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Assessing field performance of ultrasensitive rapid diagnostic tests for malaria: a systematic review and meta-analysis

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Abstract

Background: To overcome the limitations of conventional malaria rapid diagnostic tests (cRDTs) in diagnosing malaria in patients with low parasitaemia, ultrasensitive malaria rapid diagnostic tests (uRDTs) have recently been developed, with promising results under laboratory conditions. The current study is the first meta-analysis comparing the overall sensitivity, and specificity of newly developed ultrasensitive *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria RDT (Alere[™] Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag P. *falciparum* RDT) with the cRDT conducted in the same field conditions.

Methods: PubMed, EMBASE, Cochrane infectious diseases group specialized register, and African Journals Online (AJOL) were searched up to 20th April 2021. Studies with enough data to compute sensitivity and specificity of uRDT and cRDT were retrieved. A random-effect model for meta-analysis was used to obtain the pooled sensitivity and specificity.

Results: Overall, 15 data sets from 14 studies were included in the meta-analysis. The overall sensitivity of the Alere[™] ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT regardless of the reference test and the clinical presentation of participants, was 55.5% (95% confidence interval [CI]: 45.5; 65.0), while the sensitivity regardless of the reference test and the clinical presentation of participants, was 42.9% (95% CI: 31.5; 55.2) for the cRDT performed in the same field conditions. When PCR was used as reference test, the sensitivity of uRDT was 60.4% (95% CI: 50.8; 69.2), while the sensitivity was 49.4% (95% CI: 38.2; 60.6) for the cRDT. The pooled specificity of uRDT regardless of the reference test and the clinical presentation of participants was 98.6% (95% CI: 97.1; 99.4), and the pooled specificity of cRDT regardless of the reference test and the clinical presentation of participants was 97.5% (95% CI: 94.1; 98.9) and 98.2% (95% CI: 95.5; 99.3). Regardless of the reference test used, the sensitivity of Alere[™] Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT in symptomatic patients was 72.1% (95%CI: 67.4; 76.4), while sensitivity of cRDT was 67.4% (95%CI: 57.6; 75.9).

Conclusion: Findings of the meta-analysis show that Alere[™] Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT compared to cRDT performed in the same field conditions has higher sensitivity but lower specificity although the difference is not statistically significant.

Background

Even though the global burden of malaria has been reduced since 2000, in 2018, nearly 228 million new cases of malaria were recorded globally, and there were close to 405.000 excess death caused by malaria [1]. Among those deaths, children [2] and pregnant [3] women represent the most vulnerable population. To reduce and

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eliminate malaria infections, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the use of the « Test, Treat and Track» strategy [4]. The aim of this strategy is to make sure that every suspected case is tested using a confirmation test, and every confirmed case is treated with the appropriate anti-malaria medication [4].

In people living in areas where malaria is prevalent, and in pregnant women, malaria diagnosis can be challenging. In the former, because every suspected case must be diagnosed and treated, even those with parasitaemia below the detection threshold of conventional rapid diagnostic tests (cRDTs) for malaria, and in the latter, because of the ability of *Plasmodium falciparum* to bind to the placenta, which can lead to parasite densities in peripheral blood below the detection threshold of the most used cRDTs and light microscopy, hence the need for ultrasensitive diagnostic tests (uRDTs) [5].

Currently, nucleic acid amplification tests are known to be sensitive to detect these low-density infections [6, 7]. Nonetheless, these methods are limited to well-equipped laboratory settings due to their inherent complexity and need for sophisticated laboratory facilities. Recently, to fulfil the demand for diagnostic tests that are cheaper, faster, with high-sensitivity and deployable in the field, uRDT was developed [8]. Like cRDTs, which detect proteins such as histidine-rich protein 2 (HRP2), aldolase, and parasite lactate dehydrogenase (pLDH), they are based on the immunodetection of HRP2 and exhibit promising results when their performance is assessed in laboratory conditions [8].

However, no study has hitherto evaluated through meta-analysis the performance of uRDT under field conditions. This first systematic review with meta-analysis aimed to compare the overall sensitivity, and specificity of newly developed ultrasensitive malaria RDT (AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT) with the cRDT conducted in the same field conditions.

