 11) showed an advanced stage (F3-F4).
25

26 Among the 41 patients enrolled, 11 (27%) presented at least one of the two most important
27 risk factors associated to advanced NAFLD: obesity ($\text{BMI} \geq 30 \text{ kg/m}^2$) or T2DM (glycaemia
28 $\geq 126 \text{ mg/dl}$). One patient presented both conditions. Considering the high rate of patients
29 who had at least one risk factor, we searched for a difference in the fibrosis progression
30 between these two subgroups.
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32 Considering the AST/ALT ratio, patients were divided in two groups. Those (29%, n. 12)
33 who showed $\text{AST/ALT} > 1$ and those (71%, n. 29) who had $\text{AST/ALT} \leq 1$. Only 1 patient
34 belonging to the first group was affected by advances fibrosis (F3-F4). AST/ALT ratio
35 parameters were the follow: sensitivity 9%, specificity 63%, ROC area 0.36. More detailed
36 data are reported in Table III and Figure 1.
37

38 Regarding the BARD score, the cohort was divided in two groups. Those (29%, n. 12) who
39 showed a BARD score ≥ 2 and those (71%, n. 29) who had a value < 2 . Five patients with
40 advances fibrosis (F3-F4) were included in the first group. BARD score parameters included
41 a sensitivity of 45%, a specificity of 77% and a ROC area of 0.71 (Table III; Figure 1).
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43 Considering the APRI score, all patients showed $\text{APRI} \leq 1$, even those affected by advances
44 fibrosis (F3-F4) and the ROC area was 0.66 (Table III; Figure 1).
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4 Considering the FIB-4 index, patients were divided in three groups. Most of them (61%, n.
5 25) had a FIB-4 index $< 1,45$, one patient showed a FIB-4 index $> 3,25$ and the remaining
6 ones (37%, n. 15) presented intermediate values. No patients with advanced fibrosis (F3-F4)
7 showed a FIB-4 index > 3.25 , as they were all included in the other groups: 6 in the FIB-4
8 index $< 1,45$ group and 5 in the intermediate one. The only patient included in the FIB-4
9 index > 3.25 group was affected by mild fibrosis. Parameters and diagnostic accuracy were
10 calculated for the lower and the upper cut-offs: they had respectively 63% and 0% of
11 sensitivity, 46% and 97% of specificity (Table III; Figure 1).
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16 Considering the NFS, patients were divided in three groups. While 7% of patients (n. 3)
17 showed a NFS > 0.676 , the majority presented NFS ≤ 1.45 (44%, n. 18) or intermediate
18 values (49%, n. 20). Two patients with advanced fibrosis (F3-F4) showed a NFS > 0.676 ,
19 while the other 9 were included in the NFS ≤ 1.45 group (n. 2) or in the intermediate one (n.
20 7). Parameters and diagnostic accuracy were calculated for the lower and the upper cut-offs:
21 they had respectively 53% and 18% of sensitivity, 82% and 98% of specificity (Table III;
22 Figure 1).
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26 Compared to TE, among the investigated tests, NFS presented the best performance for
27 advanced liver fibrosis diagnosis.
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34 Discussion

