Dysphagia Incidence after Outpatient Anterior Cervical Surgery Using Instrumentation versus No Instrumentation
KR Chin¹, FJR Pencle², AV Coombs³, J Wheeler³, JA Seale²

ABSTRACT

Objective: Dysphagia is a relatively common occurrence in the postoperative period following anterior cervical surgery, with some indicating rates as high as 79%. In most cases, it remains only a transient phenomenon. The cause has been debated, with most speculating injury to nerves in the swallowing mechanism. The objective of this study was to determine if the presence of instrumentation during anterior cervical surgery in the outpatient setting would affect the incidence, duration and severity of dysphagia.

Methods: We did a retrospective review of the medical records of 50 consecutive patients who had undergone single-level instrumented anterior cervical discectomy and fusion. Then we compared that group with our control group of 50 patients who had had simple single-level anterior cervical discectomy without instrumentation or fusion. The patients were evaluated for the presence of dysphagia as well as neck disability index outcome scores.

Results: There was no significant difference between the groups in postoperative neck disability index outcomes at the two-year follow-up (p = 0.182). Dysphagia occurred only in the instrumented group, with an incidence of 12% (six patients): their symptoms lasted on average three weeks, and all six patients experienced only mild severity on the Bazaz-Yoo scale. There was statistically significant difference between the two groups (p = 0.012).

Conclusion: There was a greater trend towards postoperative dysphagia in cases with instrumentation (12% of the patients). Dysphagia was transient with mild severity in patients who received instrumentation compared with those who underwent discectomy alone.

Keywords: Anterior cervical discectomy and fusion, dysphagia, less exposure surgery, outpatient surgery

Incidencia de la disfagia tras la cirugía cervical anterior ambulatoria con instrumentación y sin instrumentación
KR Chin¹, FJR Pencle², AV Coombs³, J Wheeler³, JA Seale²

RESUMEN

Objetivo: La disfagia es una ocurrencia relativamente común en el periodo postoperatorio después de la cirugía cervical anterior, con algunas tasas indicadoras tan altas como 79%. En la mayoría de los casos, sigue siendo sólo un fenómeno transitorio. Su causa ha sido discutida,

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attribuyéndose principalmente a una lesión en los nervios del mecanismo de deglución. El objetivo de este estudio fue determinar si la presencia de la instrumentación durante la cirugía cervical anterior en el contexto ambulatorio afectaría la incidencia, duración y severidad de la disfagia.

Métodos: Realizamos una revisión retrospectiva de las historias clínicas de 50 pacientes consecutivos que habían tenido discectomía y fusión cervical anterior con instrumentación a un solo nivel. Entonces comparamos ese grupo con nuestro grupo de control de 50 pacientes a quienes se les había practicado una discectomía cervical anterior a un solo nivel simple sin instrumentación o fusión. Los pacientes fueron evaluados con respecto a la presencia de disfagia, así como en relación con las puntuaciones del resultado del índice de la discapacidad cervical.

Resultados: No hubo diferencias significativas entre los grupos en cuanto a los resultados del índice de discapacidad cervical postoperatorio en el seguimiento de dos años (p = 0.182). La disfagia se produjo sólo en los grupos con instrumentación, con una incidencia de 12% (seis pacientes): sus síntomas duraron un promedio de tres semanas, y los seis pacientes experimentaron toda una severidad leve en la escala de Bazaz-Yoo. Hubo una diferencia estadísticamente significativa entre los dos grupos (p = 0.012).

Conclusión: Hubo una mayor tendencia a la disfagia postoperatoria en los casos con instrumentación (12% de los pacientes). La disfagia fue transitoria con severidad leve en los pacientes que recibieron instrumentación, comparada con la de los que experimentaron discectomía solamente.

Palabras clave: Discectomía y fusión cervical anterior, disfagia cirugía de menos exposición, cirugía ambulatoria

INTRODUCTION
Postoperative dysphagia after anterior cervical surgery has long been debated to be the result of a variety of proposed factors. However, many attribute it to injury to the nerves involved in swallowing and to the local soft tissue (1). Further, it has been proposed that beyond tissue injury, patient factors (such as age and gender) and surgical factors (including surgical operative time, level of surgery, duration of oesophageal retraction and anterior instrumentation) may play a greater role (2, 3).

Many prospective studies had been conducted which revealed that this common complaint occurred more frequently than previously believed (4–7). Conclusions on the best practice to limit the incidence of dysphagia are difficult to interpret due to the variability of the results. However, the incidence of dysphagia in the early postoperative period was found to be as high as 79% in the literature (8). Fortunately, as ubiquitous as this postoperative complaint had been, in most cases, it remained only a transient phenomenon, hardly ever becoming a persistent problem for the patients (9).