Methods

The review is conducted in accordance with the recommendations for diagnostic test accuracy meta-analysis in the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews [9] and is reported with respect to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Diagnostic Test Accuracy Studies [10]. The current review is registration with PROSPERO CRD42021227784.

Search strategy

PubMed, EMBASE, Cochrane infectious diseases group specialized register, and African Journals Online (AJOL) were searched from inception up to 20 April 2021 with the following terms: ("malaria[tiab]" OR "malaria [MESH]") AND ("ultrasensitive"[tiab] OR "highly sensitive" [tiab] OR "hypersensitive"[tiab] OR "highsensitive"[tiab] OR "high sensitive"[tiab] OR "RDT"[tiab]). The search strategy used in PubMed which was adapted to fit with other databases is presented in Additional file 1: Table S1.

After bibliographic search, the titles and abstracts were screened for eligibility and duplicates were removed. Full texts of potentially eligible articles were retrieved and assessed for final inclusion independently by two reviewers, with discrepancy between both resolved by discussion.

Eligibility criteria

Both observational and experimental studies reporting enough data to compute sensitivity and specificity of uRDT and cRDT in the same setting and comparing both with the same reference test were included in the metaanalysis. Only studies conducted on the field (not in the laboratory), regardless of the language and year of publication were retained. We excluded editorials, reviews, letters, commentaries, and studies lacking key data.

Quality assessment

The Quality Assessment of Diagnostic Accuracy Studies 2 (QUADAS-2) was used independently by two reviewers to assess the quality of included studies [11]. Disagreement between the two reviewers were resolved by discussion.

Data extraction

The following information was retrieved on a preconceived data extraction form by one reviewer: the name of the first author, the country where the study was conducted, the year of publication, the characteristics of the study population in terms of symptoms and age, the presence of pregnant women in the sample, the commercial name of the uRDT and reference test used in the study, the storage condition of the uRDT, the number of true positive (TP), true negative (TN), false positive (TP), false negative (FN).

Articles reporting on diagnostic performance of uRDT in different age categories (e.g., adults and children) or in which uRDT was compared with more than one reference test were divided in separated data sets. Thereafter, a second reviewer checked the concordance between data extracted and the content of the article prior to the data synthesis and analysis.

Statistical analysis

The "meta" package within R software version 4.0.2 was used for analysis [12, 13]. A random-effect model was used to obtain the overall summary effect of studies reporting enough data to compute the sensitivity, and specificity. The Clopper-Pearson method was used to compute the confidence intervals and the maximum-likelihood estimator was used to estimate the between-study variance. The QUADAS-2 score was used to estimate the risk of bias in included studies. A P-value of 0.05 was considered statistically significant in all the analysis.

Results

Search results

The bibliographic search yielded 1440 articles. The screening based on title and abstracts and full text allowed to retain 15 data sets from 14 studies for the quantitative synthesis as depicted in the Prisma flow diagram (Fig. 1).

Characteristics of the included studies

Studies were published between 2018 and 2021, with 9 out of 14 conducted in sub-Saharan African countries. Two out of the 14 studies were from Myanmar [14, 15], two from Tanzania [16, 17], while Benin [18], Cambodia [19], Ethiopia [20], Indonesia [21], Kenya [22], Mozambique [23], Papua New Guinea [24], Ghana [25],

Colombia [26], and The Gambia [27] were represented by one study (Table 1).

Eight studies (57.1%) were conducted in patients regardless of the presence of symptoms, while two (14.3%) were conducted in symptomatic patients and four (28.6%) in asymptomatic patients. The mean/median age of the study population ranged from 4 to 36 years as reported by seven studies. Four (28.6%) studies were conducted in pregnant women (Table 1). *Plasmodium falciparum* was the species targeted by the uRDT test in all the studies, and all the uRDT were from the same manufacturer (abbott AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT). The reference test was mainly PCR (10 data sets), and ultrasensitive PCR (4 data sets) (Table 1). The risk of bias in studies included in the review ranged from low to moderate and is summarized in Fig. 2.

