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Review Article

Early detection of spinal cord compression: screening, clinical presentation, outcome and prognosis

Dalia Hasan Ali[1]*, Abdullah Ibrahim Alshafi[2], Eman Khalid Aljehani[3], Jehad Ali Alhilal[4], Yasir Yar Al Balushi[5], Ghazal Obaidallah Alkhuzaee[6], Mohammed Mamdouh Alenezi[7], Khadija Mohamed Aldallal[8], Marwan Mohammed Alanazi[9], Lama Mohammed Saleem[10]

[1]Department of Orthopedic, King Fahad General Hospital, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
[2]College of Medicine, King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia
[3]Department of Neurology, Ministry of Health, Dhahran, Saudi Arabia
[4]Department of Family Medicine-Aldanah PHC, Ministry of Health, Dammam, Saudi Arabia
[5]Department of Accident and Emergency, Salmaniya Medical Complex, Manama, Bahrain
[6]Department of Radiology, East Jeddah Hospital, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia
[7]Department of Surgery, Al Adan Hospital, Hadiya, Kuwait
[8]Department of Radiology, Salmaniya Medical Complex, Manama, Bahrain
[9]Physical Therapy Department, Comprehensive Rehabilitation Center, Tabuk, Saudi Arabia
[10]Department of Health Administration, King Fahad General Hospital, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

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***Correspondence:**
Dr. Dalia Hasan Ali,
E-mail: dr.daliahali@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Spinal cord compression (SCC) is a critical medical condition characterized by pressure on the spinal cord, which can lead to severe and potentially irreversible neurological damage if not promptly addressed. The causes of SCC are varied, including primary and metastatic tumors, traumatic injuries, degenerative diseases, and infections. Early detection of SCC is paramount for improving patient outcomes, minimizing risk of permanent deficits, and enhancing quality of life. This review examines etiology and clinical presentation of SCC, highlighting the significance of early screening and detection. Effective screening involves identifying high-risk individuals through risk stratification, utilizing advanced imaging techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) scans, and maintaining clinical vigilance. Recognizing early symptoms, such as localized pain, neurological deficits, and autonomic dysfunction, is crucial for timely intervention. Prognosis of SCC improves significantly with early diagnosis and intervention. Treatment options include surgical decompression to relieve pressure, radiation therapy for tumor-related compression, and corticosteroids to reduce inflammation. Early intervention can prevent irreversible neurological damage and enhance recovery potential. Comprehensive rehabilitation, involving physical and occupational therapy, is critical for restoring function and improving quality of life.

Keywords: SCC, Early detection, Neurological deficits, Risk stratification, Imaging techniques, Clinical surveillance, Prognosis

INTRODUCTION

Spinal cord compression (SCC) is a serious medical condition where pressure is applied to the spinal cord, potentially leading to significant neurological impairments if not promptly diagnosed and treated. Understanding the causes and symptoms of SCC is crucial for early detection and effective management.

The causes of SCC are varied and can be broadly categorized into tumors, trauma, degenerative diseases, and infections.[1] Tumors are a significant cause, which can be either primary or metastatic.[2] Primary tumors originate in the spinal column or spinal cord, including meningiomas, schwannomas, and astrocytomas. More commonly, SCC is caused by metastatic tumors where cancers spread to the spine from other parts of the body, such as the breast, lung, prostate, and kidney.[3] These metastases can grow and compress the spinal cord or its blood supply.

