Rhino-orbito-cerebral mucormycosis causing cranial nerve abscess in post-COVID-19 status

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DESCRIPTION
Perineural extension of fungal infection is a rare complication that had been observed in post-COVID-19 immunocompetent mucormycosis patients during this pandemic. Rhino-orbito-cerebral mucormycosis is an opportunistic fungal infection caused by members of family Mucoraceae. Mucormycosis proved to be the lethal disease in untreated patients with diabetes or patients on immunosuppressive therapy with the same pattern of spread and severity. Rhino-orbito-cerebral mucormycosis has been declared endemic by the Indian government recently. Due to the aggressive pattern of spreading in this disease, it rapidly involves the surrounding structures. Cerebral extension of the organism occurs either by direct extension, haematogenous route or perineural spread. Over 2 months, we have observed nine patients with perineural spread involving cranial nerves during this endemic. The peculiar imaging findings in a perineural spread include thickened nerves with abnormal enhancement and perineural fat stranding. Initially, the enhancement in the affected nerve represents neuritis. However, it can progress into a full-blown abscess. The trigeminal nerve is a large cranial nerve with a unique course that enables us to easily demonstrate this evolution line. MRI stands to be the best diagnostic and non-invasive imaging technology that produces three-dimensional detailed anatomical images that help determine disease spreading with treatment. This article highlights the role of MRI in the diagnosis of perineural complications observed in rhino-orbito-cerebral mucormycosis.

Here, we present two representative cases of a 55-year-old woman and a 60-year-old man who presented to our hospital with facial pain, facial numbness and high-grade fever. On initial examination, periorbital soft tissue swelling and facial redness were found with a history of hospitalisation for COVID-19 pneumonitis in the recent past. The patients were administered steroids during the previous hospital stay. On relevant laboratory investigations, both the patients had deranged blood glucose levels.

The patients underwent an MRI of the paranasal sinuses and brain, revealing orbital cellulitis, pansinusitis, abnormal signals in the premaxillary skin, retro-antral fat and masticator space extending to the right cavernous sinus (figure 1A). The inferior turbinates and paranasal sinuses also had non-enhancing areas on postcontrast MRI, representing necrosis. In the first patient, the mandibular division of the right trigeminal nerve was thickened and showed heterogeneous signals on all MRI sequences (figure 1B). The diffusion-weighted image (DWI) image showed diffusion restriction in the abscess in the nerve (figure 1C). On postcontrast, T1 fat-suppressed images, the nerve revealed peripheral enhancement with central liquefied non-enhancing collection, represented an abscess (figure 1D).

To cite: Sharma K, Tiwari T, Goyal S, et al. BMJ Case Rep 2021;14:e245756. doi:10.1136/bcr-2021-245756
In another similar patient, there was the involvement of the preseptal soft tissue, eye globe and optic nerve up to the optic chiasma on the right side (figure 2A) and the path of spread was seen extending along the optic nerve on a DWI (figure 2B). There are very few documented cases available in the literature describing the perineural spread of fungal infection, especially after this COVID-19 era; however, similar cases have been reported previously in patients with uncontrolled diabetes by Galletti et al.1 A surgical biopsy from the inferior turbinate was done, which revealed non-septate fungal hyphae. Both the patients managed with antifungal drugs; however, they did not improve much. Both the patients were receiving treatment in our hospital till the writing of this article.

Contributors KS and TT contributed in planning, conduct, reporting, conception and design, acquisition of data or analysis and interpretation of data. SG and RS contributed in acquisition of data and interpretation of the data.

Funding The authors have not declared a specific grant for this research from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests None declared.

Patient consent for publication Obtained.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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