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36 With the increased prevalence of risk factors as obesity, T2DM and metabolic syndrome,
37 NAFLD is becoming a disease diffused worldwide.^{1,6} Despite the knowledge that proper
38 dietary and pharmacological treatment is essential for preventing NAFLD consequences²⁷,
39 until now, scarce results have been reported with these strategies. Furthermore, the presence
40 of concomitant risk factors facilitates the progression of steatosis into NASH, advanced
41 fibrosis and cirrhosis. The staging of the disease, by the assessment of liver fibrosis, is a
42 crucial clinical requirement, permitting its appropriate management. The limitations of liver
43 biopsy led to the development of others diagnostic methods such as TE and scores based on
44 the elaboration of different variables such as BMI, patients' age, blood exams.
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50 Our study included 41 patients affected by NAFLD and managed according to International
51 guidelines.²⁸ The percentage of patients with advanced fibrosis was higher in obese and
52 diabetic patients. This suggests the need of a closer follow up of this cohort. Considering the
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4 scores compared to TE, the AST/ALT ratio, even though it is very economic, was not enough
5 sensitive in identifying patients with advanced fibrosis. The BARD score, on the contrary,
6 had a higher sensitivity to identify patients with advanced disease and a better diagnostic
7 performance. The accuracy of APRI was superior than that of AST/ALT ratio and BARD
8 score. The two last scores analysed, FIB4 and NFS, were the most useful tests: their
9 performance could be improved through the use of a single cut off in order to avoid the grey
10 area of diagnostic indeterminate. Our findings are in agreement with a recently published
11 paper from Malmö, Sweden, showing that in patients with NAFLD NFS and FIB-4, can be
12 used to identify patients at risk of future liver-related events, overall mortality, metabolic
13 comorbidities and chronic kidney disease.²⁹
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21 **Conclusions**

22 In conclusion, our findings demonstrated that the most accurate score, compared to TE, was
23 NFS. It will be interesting to evaluate, in future studies, if the combined employment of NFS
24 with others scores, such as BARD score and FIB 4 score, in larger cohorts, could ameliorate
25 diagnostic accuracy in term of fibrosis staging, in patients with NAFLD.
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21 *Conflicts of interest.* The authors certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial
22 organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.
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26 *Authors contributions.* Conceptualization: Marilena Durazzo, Letizia Marzari; methodology:
27 Marilena Durazzo, Letizia Marzari; data collection: Letizia Marzari, Silvia Bonetto, Arianna
28 Ferro, Paola Belci, Alessandro Collo; writing: Marilena Durazzo, Letizia Marzari, Sharmila
29 Fagoonee; review and editing: Sharmila Fagoonee, Maria Cristina Ghigo
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34 All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.
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4 **TABLES**

5
6 **Table I** - Diagnostic scores calculation formula.

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| PROGNOSTIC SCORE | CALCULATION | |
|------------------|---|-------|
| AAR | $\frac{AST}{ALT}$ | |
| BARD SCORE | Parameters | Score |
| | AST/ALT ratio ≥ 0.8 | 2 |
| | BMI ≥ 28 | 2 |
| APRI | Diabetes type | 1 |
| | $\frac{AST \text{ (patient)}}{AST \text{ (normal value)}} \times 100$ | |
| FIB-4 | $\frac{Age \times AST}{PLTs \times \sqrt{ALT}}$ | |
| NFS | $-1.675 + (0.037 \times Age) + (0.094 \times BMI) + (1.13 \times IFG/Diabetes) + (0.99 \times AST/ALT) - (0.013 \times PLTs) - (0.66 \times Albumin)$ | |

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30 Abbreviations. AAR: AST to ALT ratio; APRI: AST to platelet ratio index; NFS: NAFLD
31 fibrosis score; AST: aspartate aminotransferase; ALT: alanine aminotransferase; BMI: body
32 mass index [kg/m²]; PLTs: platelet count [x10⁹/L]. Units. AST: UI/L; ALT: UI/L; BMI:
33 kg/m²; PLTs: x10⁹/L; Age: years; Albumin: g/dl. Interpretation. IFG/Diabetes: yes = 1, no =
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Table II - Patients demographic, clinical and biochemical characteristics.