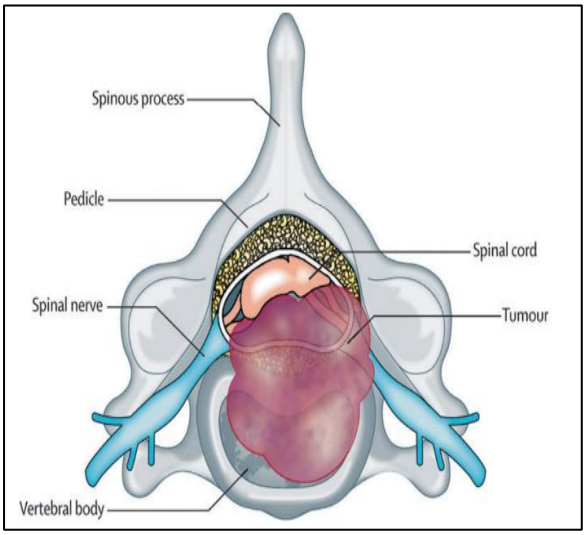

Figure 1: Example of a tumor within a vertebral body, anterior to the spinal cord which is growing posteriorly into the vertebral canal to compress the spinal cord and/or nerve roots.

Trauma is another major cause of SCC.[4] Vertebral fractures, particularly in the cervical or thoracic spine, can lead to bone fragments pressing against the spinal cord.[5] Severe dislocations or subluxations of the vertebrae can also result in compression. Blunt force injuries, such as those sustained in accidents, can cause immediate compression due to swelling, hematoma, or bone displacement. Degenerative diseases are also common culprits.[6] Herniated discs, where intervertebral discs bulge or rupture, can press on the spinal cord. Osteoarthritis can lead to the overgrowth of bone spurs (osteophytes), narrowing the spinal canal and causing compression.[7] Spinal stenosis, a condition characterized by the narrowing of the spinal canal often due to age-related changes, can similarly squeeze the spinal cord.[8] Infections can lead to SCC through the formation of abscesses.[9] Epidural abscesses, which are collections of pus between the outer membrane of the spinal cord and the bones of the spine, can compress the spinal cord. Tuberculosis of the spine (Pott's disease) and other bacterial infections can also result in similar compressive phenomena. Understanding these causes and recognizing the symptoms early are crucial steps in managing SCC effectively and preventing permanent neurological damage.

LITERATURE SEARCH

This review involved a systematic search and analysis of current literature on SCC, focusing on early detection, clinical presentation, and prognosis. We conducted a comprehensive search of databases such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and the Cochrane Library using keywords related to SCC, early detection, and prognosis. Inclusion criteria encompassed articles detailing the causes, symptoms, screening methods, and outcomes of SCC. Relevant data were extracted and analyzed to identify key themes and findings. These findings were synthesized into a coherent narrative emphasizing the importance of early detection and timely intervention in improving SCC prognosis.

DISCUSSION

SCC represents a severe pathological state where the spinal cord is subjected to pressure, potentially leading to significant, irreversible neurological damage.[10] The importance of early detection cannot be overstated, as it substantially influences patient outcomes, minimizing the risk of permanent neurological deficits. Effective screening involves a combination of risk stratification, clinical surveillance, and the use of advanced imaging modalities. The goal is to identify individuals at high risk and ensure timely intervention, thereby improving patient outcomes and reducing the likelihood of permanent neurological deficits.

