

Isolated Temporomandibular Synovitis as Unique Presentation of Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis

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ABSTRACT. Temporomandibular joint (TMJ) involvement is quite frequent in juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA). We describe a 15-year-old girl with isolated TMJ arthritis presenting as a unique manifestation of JIA, and its successful treatment. She underwent arthroscopic synovectomy followed by intraarticular steroid injection. Early use of synovectomy and intraarticular steroids in TMJ arthritis may reduce pain, improve jaw function, and prevent irreversible deformities. (*J Rheumatol* 2001; 28:1689–92)

Key Indexing Terms:

TEMPOROMANDIBULAR JOINT

JUVENILE IDIOPATHIC ARTHRITIS

Temporomandibular joint (TMJ) involvement is quite frequent in juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA), particularly in polyarticular and systemic forms, with prevalence varying from 22% to 72%¹⁻⁵, but has never been reported as a unique manifestation of JIA.

We describe a case of isolated TMJ arthritis that was the unique manifestation of JIA and outline a successful treatment approach.

CASE REPORT

A 15-year-old girl was referred to our Pediatric Rheumatology Unit for further evaluation of orofacial pain. One year prior to our evaluation she had experienced orofacial pain during mastication and mandibular movement. At first these symptoms had been interpreted as myofascial pain secondary to malocclusion, and a nightly occlusal appliance was then utilized without any improvement. Two months later, an orthopantomograph showed no evidence of dental abnormalities, but flattening and reduced range of motion of the mandibular condyles.

Over the next months, the girl experienced increased pain intensity with difficulty in eating and mastication. Eight months later, computed tomography (CT) scan of the TMJ confirmed the bilateral erosions of the mandibular condyles with flattening of their surface. Bone scintigraphy

(⁹⁹Tc) revealed an isolated increased tracer uptake on both mandibular condyles that was confirmed by SPECT scan; this allowed us to rule out possible artifacts (Figure 1A).

On admission, she complained of severe facial pain on mastication with difficulty eating and weight loss (5 kg in 6 mo). Her history was unremarkable. In her family history, a paternal uncle had rheumatoid arthritis.

On examination she was a very thin girl (weight 39.1 kg, less than the 3rd centile for her age), with poor subcutaneous fat distribution. She had decreased mandibular range of motion with maximal mouth opening capacity of 30 mm, bilateral crepitations, malocclusion with decreased mandible protrusion, and severe weakness of the mastication muscles. The remaining physical examination was unremarkable.

Complete blood count, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, C-reactive protein, serum electrolytes, thyroid, liver and kidney function tests were all normal. Tests for antinuclear antibody, dsDNA, rheumatoid factor were all negative, as well as testing for HLA-B27, her haplotype being A2, A33, B39, B65, DR1, DR8, DQ1, DQ4. Ophthalmologic examination revealed no sign of inflammation in the anterior chamber.

Gadolinium enhanced magnetic resonance imaging (Gd-DTPA MRI) confirmed severe deformities and decreased range of motion of the mandibular condyles, synovial fluid, and disc flattening and fragmentation. After Gd-DTPA injection, a clear enhancement of the synovial membrane suggested extensive bilateral synovial hyperplasia (Figure 2). She underwent bilateral arthroscopic synovectomy, and the pathology showed multi-layered synovial lining composed of hyperplastic and hypertrophic synoviocytes diffusely infiltrated by lymphocytes and plasma cells.

The history, the clinical pattern, the radiological and histological findings were strongly suggestive of JIA diagnosis, oligoarticular type. She was given naproxen and, one month later, had intraarticular injection of triamcinolone hexacetonide 10 mg in both temporomandibular joints.

Within 6 months after treatment, a dramatic, clinical improvement was observed: she no longer experienced pain on mastication, and had started eating properly with a subsequent weight gain of 4.7 kg. On examination the mandibular range of motion had greatly improved, with opening distance of 42 mm, no crepitations, and normal strength of the mastication muscles. The examination of the other joints and of the anterior eye chamber was still normal.

At 12 month followup, 24 months after onset, no other joint involvement was evident. Bone scintiscan (⁹⁹Tc) was repeated and showed complete resolution of the active lesions previously highlighted in the TM