Meta-analysis of sensitivity and specificity Sensitivity

Even if the difference was not statistically significant, the AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT had a higher sensitivity than the cRDT performed in the same field conditions. The overall sensitivity of the uRDT



Table 1	Charac	teristics o	f the stud	ies incluc	ded in th	ie review									
Author	Year	Design	Country	Setting	Mean* age	Minimum age	Maximum age	%Male	Characteristic of the population	Plasmodium sp target by the Ultrasensitive RDT	Person(s) performing ultrasensitive RDT	Characteristics of patients in terms of symptoms	Reference test	Commercial name(s) of the ultra- sensitive RDT used in the study	Parasite density reported in the study
Briand	2020	Cross sec- tional analysis of a cohort study	Benin	Hospital based	26.7	ж	NR	AA	Pregnant women	Falciparum	Unclear	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag P. falcipa- rum RDT	Mean parasite den- sity (95%Cl): 20.7 p/µL (108-39.6)
Yeung	2020	Cross sec- tional	Cambodia	Popula- tion- based, Hos- pital based	ЖZ	N	NR	NR	All age cat- egories and conditions (Active case detection)	Falciparum	Trained lab technician	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag P. falcipa- rum RDT	Unclear
Girma	2019	Cross sec- tional	Ethiopia	Popula- tion- based	а Х	N	NR	NR	All age cat- egories and conditions	Falciparum	Trained lab technician	Asymptomatic	Ultra-sensi- tive PCR	Alere ^{na} Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag P. falcipa- rum RDT	uRDT median = 7817 per mL, and cRDT median = 70,205 (IQR: 5585-196 950 per mL)
Unwin	2020	Cross sec- tional	Indonesia	Hospital based	N	NR	NR	A	Pregnant women	Falciparum	NR	Asymptomatic	Composite test (qPCR, LAMP, nPCR)	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. falcipa-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	Unclear
Samuels	2019	Cross sec- tional analysis of a cohort study	Kenya	Popula- tion- based	Х	N	NR	AA	Pregnant women	Falciparum	Unclear	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. falcipa-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	Median = 148 (IQR: 11-1260 per µL)
Galatas	2020	Cross sec- tional	Mozam- bique	Popula- tion- based	4	щ	ж	44.8	All age cat- egories and conditions	Falciparum	Trained lab technician	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. folcipo-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	Geo mean = 112.9 p/µL. (Ranged: 0.6 to 120,786.2) for uRDT, And Geo man = 145.5 p.µL. (Ranged: 0.6-120,786.2) for cRDT positive samples

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Table 1	(continued)	 													
Author	Year Desi	ign Coun	try Se	stting	Mean* age	Minimum age	Maximum age	%Male	Characteristic of the population	Plasmodium <i>sp</i> target by the Ultrasensitive RDT	Person(s) performing ultrasensitive RDT	Characteristics of patients in terms of symptoms	Reference test	Commercial name(s) of the ultra- sensitive RDT used in the study	Parasite density reported in the study
Landier_1	2018 Cros. tio	s sec- Myan. mal	mar Po	pula- tion- based	36	8	ЖZ	47.1	Adults	Falciparum	٣	Asymptomatic	ELISA	Alere ^{nx} Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. falcipa-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	Geo mean uRDT +: 3,019 p/ml (95% Cl, 1,790 to 5,094 p/ml), and cRDT +: 11,352 (95% Cl, 5,643 to 22,837 p/ml)
Landier_2	2018 Cros: tio	s sec- Myan nal	mar Po	pula- tion- based	36	80	N	47.1	Adults	Falciparum	X	Asymptomatic	Ultra-sensi- tive PCR	Alere ^{na} Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag P. falcipa- rum RDT	Geo mean uRDT +: 3,019 p/ml (95% Cl, 1,790 to 5,094 p/ml), and cRDT +: 11,352 (95% Cl, 5,643 to 22,837 p/ml)
Liu	2019 Cros. tio	s sec- Myan. Inal	mar Po	pula- tion- based	14	0.6	06	43.1	All age cat- egories and conditions	Falciparum	Unclear	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Alere ^{rw} Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. falcipa-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	NR
Hofmann	2018 Cross tio	s sec- Papué Nev Gui	Po Po Po Po Po Po Po Po Po Po Po Po Po P	based	53	ж	ж	X	5 years and older (excluding pregnant women)	Falciparum	Ĕ	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Alere ^{na} Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag P. falcipa- rum RDT	Geo mean uRDT +: 427.58 p/µL: median, 173.63 p/µL (IQR p/µL), and Geo mean cRDT +: 6104.25 p/µL; median, 1309.40 p/µL (IQR, 135.3-12,586.2 p/µL)
Hofmann_1	2019 Cros: tio analy of col stu	s sec- Tanza onal ysis a hort udy	HC	based	R	0.2	6.9	NR	Children under 5 year	Falciparum	Unclear	Symptomatic	Ultra-sensi- tive PCR	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag P. falcipa- rum RDT	Geo mean:3844 p/μl: median, 54,742 p/μL (IQR, 13–385,514 p/μL)