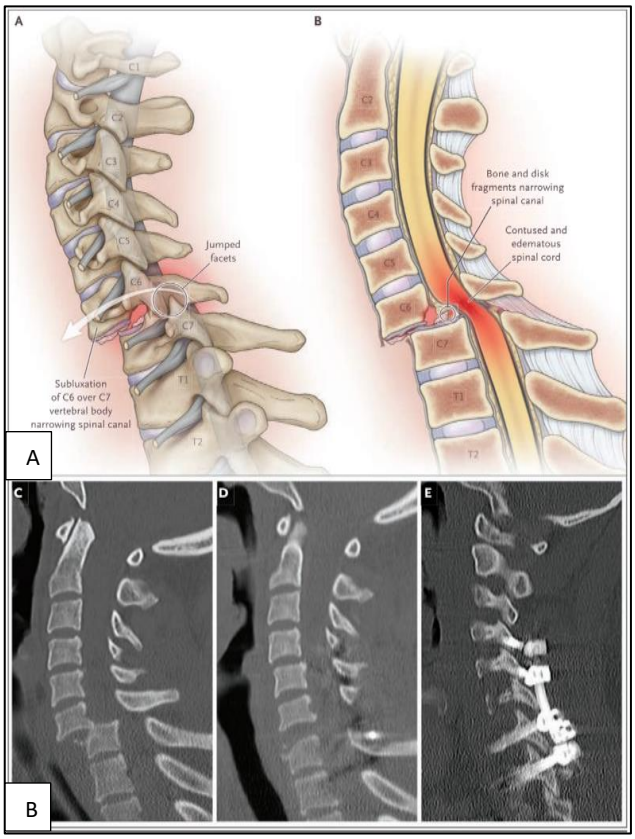

Figure 2 (A and B): SCC.[11]

Risk stratification and monitoring

Screening begins with identifying individuals who are at elevated risk for developing SCC. High-risk groups include patients with known malignancies, especially those prone to spinal metastasis such as breast, lung, prostate, and kidney cancers.[12] Additionally, individuals with severe osteoporosis, previous spinal trauma, or degenerative spinal diseases are at increased risk.[10] Regular monitoring through clinical assessments and imaging is recommended for these high-risk populations. For cancer patients, routine spinal imaging may be integrated into their overall cancer management plan to detect early metastases.[13]

Imaging modalities

Diagnostic imaging is pivotal in the early detection and management of SCC. Accurate and timely imaging allows for the identification of the underlying cause, extent of compression, and precise localization of the lesion, which are essential for guiding appropriate treatment strategies. MRI is the gold standard for diagnosing SCC due to its superior soft tissue contrast and detailed visualization of the spinal cord, nerve roots, intervertebral discs, and surrounding soft tissues.[14,15] MRI can detect a range of abnormalities, including tumors (both primary, such as meningiomas and astrocytomas, and metastatic lesions), degenerative changes (herniated discs and spinal stenosis), infections (epidural abscesses and vertebral osteomyelitis), and traumatic injuries (soft tissue injuries, hematomas, and ligamentous damage). MRI provides sagittal, axial, and coronal views, allowing comprehensive assessment, and the use of contrast-enhanced MRI can further delineate the extent of tumors and inflammatory processes. CT scans are highly effective in visualizing bony structures and are especially useful when MRI is contraindicated or unavailable. CT provides detailed images of bone fractures, degenerative bone changes (osteophytes and spinal stenosis), and traumatic injuries, making it a critical tool in trauma settings.[16] CT myelography, where contrast dye is injected into the spinal canal before imaging, enhances the visibility of the spinal cord and nerve roots, helping to identify areas of compression more accurately. X-rays, while less sensitive than MRI and CT, can be useful for initial assessment in emergency settings.[17] They are effective in detecting gross structural changes such as vertebral fractures, significant dislocations, and severe degenerative changes. In resource-limited settings, X-rays serve as a preliminary diagnostic tool before more advanced imaging is available.[17] For cases involving metastatic cancer, positron emission tomography (PET) scans and bone scintigraphy can be used to detect active metastatic lesions.[13] These imaging modalities can identify areas of increased metabolic activity and bone turnover, indicating the presence of cancerous lesions that may not yet have caused structural changes visible on MRI or CT. Although not commonly used for diagnosing SCC, ultrasound can be beneficial in specific scenarios, such as evaluating the spinal cord in neonates and infants where bone structures are not fully ossified, allowing better visualization of the spinal canal and cord.

Clinical surveillance

Healthcare providers must maintain a high index of suspicion for SCC, especially in patients presenting with back pain, a common early symptom of compression.[18] Detailed clinical evaluations, including neurological assessments, are essential. Symptoms such as localized back pain that radiates along nerve pathways, progressive weakness, sensory loss, or changes in bladder and bowel function should prompt immediate investigation. Early recognition of these symptoms, coupled with prompt imaging, is crucial for early diagnosis and intervention. For patients with known risk factors, establishing regular follow-up and monitoring protocols is critical. This can include scheduled imaging studies and routine clinical evaluations.[1] For example, cancer patients might have periodic MRIs as part of their follow-up care to monitor for spinal metastases. Similarly, individuals with severe osteoporosis or previous spinal injuries might undergo regular assessments to detect early signs of compression.