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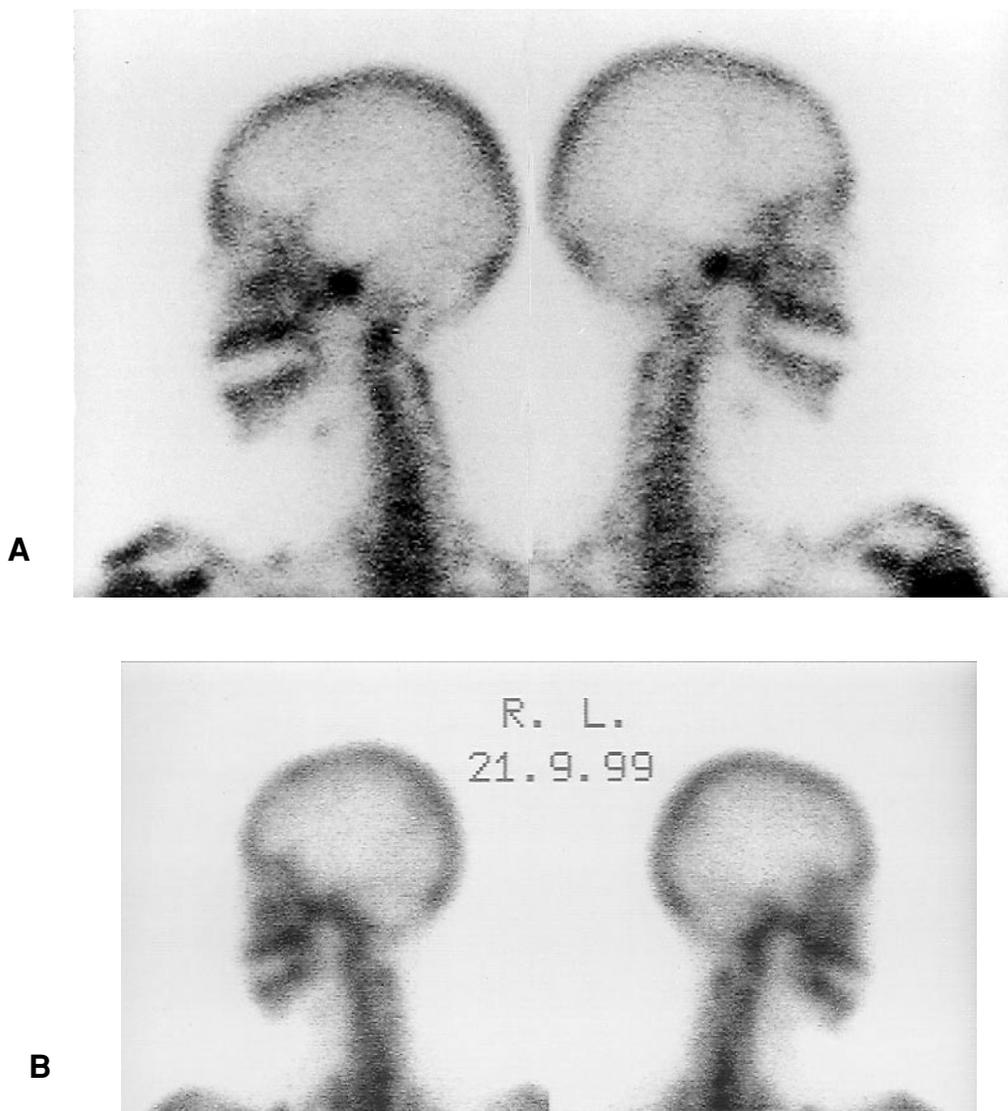


Figure 1. A. Radiophosphate (Tc-99m MDP) images show intense isolated tracer uptake of both TMJ. B. Radiophosphate (Tc-99m MDP) images 6 months after treatment showing complete normalization of TMJ.

joints (Figure 1B). One year later we repeated Gd-DTPA MRI, which revealed the persistence of unchanged condyle deformities and limited condyle range of motion on mouth opening, but disappearance of intra-articular effusion. After gadolinium injection the synovial thickening observed in the previous MRI was no longer present.

DISCUSSION

Radiographic TMJ abnormalities have been reported in 22–72% of patients with JIA¹⁻⁵. TMJ involvement occurs more frequently in polyarticular onset than in either oligoarticular or systemic onset JIA²⁻⁵.

No marked sex difference has been found either in prevalence or in severity of TMJ arthritis^{1,2}. While some clinical variables, such as duration and early onset of the disease, are significantly associated with TMJ involvement, immunological tests (rheumatoid factor, antinuclear antibody, HLA-B27) are not^{2,4,6}.

Our patient's TMJ arthropathy represents an isolated manifestation of JIA; in fact, 24 months after onset of symptoms, the TMJ arthritis was still the only localization of the disease. The recently revised criteria for JIA, oligoarticular type, are fulfilled by exclusion of infective, hematological, and malignant conditions⁷.

