Pneumonia in acute stroke patients fed by nasogastric tube

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Background: Aspiration pneumonia is the most important acute complication of stroke related dysphagia. Tube feeding is usually recommended as an effective and safe way to supply nutrition in dysphagic stroke patients.

Objective: To estimate the frequency of pneumonia in acute stroke patients fed by nasogastric tube, to determine risk factors for this complication, and to examine whether the occurrence of pneumonia is related to outcome.

Methods: Over an 18 month period a prospective study was done on 100 consecutive patients with acute stroke who were given tube feeding because of dysphagia. Intermediate outcomes were pneumonia and artificial ventilation. Functional outcome was assessed at three months. Logistic regression and multivariate regression analyses were used, respectively, to identify variables significantly associated with the occurrence of pneumonia and those related to a poor outcome.

Results: Pneumonia was diagnosed in 44% of the tube fed patients. Most patients acquired pneumonia on the second or third day after stroke onset. Patients with pneumonia more often required endotracheal intubation and mechanical ventilation than those without pneumonia. Independent predictors for the occurrence of pneumonia were a decreased level of consciousness and severe facial palsy. The NIH stroke scale score on admission was the only independent predictor of a poor outcome.

Conclusions: Nasogastric tubes offer only limited protection against aspiration pneumonia in patients with dysphagia from acute stroke. Pneumonia occurs mainly in the first days of the illness and patients with decreased consciousness and a severe facial palsy are especially endangered.

Dysphagia is an important complication of acute stroke. Abnormal lip closure, lingual incoordination, and delayed or absent triggering of the swallowing reflex may lead to a disturbance of both the oral and the pharyngeal stage of swallowing. Frequently encountered consequences are incomplete oral clearance, pharyngeal pooling, regurgitation, and aspiration. In the acute stage of the illness, dysphagia is found in up to 50% of stroke patients, depending on the timing of the assessment, the diagnostic methods used, and the case mix. Dysphagic symptoms resolve in most patients within a week to a month and persist in only a small number of subjects beyond six months.

Aspiration with the possible consequence of aspiration pneumonia is the most important acute complication of dysphagia, affecting up to one third of dysphagic patients. Besides a proper diagnostic assessment and an early start to rehabilitative efforts, tube feeding is usually recommended as an effective and safe way of supplying nutrition in these patients during the first two weeks. In a recent study on patients who had suffered a stroke more than six months earlier, Nakajoh et al found that the frequency of pneumonia was significantly higher in dysphagic patients with oral feeding than with tube feeding. However, owing to fundamental differences of the clinical features in acute and chronic stroke, observations in post-acute stroke patients should not be extrapolated to patients in the acute stage of the disease.

The present investigation was conducted with the following aims: first, to estimate the frequency of pneumonia in acute stroke patients fed by nasogastric tubes; second, to determine risk factors for this complication; and third, to examine whether the occurrence of pneumonia is related to outcome.

Methods
Over an 18 month period we included in this study 100 consecutive patients referred to our stroke unit. Our department provides a neurological service for about 500 000 inhabitants aged over 16 years in the area around Münster. All patients presented within 24 hours of the onset of acute stroke and were provided with a nasogastric tube because of dysphagia (for definition see below). Exclusion criteria were admission more than 24 hours after stroke onset, oral feeding from day 0, coma on admission, and endotracheal intubation on admission. The study protocol was approved by the local ethics committee. All patients underwent unenhanced computed tomography or magnetic resonance imaging of the brain.

The clinical severity of the stroke was assessed on the day of admission using the National Institutes of Health stroke scale (NIHSS). For further analysis, the items “level of consciousness,” “facial palsy,” “dysarthria,” “best language,” “extinction or inattention (neglect),” and a sum score of “motor arm” and “motor leg,” reflecting the degree of a hemiparesis, were selected a priori. These variables were dichotomised into severe deficits, corresponding to individual NIHSS scores of ≥2, and non-severe deficits, corresponding to NIHSS scores of ≤1. In case of the sum score for hemiparesis we chose a cut off value of ≥6 to indicate a severe deficit. All the clinicians involved had been trained in applying this scale with the help of a suitable teaching video.

The patients’ ability to swallow was assessed clinically on the day of admission by an experienced speech pathologist.

Abbreviations: MRS, modified Rankin scale; NIHSS, National Institutes of Health stroke scale
Endotracheal intubation and artificial ventilation became necessary in three patients without pneumonia and in 15 with pneumonia (p < 0.001). The indications for endotracheal intubation were deterioration of consciousness, "hemiparesis," and "aphasia" (table 1).