| Patients | N (%) | 41 (100) |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Age (years) | Mean \pm SD | 55 \pm 12 |
| Gender | M/F | 8/33 |
| BMI (kg/m ²) | Mean \pm SD | 28 \pm 4 |
| BMI < 25 | N (%) | 10 (24) |
| 25 \leq BMI < 30 | N (%) | 23 (56) |
| BMI \geq 30 | N (%) | 8 (20) |
| AST (U/L) | Mean \pm SD | 32 \pm 15 |
| ALT (U/L) | Mean \pm SD | 50 \pm 41 |
| GGT (U/L) | Mean \pm SD | 68 \pm 67 |
| Glycaemia (mg/dl) | Mean \pm SD | 102 \pm 38 |
| Glycaemia \geq 126 | N (%) | 5 (12) |
| Platelets (x10 ⁹ /L) | Mean \pm SD | 213 \pm 53 |
| Triglycerides (mg/dl) | Mean \pm SD | 137 \pm 57 |
| Cholesterol (mg/dl) | Mean \pm SD | 195 \pm 32 |
| Fibrosis stage: | | |
| F0 | N (%) | 7 (17) |
| F1 | N (%) | 16 (39) |
| F2 | N (%) | 7 (17) |
| F3 | N (%) | 4 (10) |
| F4 | N (%) | 7 (17) |

Abbreviations. SD: standard deviation; BMI: body mass index; AST: aspartate aminotransferase; ALT: alanine aminotransferase; GGT: gamma glutamyltranspeptidase.

Table III - Accuracy parameters of each diagnostic score.

| | | IC 95% |
|--|--------|-------------------|
| AST/ALT Ratio | | |
| Sensitivity | 9.00% | 0.20% - 41.30% |
| Specificity | 63.00% | 43.90% - 80.10% |
| PPV | 8.00% | 0.20% - 38.50% |
| NVP | 66.00% | 45.70% - 82.10% |
| LR + | 0.25 | 0.04 - 1.70 |
| LR - | 1.44 | 1.03 - 2.00 |
| ROC area | 0.36 | 0.16 - 0.54 |
| BARD Score | | |
| Sensitivity | 45.00% | 16.70% - 76.60% |
| Specificity | 77.00% | 57.70% - 90.10% |
| PPV | 42.00% | 15.20% - 72.30% |
| NVP | 79.00% | 60.30% - 92.00% |
| LR + | 1.95 | 0.78 - 4.87 |
| LR - | 0.71 | 0.40 - 1.26 |
| ROC area | 0.71 | 0.53 - 0.89 |
| APRI | | |
| ROC area | 0.65 | 0.46 - 0.86 |
| FIB-4 Index (lower cut-off < 1,45) | | |
| Sensitivity | 63.00% | 43.90% - 80.10% |
| Specificity | 46.00% | 16.70% - 76.60% |
| PPV | 75.00% | 54.90% - 90.60% |
| NPV | 31.00% | 11.00% - 58.70% |
| LR+ | 1.16 | 0.64 - 2.12 |
| LR- | 0.81 | 0.36 - 1.80 |
| FIB-4 Index (upper cut-off > 3,25) | | |
| Sensitivity | 0.00% | 0.00% - 28.50% |
| Specificity | 97.00% | 82.80% - 99.90% |
| VVP | 0.00% | 0.00% - 97.50% |
| VVN | 73.00% | 56.10% - 85.40% |
| LR+ | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| LR- | 1.03 | 0.97 - 1.11 |
| NFS (lower cut-off < 1,45) | | |
| Sensitivity | 53.00% | 34.30 % - 71.70 % |

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-------------------|
| Specificity | 82.00% | 48.20 % - 97.70 % |
| PPV | 89.00% | 65.30 % - 98.60 % |
| NPV | 39.00% | 19.70 % - 61.50 % |
| LR+ | 2.93 | 0.80 – 10.70 |
| LR- | 0.57 | 0.36 – 0.92 |

NFS**(upper cut-off > 0,676)**

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----------------|
| Sensitivity | 18.00% | 2.30% - 51.80% |
| Specificity | 97.00% | 82.80% - 99.90% |
| PPV | 67.00% | 9.40% - 99.20% |
| NPV | 76.00% | 59.80% - 88.60% |
| LR+ | 5.45 | 0.55 – 54.30 |
| LR- | 0.85 | 0.64 – 1.13 |

Abbreviations. AST: aspartate aminotransferase; ALT: alanine aminotransferase; APRI: AST to platelet ratio index; FIB-4: fibrosis-4; NFS: NAFLD fibrosis score; PPV: positive predictive value; NPV: negative predictive value; LR+: positive likelihood ratio; LR-: negative likelihood ratio.

