



Tooth loss as risk factor for foreign-body asphyxiation in nursing-home patients

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ABSTRACT

Foreign body asphyxiation causes severe medical conditions including pneumonia in the elderly requiring nursing care. The objective of this study was to elucidate the relationships between insufficient occlusal support due to tooth loss and the onset of asphyxiation accidents, and determine preventive measures for such accidents in nursing homes in Japan. The subjects were 437 elderly (110 men and 327 women) requiring nursing care. The frequency and risk factors for asphyxiation accidents and the food causing asphyxiation were examined in these subjects for 2.5 years, from June 2006 to December 2008. During the study period, 51 of the 437 subjects suffered asphyxiation. Self-feeding ability and loss of occlusal support were associated with a covariate-adjusted relative ratio for asphyxiation of 3.1 (95% confidence interval (CI) = 1.50–6.44) and 1.7 (95% CI = 1.12–2.74), respectively. To prevent asphyxiation in elderly people, it was found that maintaining or restoring occlusal support may be required. It was concluded that self-feeding ability and loss of occlusal support are significant risk factors for foreign-body asphyxiation among elderly people requiring nursing care.

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1. Introduction

Asphyxiation occurs when any object is aspirated into the larynx or tracheobronchial tree, and causes airway obstruction: this obstruction can result in inability to breathe, with the need for rapid intervention to prevent asphyxial death (Ekberg and Feinberg, 1992). Therefore, asphyxiation cases are identified by signs and symptoms of dyspnea, abnormal respiratory rate, rhythm/depth of breathing, restlessness and cyanosis. Asphyxia is reported to be a common cause of death not only in the general population (Feinberg et al., 1992), but also in infants (<1 year of age) and the elderly. To date, a high frequency (incidence: 0.66 fatalities/100,000) of asphyxia has been reported in the general population each year (Fioritti et al., 1997). In Japan, deaths from asphyxiation have increased since the 1980s. Moreover, the mortality from asphyxiation incidents in infants has decreased by more than 60% in the past 30 years. However, mortality from asphyxiation in the elderly has increased rapidly (Ichikawa and Marui, 2000). This represents an important warning regarding asphyxiation to both elderly receiving care and their caregivers.

Samuels and Chadwick (2006) reported rapid eating, cramming of food into the mouth, and premature transfer of food into the pharynx as possible causes of asphyxiation in the elderly. Several reports have also suggested that oral stage dysfunction and cognitive impairment contribute to asphyxiation (Carter and Jancar, 1984; Feinberg et al., 1992; Finestone et al., 1998). A huge number of elderly people, including those requiring nursing care, lose teeth and/or occlusal support, resulting in decreased oral function (Hatch et al., 2001). Since wearing dentures is related to oral function, speech function and independent activities of daily living (Minakuchi et al., 2006), elderly people who lose occlusal support must wear dentures. However, it is sometimes difficult for elderly people requiring nursing care to wear dentures, for many reasons including mismanagement of dentures, losing dentures, and shortage of oral-care services. There have been few reports on the relationship between asphyxiation accidents and insufficient occlusal support due to tooth loss or failure to restore occlusal support by means of dentures. Haddon suggested that it is possible to eliminate these risk factors related to accidental death. Even when accidents do occur, the worst outcome can be avoided by thorough application of appropriate measures during and after an accident (Haddon, 1980).

In the present study, we examined the risk factors for asphyxiation accidents among the elderly in nursing homes, and determined the relationships among insufficient occlusal support caused by tooth loss, restoration of occlusal support by means of dentures, and asphyxiation accidents.

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2. Materials and methods

2.1. Participants

The survey was conducted in 486 individuals (mean age: 85.0 ± 8.5 years), whose guardians gave consent to their participation in the present study, among elderly people requiring care in 13 nursing homes in Japan. Of them, those who were discharged from nursing homes ($n = 49$) because of other reasons than asphyxiation were excluded from this study, since we could no longer peruse them. The study was performed on 437 subjects (110 men and 327 women; mean age, 80.8 ± 8.3 years for men and 86.4 ± 8.1 years for women; Barthel index, 25.1 ± 25.0).