As inferred from logistic regression analysis, independent factors in the occurrence of pneumonia were the NIHSS items "consciousness" and "facial palsy" (table 2). The duration of nasogastric tube placement varied greatly between the two groups. While patients without pneumonia had a nasogastric tube inserted for only two to three days (median 2 days, mean 4.9 (4.8)), the nasogastric tube was removed in patients with intercurrent pneumonia only after a median of 15 days (mean 16.3 (7.2)).

Endotracheal intubation and mechanical ventilation became necessary in three patients without pneumonia and in 15 with pneumonia (p < 0.001). The indications for endotracheal intubation were deterioration of consciousness (n = 11), primary respiratory failure (n = 6), and severe congestive heart failure (n = 1).

Outcome was evaluated in 87 patients; 13 patients could not be contacted. Seventeen patients made a good recovery, 30 had a moderate outcome, and 40 had a poor outcome, seven of whom had died (table 3). Patients with a good or moderate outcome more often had brain infarction than patients with a poor outcome. Patients with a poor outcome had a lower NIHSS score on admission, more often acquired intercurrent pneumonia, and more often needed endotracheal intubation and artificial ventilation. The duration of nasogastric tube placement was longer in patients with a poor outcome than in either of the other outcome groups. Multivariate regression analysis showed the NIHSS score on admission to be the only independent predictor of a poor outcome.

**DISCUSSION**

In our cohort of acute stroke patients needing tube feeding because of dysphagia, the incidence of pneumonia was 44%. At first glance, this number seems surprisingly large compared with other studies. Thus Mann et al., Gordon et al., and Hilker et al. found evidence of pneumonia in only...
20%, 13%, and 21% of patients, respectively, and Smithard et al observed pneumonia in 33% of their patients. However, the discrepancies between these numbers are clearly explained by selection bias, as the frequencies given in the first three studies referred to unselected stroke patients, and Smithard et al—although referring to dysphagic patients—excluded those with a decreased level of consciousness.

In our study, a decreased level of consciousness and facial palsy turned out to be independent clinical variables predictive of pneumonia. The first of these has already been identified as a major risk factor for pneumonia by others, and is not specific for stroke patients. Pathophysiologically, a decreased level of consciousness is known to lead to attenuation of protective reflexes and to worsening of the coordination of breathing and swallowing, thereby predisposing to aspiration independent of the underlying disease. In contrast, the correlation between a severe facial palsy and pneumonia is a new and stroke specific observation. We hypothesise that it is not the facial palsy itself that increases the risk of aspiration. More probably, a severe facial palsy indicates concomitant paresis of the tongue and other oropharyngeal muscles involved in swallowing. Although this point has to be examined more closely in future investigations, we suggest that a severe facial palsy is interpreted as a marker for a substantially increased risk of aspiration.

In our study, patients with a poor functional outcome after three months had acquired an intercurrent pneumonia significantly more often than those with a good or moderate outcome (70%, v 23% and 24%, respectively). Despite this obvious correlation, only the NIHSS score on admission proved to be an independent predictor of outcome. This reflects the limited sample size, the investigation of only a small number of possible risk factors, and the preselection of stroke patients with dysphagia. Other studies of unselected stroke patients have identified a broader range of independent prognosticators, such as dysphagia, impaired consciousness, urinary incontinence, and raised body temperature.

The question remains as to what conclusions should be drawn from this study for the care of patients with acute stroke. Obviously, a 44% incidence of pneumonia in acute stroke patients fed by nasogastric tube warrants changes to our present therapeutic strategy.

