World Journal of Otorhinolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery (2018) 4, 122–125

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

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journal homepage: www.keaipublishing.com/WJOHNS; www.wjent.org

Review Article

Difficult airway management in children and young adults with arthrogryposis

Glenn Isaacson [a,c,*], Elizabeth T. Drum [b]

[a] *Department of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck Surgery, Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA*
[b] *Department of Anesthesiology and Critical Care, Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA*
[c] *Department of Pediatrics, Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, USA*

Received 13 April 2018; accepted 17 April 2018
Available online 13 July 2018

KEYWORDS
Arthrogryposis;
Endotracheal intubation;
Difficult airway;
Malignant hyperthermia

Abstract *Objective:* To review current evidence and experience with anesthesia and airway management issues in children and young adults with arthrogryposis.
Data sources: Review of existing world literature and description of personal experience at a center for children's orthopedic surgery and rehabilitation over 2 decades.
Methods: Description of common problems and their solutions in this unusual and diverse group of patients.
Results: Arthrogryposis multiplex congenital includes more than 400 conditions that lead to congenital joint contractures affecting more than one body area. Among the many causes of arthrogryposis, 50%–65% fall into two large categories – amyoplasia and distal arthrogryposis. There is general agreement that best function in children with arthrogryposis is achieved through early mobilization of joint contractures. Children with arthrogryposis average >5 operative procedures during childhood. Anesthesia for these procedures may be complicated by limited jaw mobility and mouth opening, restricted lung development, positioning difficulties, difficult venous access and concerns about increased risk for malignant hyperthermia. 75% of arthrogryposis patients do not have a difficult airway. For those with a history of airway problems or those meeting criteria for a difficult airway, careful advanced planning helps to assure safe and successful surgery. We describe several specialized techniques for endotracheal intubation of children with arthrogryposis.

* Corresponding author. Department of Otolaryngology – Head & Neck Surgery, Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University, 1077 Rydal Road, Suite 201, Rydal, PA 19046, USA.
E-mail address: glenn.isaacson@temple.edu (G. Isaacson).
Peer review under responsibility of Chinese Medical Association.

Production and Hosting by Elsevier on behalf of KeAi

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wjorl.2018.04.003

Conclusions: Children and young adults with arthrogryposis are a diverse group. Many pose unique challenges for airway and surgical management. Review of individual anesthesia records and careful advanced planning by a coordinated, experienced airway team can lead to best outcomes from arthrogryposis surgery.

Introduction

What is arthrogryposis?

Arthrogryposis multiplex congenital includes more than 400 conditions that lead to congenital joint contractures affecting more than one body area.[1] These conditions share the phenomena of fetal akinesia—the inability to move articulations in utero — a requirement for normal joint formation and function. The lack of mobility is associated with the development of connective tissue around the joints, which leads to fibrosis and contractures of the affected joints. Neurological diseases, muscular and connective tissue abnormalities, limited intrauterine space, in adequate placental supply, and maternal disease and infections may contribute to fetal akinesia.[2]

One hundred five different genetic defects have been identified that lead to the various arthrogryposis phenotypes.[3] Among the many causes of arthrogryposis, 50%—65% fall into two large categories — amyoplasia and distal arthrogryposis. Amyoplasia has a frequency of about 1/10,000 live births and has no genetic predisposition. It presents in the newborn period with symmetric contractures involving all 4 limbs. The jaw and trunk are relatively spared. Normal limb muscle tissue is replaced by fatty, fibrous tissue.[4]

Distal arthrogryposis is not a single entity, but a group of syndromes with joint contracture involving the hands and feet. The distal arthrogryposis syndromes affect 1/2500 live births.[5] They are subdivided into 11 types based on involvement, etiology and associated anomalies of other body structures. Freeman—Sheldon syndrome, Sheldon-Hall syndrome and Gordon syndrome are included among these 11 types. Several distal arthrogryposis syndromes have been associated with mutations in sarcomeric muscle proteins. Some include defects in embryonic myosin heavy chain protein which is expressed only during fetal life, from 6 to 24 weeks of gestational age.[6]

Management of the patient with arthrogryposis

Airway and anesthesia issues

There is general agreement that best function in children with arthrogryposis is achieved through early mobilization of joint contractures. Early therapy is so important, some have discussed early obstetrical delivery of fetuses diagnosed with arthrogryposis in utero.[7] Joint mobilization through physical therapy, casting and surgical release of contractures form the basis of infant management.[8] Children with arthrogryposis average >5 operative procedure during childhood — some many more — given the complex nature of the disorder and involvement of multiple articulations.

Anesthesia for these procedures may be complicated by limited jaw mobility and mouth opening, restricted lung development, positioning difficulties, difficult venous access and concerns about increased risk for malignant hyperthermia.[9] Several of the syndromes associated with arthrogryposis, notably Escobar (multiple pterygium) syndrome and Freeman—Sheldon (whistling face) syndrome, feature restricted jaw opening,[10] limited mouth opening, micrognathia, high-arched palate, limited cervical movement or cervical instability making direct laryngoscopy and intubation difficult.

Patients with arthrogryposis have a higher incidence of associated neuromuscular diseases or associated myopathies.[11] This has led many to be concerned about an increased risk of malignant hyperthermia. There is also frequent concern about increased incidence of intraoperative hypermetabolism and hyperthermia, although a recent large review found no evidence of increased odds of intraoperative hyperthermia.[11] In the presence of underlying myopathies, many avoid the use of succinylcholine in order to reduce the risk of hyperkalemia, although no data exists about the safety of its use in patients with arthrogryposis.[12] Non-depolarizing muscle relaxants and potent inhalational agents have an excellent safety record in anesthetic management for patients with arthrogryposis.[2]

Between 20% and 67%, of affected children have scoliosis. Repeated anesthetics are often necessary for expansion of exoskeletal spinal implants used to correct spinal alignment. Vertebral curves over 50° in individuals nearing or past skeletal maturity may require extensive, protracted spine fusion surgery.[13] These are associated with substantial blood loss and can be complicated by post-operative respiratory problems from compromised lung function, underlying myopathies and surgical stress. This should be anticipated during pre-operative planning and may affect both the timing of post-operative extubation and the need for postoperative intensive care unit facilities.

Approach to airway management

Regional anesthesia

When planning operative interventions, the first question to ask is whether general anesthesia is necessary. While this is the default choice in healthy infants and children, local and regional techniques have important advantages in children with arthrogryposis. For upper extremity surgery, axillary,