The typical symptoms of TMJ synovitis such as pain during jaw movement, crepitus, and restricted mouth opening capacity^{2,8} were all present in our patient, as well as the radiological findings such as bilateral condylar flattening and erosions on CT scan, which have been found to be strongly related to TMJ involvement in JIA⁹. MRI, showing inflammation and thickening of the synovial membrane, confirmed this diagnosis. MRI has been shown to be a helpful diagnostic tool in the detection of early inflammatory changes in TMJ, with a strong correlation

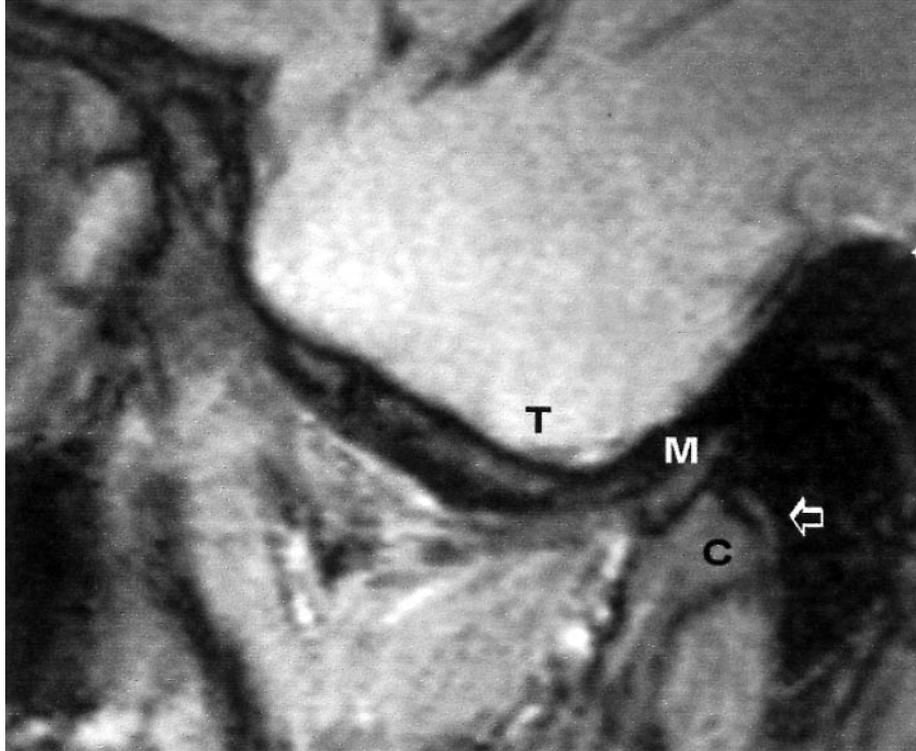


Figure 2. Gradient echo sequence MRI of the right TMJ (mouth open). Note thickening of synovial membrane (arrow), irregular profile of the flattened condyle, and narrowed articular space (M: fragmented meniscus, T: articular tubercle, C: mandibular condyle).

between degree of enhancement and degree of pathological findings in the synovial membrane^{10,11}. The histology report, showing villous hyperplasia of the synovial membrane with inflammatory infiltrate of lymphocytes and plasma cells, gave final confirmation of the diagnosis.

Chronic synovitis of the TMJ can have early and late consequences: the earliest is the functional impairment due to synovial membrane thickening, masticator muscle weakness, and facial pain. Moreover, the limited mandibular movement makes airway maintenance very difficult in case of major procedures such as surgical operations, and this problem, in some cases, has led to lifesaving tracheotomy^{12,13}. The most important late consequence of TMJ involvement in JIA is the mandible growth disturbance that leads to either micrognathia or to facial asymmetry if bilateral or unilateral, respectively. In our patient the reduced mouth opening capacity was severe and limited eating with a consequently important weight loss.

Considering the severity of the clinical picture and the unusual isolated localization we elected to perform bilateral arthroscopic synovectomy followed by intraarticular injection of steroids to improve symptoms quickly and to obtain histological confirmation of clinical and radiological suspicion of TMJ chronic synovitis. In a recent report the combination of arthroscopic synovectomy followed shortly by

intraarticular steroid injection was found to be more effective than the same procedures alone in gaining long lasting reduction of local inflammation in unresponsive active knee synovitis¹⁴.

Triamcinolone hexacetonide is one of the most widely used steroids for intraarticular injection, with a satisfactory rate of response (81% remission after 6 months)^{15,16}. The dose of 1 mg/kg has been shown to be appropriate and safe for the articular cartilage.

The TM joint's delicate structure, with the mandibular growth plate just under the fibrocartilage of the condylar head, and therefore easily damaged in active synovitis, justifies an aggressive therapeutic approach to reduce the risk of severe growth impairment.

The dramatic response in our patient is very encouraging and indicates that intraarticular steroid injection in combination with arthroscopic synovectomy in the management of early TMJ involvement alleviates pain, improves jaw function, and prevents further joint damage that can lead to irreversible deformities.

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