Table 1 (contin	(pen)													
Author	Year	Design	Country	Setting	Mean* age	Minimum age	Maximum age	%Male	Characteristic of the population	Plasmodium sp target by the Ultrasensitive RDT	Person(s) performing ultrasensitive RDT	Characteristics of patients in terms of symptoms	Reference test	Commercial name(s) of the ultra- sensitive RDT used in the study	Parasite density reported in the study
Hofmann_2	2019	Cross sec- tional analysis of a cohort study	Tanzania	Hospital based	R	8	80	R	Adults	Falciparum	Unclear	Symptomatic	Ultra-sensi- tive PCR	Alere [™] Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. falcipa-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	Geo mean: 1102 p/µL; median, 1691 p/µL (IOR, 27–87,812 p/µL)
Mwesigwa	2019	Cross sec- tional	The Gam- bia	Popula- tion- based	13	R	NR	44.3	All age cat- egories and conditions	Falciparum	Nurse	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Unclear	NR
Vásquez	2020	Cross sec- tional	Colombia	Hospital based	X	NR	Х	NA	Pregnant women	Falciparum	Trained lab technician	Asymptomatic and sympto- matic	PCR	Alere ^{ttv} Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. falcipa-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	Geo mean = 13.2 p/µL (Ranged: 0.03 to 8145)
Manjurano	2021	Cross sec- tional	Tanzania	Hospital based	X	Ю	Х	42.8	5 years and older	Falciparum	Trained lab technician	Symptomatic	PCR	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P: falcipa-</i> <i>rum</i> RDT	Ranged: 40–1,000,000 p/µL
Acquah	2021	Cross sec- tional	Ghana	Popula- tion- based	NR	m	88	33	All age cat- egories and conditions	Falciparum	Trained lab technician	Asymptomatic	PCR	Alere TM Ultra- sensitive Malaria Ag <i>P. falcipa-</i> rum RDT	Unclear
*Mean or me	edian ag	ət													



was 55.5% (95% CI: 45.5; 65.0) while the figure was 42.9% (95% CI: 31.5; 55.2) for the cRDT (Fig. 3). The difference in terms of sensitivity between the AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT and cRDT varies according to the reference test used. When PCR was used as reference test, the sensitivity of AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT was 60.4% (95% CI: 50.8; 69.2) while it was 49.4% (95% CI: 38.2; 60.6) for the cRDT. When the ultra-sensitive PCR was used as reference test, sensitivity of uRDT was 60.3% (95% CI: 42.2; 75.9) and of cRDT was 44.1% (95% CI: 18.8; 72.8) (Table 2).

The sensitivity of Alere[™] Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT and cRDT in pregnant women was 52.5% (95% CI: 31.3; 72.9) and 44.9% (95% CI:29.7; 61.2)

respectively. Regardless of the reference test used, the sensitivity of AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT in symptomatic patients was 72.1% (95%CI: 67.4; 76.4), while sensitivity of cRDT was 67.4% (95%CI: 57.6; 75.9). In asymptomatic patients the sensitivity of AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT was 42.1% (95%CI: 26.5; 59.5), and sensitivity of cRDT was 26.0% (95%CI: 13.9; 43.4).