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4 **TITLES OF FIGURES**
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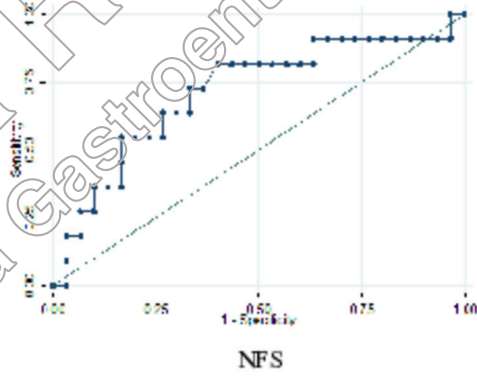
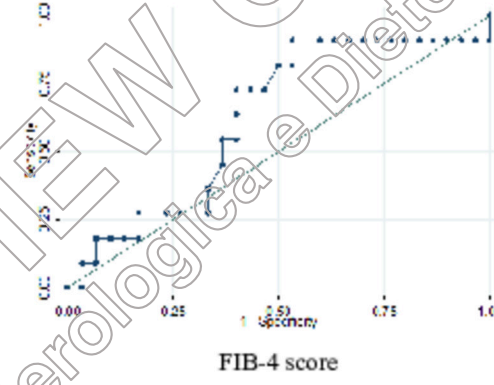
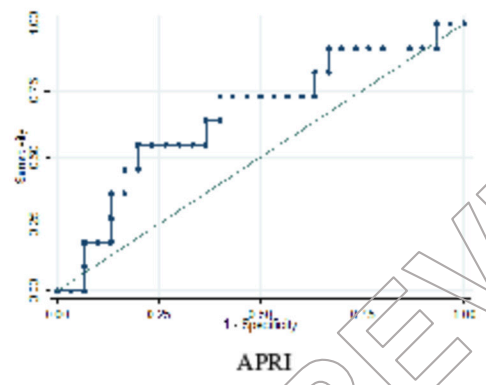
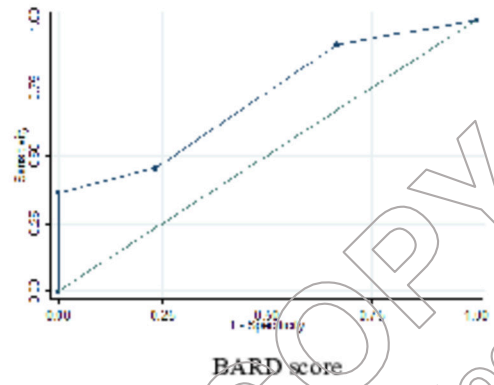
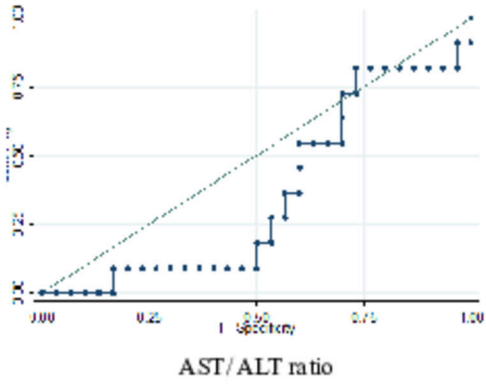
7 **Figure 1-** Accuracy parameters of each diagnostic score.

8 Legend. ROC curve for diagnostic accuracy of each considered diagnostic score (IC 95%).

9 Abbreviations. ROC: receiver operating characteristics; AST: aspartate aminotransferase;
10 ALT: alanine aminotransferase; APRI: AST to platelet ratio index; FIB-4: fibrosis-4; NFS:
11 NAFLD fibrosis score.
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16 Abbreviations. ROC: receiver operating characteristics; AST: aspartate aminotransferase;
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