The clinical presentation of SCC is crucial for early detection and prompt intervention. Recognizing the early signs and symptoms can significantly impact patient outcomes by facilitating timely diagnosis and treatment. One of the earliest and most common symptoms of SCC is pain, which is often localized to the region of the spine where the compression occurs. This pain can be severe and persistent, and it may radiate along the nerve pathways associated with the affected spinal segment.[19] For example, cervical spine compression may result in pain radiating to the shoulders and arms, while thoracic or lumbar compression may cause pain radiating to the chest, abdomen, or legs. The pain is typically exacerbated by movements, such as bending or twisting, and may worsen when lying down, due to increased pressure on the spinal structures. As the compression progresses, patients may develop neurological deficits, which are critical indicators of SCC.[20] These deficits can include weakness, numbness, and tingling in the extremities. The pattern and distribution of these symptoms depend on the level of the spinal cord affected. For instance, compression in the cervical region can lead to weakness and sensory changes in the arms and hands,[21] whereas compression in the thoracic or lumbar regions might affect the legs and feet.[22] Early detection hinges on recognizing these subtle neurological changes before they become severe. Patients may report sensory disturbances such as paresthesias (tingling or "pins and needles" sensation), hypoesthesia (reduced sensation), or dysesthesia (abnormal sensation).[20] These sensory changes often follow a dermatomal pattern, corresponding to the nerve roots affected by the compression. For example, a patient with thoracic SCC may experience a band-like sensation around the chest or abdomen, known as a "girdle" sensation.[23]

Autonomic symptoms are significant indicators of advanced SCC and include issues with bladder and bowel control.[24] Patients may experience urinary retention, incontinence, or constipation, which are late signs of significant spinal cord involvement. These symptoms warrant immediate medical attention as they suggest a high degree of neural compromise. Difficulty walking, unsteady gait, and balance issues are common in SCC, particularly when the compression affects the spinal cord's ability to transmit signals to the lower extremities.[25] Patients may present with ataxia (lack of muscle coordination) or spasticity (increased muscle tone and reflexes), which can significantly impact mobility.[20] Observing changes in a patient's ability to walk or perform coordinated movements can be a critical clue for early detection. Changes in reflexes can be early indicators of SCC. Hyperreflexia (exaggerated reflexes) or hyporeflexia (diminished reflexes) can indicate spinal cord involvement.[26] The presence of pathological reflexes, such as the Babinski sign, can suggest upper motor neuron involvement and warrant further investigation.[27]

In cases where SCC is caused by metastatic cancer, patients may also present with systemic symptoms such as unexplained weight loss, fatigue, and fever.[28] These symptoms, in conjunction with localized spinal pain and neurological deficits, should prompt further evaluation for potential SCC.

A thorough clinical evaluation is essential for early detection. This includes a detailed medical history to identify risk factors and symptoms, and a comprehensive physical examination focusing on neurological assessment. Tests to assess muscle strength, sensory function, reflexes, and coordination should be conducted systematically to detect subtle abnormalities.[29,30] Moreover, the underlying cause of SCC also plays a crucial role in determining the prognosis. Compression due to malignancies typically indicates a more challenging prognosis due to the systemic nature of cancer, whereas compressions stemming from reversible or correctable conditions like herniated discs or minor traumas often have more favorable outcomes. Regardless of the cause, comprehensive rehabilitation strategies that include physical therapy and occupational therapy are vital for enhancing and restoring function, aiming to optimize the quality of life and functional independence of affected individuals.[29]