Specificity

The overall specificity of the AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT was lower than the cRDT (statistically non-significant). The pooled specificity of AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT

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Study	ТР	TP+FN Sensitivity	% [95% Cl]	Sensitivity	Study	TN	FP+TN S	pecificity,%	[95% CI]	Specificity
-007			•	•	cRDT					
CRUI					Hofmann 2018	112	112	100.0	[96 8· 100 0]	
Hofmann,2018	20	135 14	.8 [9.3; 21.9]		Landier 1 2018	1242	1244	99.8	[99.4. 100.0]	
Landier_1,2018	30	198 15	.2 [10.5; 20.9]	*	Landier 2 2018	1258	1250	99.9	[99.6: 100.0]	13
Landier_2,2018	31	183 16	.9 [11.8; 23.2]		Girma 2019	438	441	00.3	[08 0· 00 0]	
Girma,2019	17	82 20	.7 [12.6; 31.1]		Unima,2013	0697	0001	00.0	[00.6, 100.0]	
Hofmann_1,2019	226	309 73	.1 [67.8; 78.0]	-	Holmann_1,2019	2007	2091	55.5		
Hofmann_2,2019	35	48 72	.9 [58.2; 84.7]		Hotmann_2,2019	467	467	100.0	[99.2; 100.0]	
Liu,2019	28	65 43	.1 [30.8; 56.0]		Liu,2019	1881	1926	97.7	[96.9; 98.3]	_ =
Samuels.2019	77	122 63	.1 [53.9: 71.7]		Samuels,2019	342	361	94.7	[91.9; 96.8]	
Briand,2020	76	172 44	.2 [36.6: 51.9]		Briand,2020	737	770	95.7	[94.0; 97.0]	- <u></u>
Galatas 2020	110	179 61	5 [53.9: 68.6]		Galatas,2020	4183	4217	99.2	[98.9; 99.4]	
Unwin 2020	36	158 22	8 [16.5: 30.1]		Unwin,2020	82	84	97.6	[91.7; 99.7]	
Yeung 2020	12	26 46	2 [26 6: 66 6]		Yeung,2020	640	652	98.2	[96.8; 99.0]	
Vácquez 2020	21	20 53	8 [37 2: 60 0]		Vásquez,2020	819	819	100.0	[99.6; 100.0]	
Maniurana 2021	00	175 56	6 [49 0: 64 0]		Manjurano,2021	211	222	95.0	[91.3; 97.5]	
Acquick 2021	107	201 65	4 [50 9: 70 9]		Acquah,2021	401	435	92.2	[89.2; 94.5]	
Acqual,2021	197	301 03	.4 [59.6, 70.6]		Subgroup specific	itv	15700	99.3	[98.1: 99.7]	\diamond
Subgroup sensitivit	y	2192 42	.9 [31.5; 55.2]		Heterogeneity: $l^2 = 97$	7.3%. D < 0	0.0001			
Heterogeneity: / = 96.2	2%, p <	0.0001								
					uRDT					
	00	405 00	7 140 4 05 0		Hofmann.2018	112	112	100.0	[96.8: 100.0]	
Holmann,2018	30	135 20	.7 [19.4; 35.0]		Landier 1.2018	1238	1244	99.5	[99.0: 99.8]	-
Landier_1,2018	69	198 34	.8 [28.2; 41.9]		Landier 2.2018	1251	1259	99.4	[98.8: 99.7]	-
Landier_2,2018	67	183 36	.6 [29.6; 44.0]		Girma 2019	434	441	98.4	[96.8: 99.4]	
Girma,2019	41	82 50	.0 [38.7; 61.3]		Hofmann 1 2019	2682	2691	99.7	[99.4 99.8]	
Hofmann_1,2019	230	309 74	.4 [69.2; 79.2]	-	Hofmann 2 2019	467	467	100.0	199 2. 100 01	
Hofmann_2,2019	37	48 77	.1 [62.7; 88.0]		Liu 2019	1862	1926	96.7	[95.8 97.4]	
Liu,2019	36	65 55	.4 [42.5; 67.7]		Samuels 2019	341	361	94.5	[91.6: 96.6]	
Samuels,2019	85	122 69	.7 [60.7; 77.7]		Briand 2020	721	770	93.6	[91 7: 95 3]	
Briand,2020	104	172 60	.5 [52.7; 67.8]		Galatas 2020	4173	4217	99.0	[08.6: 00.2]	
Galatas,2020	122	179 68	.2 [60.8; 74.9]		Unwin 2020	82	84	97.6	[01 7: 00 7]	
Unwin,2020	31	158 19	.6 [13.7; 26.7]		Voung 2020	621	650	06.9	[05 1: 09 0]	- 27
Yeung,2020	14	26 53	.8 [33.4; 73.4]		Véanuez 2020	031	032	90.0	[95.1, 96.0]	
Vásquez,2020	25	39 64	.1 [47.2; 78.8]		Vasquez,2020	013	014	99.9	[99.3; 100.0]	
Manjurano,2021	117	175 66	.9 [59.4; 73.8]		Marijurano,2021	207	222	93.2	[09.1, 90.2]	
Acquah,2021	220	302 72	.8 [67.5; 77.8]		Acquan,2021	389	435	89.4	[86.1; 92.2]	
Subgroup sensitivity	y	2193 55	.5 [45.5; 65.0]	\diamond	Subgroup specific	ily	15095	90.0	[97.1; 99.4]	\rightarrow
Heterogeneity: $I^2 = 94.5$	5%, p <	0.0001			Heterogeneity: $I^{-} = 9I$	7.2%, p < 0	0.0001			
				20 40 60 80						86 88 90 92 94 96 98 100
Fig. 3 The forest pl	ot of	sensitivity and	d specificit	V						
-		/								,