### Table 1: Epidemiological features, lesion location, clinical features, and outcome data stratified by the occurrence of pneumonia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epidemiological features</th>
<th>No pneumonia (n = 56)</th>
<th>Pneumonia (n = 44)</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>67.9 (12.9)</td>
<td>70.0 (10.5)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>33/23</td>
<td>28/16</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow up during initial hospital stay (days)</td>
<td>18.1 (9.2)</td>
<td>19.1 (9.2)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesion location</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle cerebral artery, left</td>
<td>30 (54%)</td>
<td>23 (52%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle cerebral artery, right</td>
<td>15 (27%)</td>
<td>10 (23%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle cerebral artery + anterior cerebral artery, left</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>3 (7%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain stem</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
<td>4 (9%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal capsule haemorrhage, left</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal capsule haemorrhage, right (%)</td>
<td>1 (2%)</td>
<td>2 (3%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical features</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIHSS score</td>
<td>10.3 (5.1)</td>
<td>17.4 (4.9)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased consciousness</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>19 (43%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial palsy</td>
<td>18 (30%)</td>
<td>29 (66%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemiparesis</td>
<td>21 (38%)</td>
<td>26 (59%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysarthria</td>
<td>11 (20%)</td>
<td>14 (32%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphasia</td>
<td>14 (25%)</td>
<td>24 (55%)</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>8 (14%)</td>
<td>8 (18%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endotracheal intubation</td>
<td>2 (4%)</td>
<td>3 (7%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasogastric tube duration (days)</td>
<td>4.9 (4.8)</td>
<td>16.3 (7.2)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Outcome**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>13 (27%)</td>
<td>4 (10%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>23 (48%)</td>
<td>7 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>12 (25%)</td>
<td>28 (72%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are given as mean (SD) or n (%). Numbers of NIHSS items refer to severe clinical findings (corresponding to individual NIHSS scores of 2 or more). In case of “hemiparesis,” numbers of the NIHSS items “motor arm” and “motor leg” were added; hemiparesis was counted as severe if the sum score was >6.

F, female; M, male; NIHSS, National Institutes of Health stroke scale.

### Table 2: Clinical risk factors for the development of pneumonia: results of logistic regression analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Risk factor</th>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>p Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consciousness</td>
<td>7.4 (2.9 to 18.4)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial palsy</td>
<td>3.1 (1.0 to 9.3)</td>
<td>&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemiparesis</td>
<td>0.6 (0.4 to 1.1)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphasia</td>
<td>2.1 (0.7 to 6.1)</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dysarthria</td>
<td>1.4 (0.6 to 3.4)</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>1.2 (0.4 to 3.8)</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Kaplan–Meier survival curve showing relative number of patients (y axis) free of pneumonia. The x axis gives the time in days. The Kaplan–Meier curve was censored for a follow up of less than 10 days in patients without pneumonia.
knowledge, the early insertion of a gastrostomy tube does not appear to be superior to feeding through a nasogastric tube. As with nasogastric tubes, gastrostomy tubes do not offer protection from colonised oral secretions and are known to increase gastro-oesophageal reflux. Thus, with the exception of a study by Norton et al, others have found similar aspiration rates with gastrostomy and nasogastric tube feeding.

To reduce the rate of aspiration pneumonia in acute stroke patients, one might consider the use of early protective endotracheal intubation in high risk patients—that is, those with severely decreased consciousness and severe facial palsy. There are at least three arguments in favour of such a strategy. First, according to our findings pneumonia is a complication of the acute stage of the illness, occurring as early as the second day after stroke onset. Thus one might reasonably expect that a short interval of endotracheal intubation and mechanical ventilation would be sufficient to get the patient past the most critical period. Second, even if one refrains from endotracheal intubation initially, it will anyway become necessary later in a substantial number of patients: in our study, more than one third of patients with pneumonia required endotracheal intubation and mechanical ventilation, 40% of them because of pneumonia related respiratory failure. Finally, although the outcome of stroke patients needing mechanical ventilation is generally considered to be unfavourable, broadening the indications for this intervention along the lines suggested could change this assessment.

However, there are some important objections to this approach. Endotracheal intubation itself is not free of risk and may lead to injury to the teeth, the vocal cords, and the trachea. Additionally, the sedation and analgesia required for endotracheal intubation may cause a substantial fall in arterial blood pressure, thereby endangering the penumbral tissue in acute stroke patients. Furthermore, the protection against aspiration afforded by a cuffed endotracheal tube may not be complete. Although Treolar and Stechmiller had found no evidence of aspiration in their study, others reported to the contrary. Finally, endotracheal intubation and sedation seriously interfere with early rehabilitation, which has been shown to be important for the outcome of acute stroke patients.

There are two methodological limitations of our study that may decrease the impact of the results presented. First, the assessment of pneumonia was not made blind to the patients’ baseline characteristics. This may have introduced an expectation bias. Second, more than 10% of the patients were lost to follow up at three months. Although the proportion of patients lost to follow up was similar for the pneumonia and non-pneumonia groups (11% v 14%), a significant effect on our results cannot be ruled out.

Conclusions

Overall, feeding tubes offer only limited protection against aspiration pneumonia in patients with dysphagia caused by acute stroke. Pneumonia occurs mainly in the first days of the illness, and patients with a decreased level of consciousness and a severe facial palsy are especially endangered. Risks and benefits of more protective strategies such as early endotracheal intubation have to be established in randomised controlled trials.

Authors’ affiliations

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REFERENCES