2.2. Survey of asphyxiation

Asphyxiation occurring while eating food over a period of 2 years and 6 months from June 2006 to December 2008 was examined, and the outcomes were also determined. In this study, asphyxiation accidents were limited to those caused by food.

Asphyxiation cases were identified by signs and symptoms such as dyspnea, abnormal respiratory rate, rhythm/depth of breathing, restlessness and cyanosis as reported by the [North American Nursing Diagnosis Association \(2003\)](#).

2.3. Examination of risk factors for asphyxiation

The following six items were assessed to examine the risk factors for asphyxiation. In terms of the oral environment and oral function, the procedures used by dentists and physicians in each nursing home were studied.

2.3.1. Self-feeding ability

Subjects who could feed themselves at least partly without any help were assigned to the “independent group” and those who were able to eat only with assistance were assigned to the “dependent group”.

2.3.2. Activity of daily living (ADL)

ADL in these subjects was evaluated using the Barthel Index ([Mahoney and Barthel, 1965](#)). When the index was 45 points or higher, ADL was considered to be maintained, and when the index was less than 40 points, ADL was considered to be decreased.

2.3.3. Cognitive function

The severity of senile dementia was evaluated according to “ADL independence of demented elderly”, designed by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan (<http://www.mhlw.go.jp:80/topics/kaigo/kentou/15kourei/san-kou4.html>; [Hirakawa et al., 2008](#)). Cognitive impairment was identified at rank 2 and higher of this scale ([Table 1](#)).

2.3.4. Tongue coating

Tongue coating was visually evaluated according to the report by [Miyazaki et al. \(1995\)](#). We divided the scores into two groups (no, score 0 and 1; yes, score 2 and 3).

2.3.5. Food residue

We assessed food residue in the oral region after a meal ([Ono et al., 2007](#)).

2.3.6. Xerostomia

The presence or absence of xerostomia was examined. The categories reported by [Kakinoki et al. \(2004\)](#) were dry, mildly dry,

Table 1

ADL independence of demented elderly (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan).

Rating criteria	Description
Rank 0	Clear mentality
Rank 1	Although demented, the subject is almost independent in ADL at home or elsewhere
Rank 2	The subject shows slight impairment of cognition, but is independent under a carer's observation
Rank 3	The subject sometimes shows impairment of cognition, thus a carer is required
Rank 4	The subject often shows impairment of cognition, thus a carer is required all time
Rank 5	The subject shows serious mental symptoms or problematic behavior, thus specific medical care is required

wet (normal) and wet (high). The categories of dry and mildly dry were considered to indicate xerostomia.

2.4. Assessment of oral function

Assessment of oral function was performed based on the current number of teeth, occlusal condition and presence or absence of swallowing disorder.

2.4.1. Assessment of occlusal condition

With regard to the occlusal condition, the Eichner classification of occlusal support regions ([Eichner, 1955](#)) was used for reference. Subjects with an Eichner occlusal support classification of A1–B1, who had occlusal support in at least three sites in the molars, were assigned to the “natural occlusal support group”. Those in whom occlusal support was restored with removable dentures were assigned to the “denture occlusal support group”. Those with occlusal support in two or fewer sites with an Eichner classification of B2–C3, with no occlusal support in the molars, and unrestorable occlusal support using removable dentures were assigned to the “occlusal support disruption group”.

2.4.2. Swallowing disorder

Swallowing disorder was defined as cases in which choking or accidental aspiration occurred, and cases that showed a gurgling sound on auscultation of the neck region ([Takahashi et al., 1994](#)) after swallowing 3 ml of water.

2.5. Survey of diagnosis

The presence or absence of general conditions that might have affected swallowing function was determined.

2.6. Survey of concomitant medication

Medication that might have affected oropharyngeal function (e.g., psychotropic agents, antidepressants) ([Carl and Johnson, 2006](#)) was investigated.

2.7. Statistical analysis

Chi-squared test was used to determine the independence of each group in two-group comparisons. Risk factors were screened by logistic analysis of variance using the presence or absence of a history of asphyxiation as a dependent variable and the presence of significant factors as an independent variable. The stepwise method (backward elimination method) was used for variable selection. Windows Japanese version SPSS (Ver. 16) was used for statistical analysis, and the level of significance was a p value of <0.05 .

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