Table 2 Meta-analysis of diagnostic performance Alere[™] Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag P. falciparum RDT according to the reference test

N data sets		Pooled sensitivit	:y, % [95% CI]	Heterog sensitiv	geneity for ity (l ² , %)	Pooled specificit	y, % [95% CI]	Hetero <u>c</u> for specific %)	geneity ity (l ² ,
		uRDT	cRDT	uRDT	cRDT	uRDT	cRDT	uRDT	cRDT
According to reference	e test								
PCR	9	60.4 [50.8; 69.2]	49.4 [38.2; 60.6]	89.4	92.6	97.5 [94.1; 98.9]	98.2 [95.5; 99.3]	97.6	97.1
Ultra-sensitive PCR	4	60.3 [42.2; 75.9]	44.1 [18.8; 72.8]	93.6	97.1	99.5 [98.9; 99.8]	99.8 [99.7; 99.9]	71.9	0.0

PCR Polymerase chain reaction, RDT Malaria rapid diagnostic test, CI Confidence interval

was 98.6% (95% CI: 97.1; 99.4), and of cRDT was 99.3% (95% CI: 98.1; 99.7). When PCR was used as reference test the specificity of uRDT and cRDT was 97.5% (95% CI: 94.1; 98.9) and 98.2% (95% CI: 95.5; 99.3) respectively, and when the ultra-sensitive PCR was used as reference test the specificity was 99.5% (95%CI: 98.9; 99.8) and 99.8% (95% CI: 99.7; 99.9), respectively (Table 2).

The specificity of AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT and cRDT in pregnant women was 98.1% (95% CI: 91.5; 99.6) and 98.7% (95% CI: 90.9; 99.8), respectively. Regardless of the reference test used, the specificity of AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT in symptomatic patients was 99.5%

(95%CI: 92.6; 100.0), and specificity of cRDT was 99.7% (95%CI:95.0; 100.0). In asymptomatic patients the specificity of AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT was 98.4% (95%CI: 95.4; 99.5), and specificity of cRDT was 99.3% (95%CI: 96.8; 99.9).

Discussion

This meta-analysis assessing the field performance of malaria uRDT (AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT) highlights the higher sensitivity of the AlereTM Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT compared to the cRDT when performed on the same field conditions and confirmed findings observed in

the laboratory conditions [8]. Indeed, these results are promising for detection of malaria in patients with low parasitaemia, subclinical or asymptomatic infections and pregnant women. For the former because current cRDT available on the market and widely used in malaria endemic countries are not able to diagnose malaria in patients with a parasite density below 100 / μ L while uRDT can, this may explain the relatively higher sensitivity of uRDT [28]. For the latter because they are in most countries under intermittent preventive treatment (IPT), which can strongly influence the parasite density, and because of pathophysiology of malaria during pregnancy.

