Journal of Bone Oncology 4 (2015) 37–41

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Bone Oncology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbo

Review Article

Benign tumours of the bone: A review ☆

David N. Hakim [a], Theo Pelly [b], Myutan Kulendran [c], Jochem A. Caris [d]

[a] Imperial College London, UK
[b] Leeds University, UK
[c] St George's Hospital,UK
[d] Academic Surgical Unit, Imperial College London, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 22 November 2014
Accepted 23 February 2015
Available online 2 March 2015

Keywords:
Benign
Bone
Tumour
Osteochondroma
Giant cell tumour
Osteoblastoma

ABSTRACT

Benign tumours of the bone are not cancerous and would not metastasise to other regions of the body. However, they can occur in any part of the skeleton, and can still be dangerous as they may grow and compress healthy bone tissue. There are several types of benign tumours that can be classified by the type of matrix that the tumour cells produce; such as bone, cartilage, fibrous tissue, fat or blood vessel. Overall, 8 different types can be distinguished: osteochondroma, osteoma, osteoid osteoma, osteoblastoma, giant cell tumour, aneurysmal bone cyst, fibrous dysplasia and enchondroma.

The incidence of benign bone tumours varies depending on the type. However, they most commonly arise in people less than 30 years old, often triggered by the hormones that stimulate normal growth. The most common type is osteochondroma.

This review discusses the different types of common benign tumours of the bone based on information accumulated from published literature.

1. Introduction

Benign tumours of the bone consist of a wide variety of different neoplasms. These tumours vary in terms of incidence, clinical presentation and require a diverse array of therapeutic options. The incidence of benign bone tumours is debated due to their often asymptomatic presentation and difficulty in detection [1]. Overall, 8 different types can be distinguished; osteochondroma, osteoma, osteoid osteoma, osteoblastoma, giant cell tumour, aneurysmal bone cyst, fibrous dysplasia and enchondroma. These tumours can be roughly divided into categories based on their cell type: bone-forming, cartilage-forming, as well as connective tissue and vascular [2]. Some other forms of benign tumours may also present, however due to their low incidence they will not be discussed. We will discuss the most common first followed by descending prevalence.

2. Osteochondroma

These cartilaginous tumours represent most of the benign bone tumours (approx. 30%). Most commonly found in the femur and tibia, osteochondroma occur mainly in the metaphysis and diametaphysis and projects out of the underlying bone. The cartilaginous cap is the site of growth, which normally diminishes after skeletal maturity. Whilst solitary osteochondroma (exostosis) is normally encountered within the first four decades [3], the hereditary and autosomal form predominantly occurs at a younger age and may present with limb shortening and deformity.

Conventional radiology (using anatomical location, transitional zone and mineralisation of matrix) is used to diagnose chondroid tumours[4]. When there is no mineralisation of the cortex, diagnosis becomes more difficult and Computer Tomography (CT) or Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) may be used. MRI provides excellent demonstration of arterial and venous compromise [5]. The most common characteristics include: endosteal scalloping, thick periosteal reaction and cortical hook. Only symptoms caused by the tumour warrant surgical removal and can provide excellent results [6].

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3. Giant cell tumour of bone

Twenty per cent of all benign bone tumours are giant cell tumours (GCT), and mostly appear between the ages of 20 and 40 [7,8]. The location of GCTs can vary – most occur in the long bones,

☆This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jbo.2015.02.001
2212-1374/

predominantly in the area of the knee (50–65%). Histologically, GCTs consist of giant cells with osteoclast like function surrounded by spindle-like stromal cells and other monocytic cells [7,9]. GCTs are usually benign (80%). However, recurrence after excision may occur in 20–50%, with 10% becoming malignant on recurrence [10].

GCTs appear on plain radiographs with the appearance of a lytic cystic lesion, with well defined, non-sclerotic margins [7,10]. These are usually located in the epiphysis of bones, with eccentric growth patterns. Other common features include cortical thinning, expansile remodelling of the bone, and prominent trabeculation [9]. In aggressive tumours radiographs may demonstrate cortical thinning, cortical bone destruction, and a wide zone of transition [9]. Pathologic fracture is a feature in between 11% and 37% of patients. [9,11]

Although GCTs are usually diagnosed on the basis of radiographic evidence, a number of additional imaging tools may help to confirm the diagnosis. In 57% of cases 'donut sign' is present on bone scintigraphy, a result of increased peripheral uptake of radionuclide [12].

The use of CT imaging is helpful in examining the extent of the tumour margins. CT is superior to radiographic imaging in the recognition of certain features of GCTs, including cortical alterations and periosteal reactions [9]. MR imaging is the most accurate tool for demonstrating GCTs margins [9,13]. However, it is less effective than CT imaging at demonstrating changes in the cortex of the bone [13].