Early detection is crucial for minimizing neurological damage, enhancing recovery potential, and improving overall patient prognosis. Some factors that contribute to these outcomes are the speed of diagnosis, the initial severity of symptoms, the underlying cause of compression, and the efficacy of the treatment provided.[31] Firstly, the promptness of diagnosis and intervention is critical in determining outcomes.[32] When SCC is detected early, before significant neurological damage has occurred, there is a greater likelihood of halting the progression of symptoms and potentially reversing damage. Early surgical decompression can relieve pressure on the spinal cord, preventing further injury and potentially restoring lost function.[33] Similarly, early administration of corticosteroids can reduce inflammation and swelling around the spinal cord, alleviating compression and minimizing neurological deficits.[34] Delayed diagnosis often results in irreversible damage, leading to permanent disabilities.

Further, the degree of neurological impairment at the time of diagnosis is a strong predictor of patient outcomes.[32] Patients who present with minimal symptoms, such as localized pain or mild sensory deficits, generally have a better prognosis compared to those with severe symptoms like profound weakness, significant sensory loss, or autonomic dysfunction. Early detection aims to identify SCC at a stage where neurological impairment is still reversible, thus enhancing the potential for recovery.[35] Patients with mild symptoms at presentation often experience significant improvement or complete recovery with timely and appropriate treatment.

Also, the underlying cause of SCC significantly affects the prognosis.[36] Compression due to metastatic cancer generally indicates a poorer prognosis because it often reflects advanced, systemic disease.[28] However, early detection and treatment can still significantly improve quality of life and functional status by alleviating pain and preventing further neurological deterioration. Conversely, SCC caused by trauma, herniated discs, or degenerative diseases such as osteoarthritis or spinal stenosis often has a more favorable outcome, particularly when treated promptly.[36] In these cases, early intervention can effectively relieve compression and lead to substantial recovery.

Moreover, the effectiveness of the chosen therapeutic interventions plays a crucial role in determining outcomes. Surgical decompression is a primary treatment modality for SCC and is most effective when performed early.[31] The success of surgery depends on various factors, including the location and extent of compression, the patient’s overall health, and the presence of any comorbid conditions. Post-surgical rehabilitation, including physical and occupational therapy, is essential for optimizing recovery and improving functional outcomes.[37] Radiation therapy is particularly effective for SCC caused by metastatic tumors, helping to reduce tumor size and alleviate compression.[38] The prompt initiation of these treatments following early detection can significantly improve patient outcomes.

Early detection of SCC can significantly improve the quality of life by preserving neurological function and preventing disability.[39] Patients diagnosed early are more likely to maintain independence in daily activities, retain mobility, and have fewer complications related to prolonged immobility, such as pressure sores, urinary tract infections, and deep vein thrombosis.[40]

Psychological outcomes are also better when patients experience less pain and disability, leading to improved overall well-being and reduced anxiety and depression associated with chronic illness.[41] Several prognostic factors can influence outcomes in SCC. These include the patient's age, overall health, the speed of symptom onset, and the specific level of the spinal cord affected.[32] Younger patients with fewer comorbidities generally have better outcomes.[42] Rapid onset of symptoms often indicates a more acute and severe compression, necessitating urgent intervention to prevent permanent damage.[43] The specific level of spinal cord affected also plays a role, with cervical compressions potentially causing more widespread deficits compared to thoracic or lumbar compressions.[44]

CONCLUSION

Early detection of SCC is essential for preventing severe neurological damage and improving patient outcomes. It is important to identify high-risk individuals, such as patients with metastatic cancers, severe osteoporosis, or prior spinal trauma. Utilizing advanced imaging techniques like MRI and CT scans is crucial for early and accurate diagnosis. Recognizing early symptoms-such as localized back pain, radiating pain, progressive neurological deficits, and autonomic dysfunction-allows for timely intervention. Effective treatment strategies, including surgical decompression, radiation therapy, and corticosteroids, can significantly improve prognosis when implemented early. Comprehensive rehabilitation and supportive care further enhance recovery and functional independence.

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