

Synovial cysts of the lumbar spine

Torbiele synowialne odcinka lędźwiowego kręgosłupa

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Abstract

Background and purpose: Synovial cysts of the spine occur most frequently in the lumbosacral region. Methods of treatment vary, but in cases of chronic pain or neurological deficits surgical intervention is undertaken. The aim of this paper is to present indications, surgical technique and efficacy of surgical treatment in patients with synovial cyst of the spinal canal.

Material and methods: The retrospective analysis included 11 patients, aged from 47 to 72 years, treated at the Department of Neurosurgery and Neurotraumatology, Poznan University of Medical Sciences, between 2004 and 2009. The length of medical history ranged from 2 months to 6 years. Conservative treatment applied before surgery was not effective. Neurological examination revealed unilateral or bilateral sciatica, superficial sensory disturbance or lower limb paresis.

Results: Synovial cysts were located mainly at the L4-L5 level (9 cases). Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the spine was performed in all patients and showed the cystic lesion attached to the intervertebral joint. Surgical treatment consisted of a unilateral fenestration using microsurgical techniques in most cases. Back pain relief was observed in 9 cases. In 10 patients, symptoms of sciatica disappeared. Neurological deficits disappeared in 5 patients.

Conclusions: Surgical treatment of spinal synovial cysts is safe, effective and ensures a long-lasting effect. Surgical treat-

Streszczenie

Cel pracy: Torbiele synowialne kręgosłupa występują najczęściej w odcinku lędźwiowo-krzyżowym. Opracowano zróżnicowane sposoby leczenia tych zmian zwyrodnieniowych, jednak w przypadkach przewlekłego bólu lub wystąpienia neurologicznych objawów ubytkowych zaleca się interwencję chirurgiczną. Celem pracy jest przedstawienie wskazań, techniki operacyjnej i skuteczności leczenia operacyjnego chorych z torbielą synowialną kanału kręgowego.

Materiał i metody: Retrospektywną analizą kliniczną objęto 11 pacjentów, w wieku od 47 do 72 lat, leczonych w Katedrze i Klinice Neurochirurgii i Neurotraumatologii UM w Poznaniu w latach 2004–2009. Długość wywiadu chorobowego wahała się od 2 miesięcy do 6 lat. Leczenie zachowawcze stosowane przed leczeniem operacyjnym nie dawało poprawy. W badaniu neurologicznym stwierdzono jednostronną lub obustronną rwę kulszową, zaburzenia czucia powierzchownego bądź niedowłady kończyn dolnych.

Wyniki: Torbiel umiejscawiała się najczęściej na poziomie L4–L5 (9 przypadków). Badanie kręgosłupa za pomocą rezonansu magnetycznego (RM) zostało wykonane u wszystkich pacjentów i wykazało zmianę o charakterze torbielowatym, która była połączona ze stawem międzykręgowym. Leczenie operacyjne polegało w większości przypadków na jednostronnej fenestracji więzadła żółtego z wykorzystaniem techniki mikrochirurgicznej. Ustąpienie dolegliwości bólowych kręgosłupa zaobserwowano w 9 przypadkach. U 10 chorych

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ment is indicated in patients in whom the clinical symptoms correlate with the presence of synovial cyst in imaging studies and do not resolve after conservative treatment.

Key words: synovial cyst, lumbar spine, surgical management.

Introduction

Synovial cysts of the spinal canal cause direct compression on the nervous structures within the spinal canal. They are most common in the lumbosacral spine, but can be found in both the cervical and thoracic spine [1-6]. The incidence of synovial cysts varies from 0.1% to 0.8% in patients who have undergone surgery for various spinal disorders [7]. Cysts seldom result in chronic back pain and sciatica. The origins of synovial cysts remain controversial. The role of either injury or inflammation as pathognomonic factors is still under dispute. Similarly, disagreement regarding treatment modalities exists. Various modes of conservative treatment have been proposed, but chronic pain or neurological deficits require surgical treatment [2,7].

The aim of the study is to present surgical technique and the efficacy of surgical treatment of patients with spinal canal synovial cysts.

Material and methods

Our cohort included 11 patients (6 women and 5 men) aged 47 to 72 years (mean: 59 years) who were treated surgically for lumbar spine synovial cysts between 2004 and 2009 in the Department of Neurosurgery and Neurotraumatology of the Medical University of Poznań. Synovial cysts were most common in the sixth decade of life (6 out of 11 patients).

Anamnesis varied from 2 months to 6 years; 4 patients were treated conservatively for more than 2 years. Four patients reported an acute onset of the symptoms while the remaining 7 patients presented with slowly progressive symptoms. A single patient reported pain occurrence after spinal injury (immediately after a car accident) while all the others had spontaneous pain occurrence. Patients complained of persistent lumbosacral pain that escalated with a change of position. Pain inten-

ustąpiły objawy rwy kulszowej. Ubytkowe objawy neurologiczne wycofały się u 5 pacjentów.

Wnioski: Leczenie chirurgiczne torbieli synowialnych kręgosłupa jest metodą bezpieczną, efektywną i zapewniającą trwały efekt. Do leczenia operacyjnego kwalifikują się chorzy, u których objawy kliniczne korelują z obecnością torbieli w badaniach obrazowych i nie ustępują po leczeniu zachowawczym.

Słowa kluczowe: torbiel synowialna, odcinek lędźwiowy kręgosłupa, leczenie chirurgiczne.

sity diminished in a supine position. Five patients reported pain aggravation at night. Pain radiated to lower extremities in all of the patients.

Prior to surgery, all the patients were treated pharmacologically on top of which 9 underwent physiotherapy. In one patient, a cyst was punctured and steroids were injected into the cyst under computed tomography (CT) guidance. No positive effects were found during 3 weeks follow-up while control magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) showed no cyst regression.

Preoperative clinical examination revealed sciatica – unilateral in 9 and bilateral in 2 patients. Neurological deficits were found in 6 patients. All of them reported hypoesthesia, five of them foot paresis and one foot paralysis.

Anteroposterior, lateral and functional X-rays enabled evaluation of degenerative changes and spine stability. First degree degenerative spondylolisthesis was found in one patient. MRI and CT exams facilitated final diagnosis (Fig. 1).

A posterior approach was selected for surgery. The initial skin incision (3 to 4 cm long) was performed over spinous processes, then, after fascia incision and paravertebral muscles dissection, the level of the synovial cyst was confirmed with intraoperative X-rays. The subsequent stages of the surgery were performed under a microscope with 8 to 16 magnifications. We found hypertrophy of facet joints in 6 patients. We were able to visualize synovial cyst upon ligamentum flavum dissection followed by fenestration enlargement with partial resection of the superior-medial part of the facet in 8 patients. In 2 cases, we were forced to enlarge the operative approach owing to the narrow space between arches, invaginated ligamentum flavum and enlarged facet joint. These patients had hemilaminectomy performed in order to ensure an adequate approach to the spinal canal. A cyst was adjacent to the ligamentum flavum in one case; conversely, it was adjacent to facet

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