Indeed, in pregnant women, red blood cells parasite by Plasmodium bind to the chondroitin sulfate portion of syndecan-1 of both intervillous space and the syncytiotrophoblast [5] leading to their sequestration into the placenta and explain a relative low blood parasite density [29, 30], and thus their capacity to escape to cRDT. Malaria in pregnancy is deleterious for both the mother [29] and the fetus [1]. For the mother, malaria can cause anaemia, severe disease, and death while for the fetus and newborn it contributes to stillbirth, preterm birth, and low birthweight [1, 5]. The WHO estimated that 822,018 of cases of low birthweights in sub-Saharan Africa were related to exposure to malaria parasite during pregnancy in 2019. Given the tremendous burden of malaria in pregnant women, there is an urgent need of highly sensitive method that can help in timely efficient diagnosing of malaria in this vulnerable population. Interestingly the current meta-analysis found that uRDT performed better than cRDT in this specific population, which may allow to capture and treat additional cases that may have been missed by cRDT.

Even if the specificity of uRDT seems to be slightly lower than cRDT it is estimated to 98.6% (95% CI: 97.1; 99.4) and is higher than 95% regardless of the reference test used in blood. Importantly its specificity is not statistically significantly different from the one obtained for the cRDT in the current meta-analysis.

From a public health perspective, the findings of this study suggest that $Alere^{TM}$ Ultra-sensitive malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT is more sensitive than cRDT and could help to capture additional low parasite density malaria cases that escape the current cRDT. These results call for the assessment of additional criteria, namely the stability at high temperature, cost and shelf life of uRDTs, before AlereTM Ultra-sensitive malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT could be integrated into the already available malaria diagnostic arsenal. Furthermore, it is essential that a correlation be established in the field between the parasitaemia observed in patients and the positivity of uRDTs to confirm the results obtained in the laboratory conditions. Nevertheless, given that cRDTs typically do not

consistently detect parasite densities lower than $100p/\mu L$, the definition of an ultrasensitive malaria test needs to be clarified and the conditions to fulfil for a test to be considered ultrasensitive need to be consensually adopted to compliment the current WHO definition, which is based solely on the parasite density detection threshold (below 100 parasites/µl) [28].

The results of the current study must be interpreted considering some drawbacks. Most of the studies were conducted in WHO African region (sub-Saharan Africa), which is the region with the highest burden of malaria. This can limit the generalizability of the results to other malaria endemic regions of the world. Data does not allow for stratified analysis according to parasite density, which is one of the key elements in the performance of malaria diagnostic tests. None of the studies specified the storage conditions of uRDT and cRDT, and only seven reported clearly that the test was conducted by trained laboratory technician/nurse, this may have impacted on the quality of the results. Several brands of cRDT with different performances were used as comparators to the Alere[™] Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag P. falciparum RDT in the current study. The diversity of these tests could be an additional source of heterogeneity in the results and may limit a direct comparison between Alere[™] Ultra-sensitive Malaria Ag P. falciparum RDT and a specific brand of cRDT test. Nevertheless, this study is the first to assess by the mean of a meta-analysis, the performances of one of the most recent diagnostic tools of malaria diagnostic in the field conditions. Furthermore, recent guidelines were used for the assessment of quality of included studies and the reporting of the review.

Conclusion

Findings of the meta-analysis show that AlereTM Ultrasensitive Malaria Ag *P. falciparum* RDT compared to cRDT performed in the same field conditions has higher sensitivity but lower specificity although the difference is not statistically significant.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at https://doi.org/10.1186/s12936-021-03783-2.

Additional file 1: Table S1. Search strategy for PubMed.

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None.

Authors' contributions

CD, and SS selected the studies, extracted the relevant information, and synthesized the data. CD, FKS and SS did the literature search. CD performed analyses and wrote the first draft of the paper with inputs of FKS, and SS. SS conceived the original idea of the study with the inputs of CD and FKS. All

authors critically revised successive drafts of the paper. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

All materials are available in the manuscript and additional file.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate Not applicable.

Consent for publication

All authors approved the final version of the manuscript and agree for publication.

Competing interests

We declare no competing interests.

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