Functional imaging tools such fluoro-2-deoxy-D-glucose positron emission tomography have been identified as a potentially useful tool in identifying malignancy in musculoskeletal tumours [14]. There has been less research into the usage of PET in identifying benign bone tumours [15]. There is some evidence demonstrating that in PET giant cell tumours and other tumours containing giant cells display high FDG uptake [15–17]. It has been suggested that FDG PET may therefore be useful in the imaging of giant cell tumours after recurrence, where normal anatomy may be distorted [18].

Primarily, the management of GCTs has been curettage followed by filling with bone cement [7,19]. However this has been associated with high recurrence rates. Additional treatment with adjuvants is often employed to reduce this recurrence. These adjuvants may include zinc chloride, bisphosphonates, phenol, liquid nitrogen and alcohol. [20–23]. Aggressive tumours may also be treated with wider excision and the use of surgical prostheses [9].

A recent development in treatment has been the use of the chemotherapy drug, denosumab, a monoclonal antibody which inhibits the osteoclastic activity of GCT [7]. This is useful when the location of the tumour makes surgery difficult, for example in the sacrum or pelvis [7]. Interim results of a phase II trial have shown that the drug may be used to reduce the need for more extensive surgery in difficult to resect tumours [24].

4. Osteoblastoma

Osteoblastoma is a rare, benign bone tumour accounting for 14% of bone tumours [25]. It most commonly affects people within the first four decades of life with a larger probability of it occurring in the second and third decades [26]. Although any bone can be involved, osteoblastoma arises predominantly in the axial skeleton with spinal lesions constituting one-third of reported cases [27]. On CT imaging, osteoblastoma appearance is changeable and can often look like other tumours, including malignant ones. They can be distinguished due to their significantly large nidus size (>2 cm in diameter, sometimes up to 15 cm) compared to osteoid osteoma [28], but diagnosis needs to be confirmed on biopsy. Their nidus is formed by dense sclerotic woven bone and tumour trabeculae frequently connect with the surrounding bone. Osteoblastoma tends to remain confined to bone and does not normally penetrate the cortex, it has therefore usually a good prognosis and a low recurrence rate of around 15–20% [29]. The first line of treatment is medical [30], if proven unsuccessful radiotherapy and chemotherapy might be attempted before choosing surgical interventions. There have only been a few cases reported where osteoblastoma has progressed to an osteosarcoma [31].

5. Osteoma

Osteomas are a benign outgrowth of membranous bones, most commonly found in the para-nasal sinuses, skull and long bones [32]. These benign tumours can grow on bone (homoplastic) and can present on other tissues (heteroplastic or eteroplastic) [33]. They consist of osseous tissue that comprises of condensed bone with a well-defined border, without surface irregularities or satellite lesions. Without symptoms they are difficult to diagnose. Because of their increased incidence in divers and swimmers an inflammatory response has been thought to be one of the underlying mechanisms [34]. Solitary osteoma are usually harmless, however if multiple are found they are a risk that the patient may have other underlying conditions, such as Gardner's syndrome [35]. Although rare, surgical removal is indicated in these circumstances as well as in symptomatic patients.

6. Osteoid osteoma

Rarely exceeding 1.5 cm, osteoid osteoma is a benign bone tumour composed of osteoid and woven bone. Osteoid osteoma makes up 12% of all skeletal neoplasms, making it quite common. 50% of osteoid osteoma lesions are found in the fibia or tibia. The cortex of long bones is the most common location of the lesion. Dense, fusiform, reactive sclerosis characterise osteoid osteoma [36]. It is more commonly found in young males under the age of 40 [37], whilst infants are rarely affected. The most common symptom is pain. The axial skeleton is affected much less, with skull and facial bones rarely affected. MRI, CT scanning and Isotopic scanning may be used for diagnoses and for the identification of central calcifications surrounded by the nidus (ovoid translucency) [26]. In a study done by Assoun et al. 19 patients were examined using CT and MRI, results showed that CT was more accurate than MR imaging in detection of the osteoid osteoma nidus in 63% of cases [38].

The osteoid and woven bone can be seen as interconnected trabeculae (thin or broad) or sheets. The bone surrounding the lesion (host bone) is strong and is made of varying mixtures of woven and lamellar bone [36]. The radiologic appearance of cortical osteoid osteoma arising in the shaft of a long bone has certain characteristics. It may be radiolucent and contain a changeable amount of mineralisation and is usually centrally positioned in an area of reactive osteosclerosis (dense fusiform, reactive). Sclerosis may regress after surgical removal of the tumour. Preoperative administration of tetracycline and the use of UV light for examination during the procedure may enhance the surgeon's view of the nidus. This technique works due to the tetracycline's position in the rapidly metabolised osteoid of the nidus in contrast to the slow mineralising host bone [36].

Out of 860 cases reviewed by Jackson et al. only 1.6% found it painless [39]. Most patients present with a swelling, mass or deformity. Swelling may be associated with superficial lesions.

Table shows the anatomical locations of the osteoid osteomas and their characteristics:

Morphological and anatomical location of Osteoid osteoma [40]	Characteristics
Intracortical	Dense sclerosis around the nidus
Periosteal	Periosteal reaction