We had performed anterior cervical surgery with and without instrumentation on numerous patients in an ambulatory surgery centre. In our experience, having stringent patient selection protocols with a focus on less invasive operative techniques and instruments was the foundation of successful outpatient surgery. As such, it is difficult to extrapolate the results of prospective studies on the topic of dysphagia conducted in the hospital setting to the outpatient setting, as there is variability in exposure, surgical operative time and reliance on inpatient postoperative observation. Therefore, we determined the incidence, severity and duration of dysphagia after anterior cervical surgery in two similar groups of patients, instrumentation versus no instrumentation.

Specifically, we looked at instrumented surgeries using the frequently used Smith-Robinson approach to the anterior cervical spine (10): anterior cervical discectomy and fusion (ACDF). Then, we compared these results with a control group of patients who had only partial discectomies with no instrumentation and annuloplasty. Our hypothesis was that the presence of an anterior cervical plate increased the risk of early postoperative dysphagia. To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies which looked at the incidence and factors related to postoperative dysphagia after anterior cervical surgery.
SUBJECTS AND METHODS

We reviewed the medical records of prospectively collected data of 50 consecutive patients who had undergone single-level instrumented anterior cervical discectomy and fusion [ACDF] (Group 1). Our control included 50 patients who had had simple single-level anterior cervical discectomy (ACD) without instrumentation or fusion (Group 2). Approval by the Institutional Review Board of The George Washington University was obtained for this study as part of a cohort of patients who had cervical spine surgery performed. All the operations were done in an ambulatory surgery centre by a single surgeon who was experienced in performing all three procedures in academic and private hospitals as if in an outpatient setting, prior to commencing in an outpatient setting. The patients were considered for surgery only after failed conservative management for at least six weeks. The exclusion criteria for surgery included acute severe trauma, fractures, malignancy, infection, unstable chronic medical illnesses, prior anterior cervical fusions and a body mass index (BMI) of over 42 (11). The indications for ACDF included symptomatic, spontaneous/degenerative or traumatic herniated cervical nuclei pulposi (Fig. 1). Polyetheretherketone (PEEK) interbody cages, anterior cervical plates and demineralized bone matrix (DBM) were all used to aid with fusion. All the implants and bone substitutes used in Group 1 were of the same design and manufactured by the same company. Group 2 had a similar modified Smith-Robinson approach and localization of the operative level. The indications for ACD included younger patients with minimal disc herniation with or without disc dissection secondary to non-acute trauma without evidence of facet-generated pain and patient preference after all options were discussed. A small annulotomy was made using a beaver blade, and a small straight curette was advanced towards the herniated disc visualized on preoperative magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). A micropituitary ronguer was used to perform a partial discectomy under fluoroscopic guidance. Radiofrequency annuloplasty was then performed at 80°C to seal the window. The posterior longitudinal ligament was not taken down. The closure of the wound was in similar fashion as that in Group 1. A standard postoperative protocol (Appendix) was explained to the patients and their relatives attending to them (12).

The patients were reviewed, and evaluation of postoperative outcomes was based on the presence or absence, severity and duration of dysphagia within the first 24 hours of surgery, then at follow-ups two weeks, six weeks, six months and, finally, two years after surgery. Postoperative dysphagia was defined as any discomfort or difficulty with swallowing which was not historically present prior to surgery. The severity was assessed using the Bazaz-Yoo dysphagia severity scale of mild, moderate and severe [Table 1] (4). We performed additional statistical analyses to determine any association of age, BMI, gender, level of surgery, surgical operative time and neck disability index (NDI) outcome scores with the incidence of dysphagia.

Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS V22 (IBM Corporation, New York, United States of America), and comparisons were expressed as counts or means with standard error. Intergroup comparisons were made using t-test and Chi-square test. Tests were considered significant if p was < 0.05. Power analysis with a power of 0.8 and alpha of 0.05 was performed based on dysphagia incidence. This demonstrated that an adequate sample size of 12 patients per group was needed to verify statistically significant difference between groups (13, 14).

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Table 1: Bazaz-Yoo dysphagia severity scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Severity</th>
<th>Liquid</th>
<th>Solid</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>None or rare</td>
<td>Occasionally (only with specific food)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>None or rare</td>
<td>Frequent (majority of solids)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Fig. 1: A: sagittal view of a preoperative magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of a 46-year-old man with multiple herniated discs (most severe at C6–7). B: a lateral plain radiograph at eight months post-ACDF showing good plate position. The patient was asymptomatic and clinically fused.
RESULTS
Of the 50 patients in Group 1 (ACDF), 48% were female, with the group’s mean age being 46.3 ± 1.7 years and mean BMI 24.7 ± 2.1 kg/m². Of the 50 patients in Group 2 (ACD), 63% were female, with the group’s mean age being 38.8 ± 4 years and mean BMI 24.8 ± 0.7 kg/m². No statistically significant differences in gender, age and BMI between the groups were found.

In Group 1, C5–6 was the most frequently treated level (43%), followed by C6–7 (22.7%). In Group 2, C5–6 was also the most frequently treated level (33.3%), followed by C4–5 (20.8%). Figures 2 and 3 show the frequency of surgical levels operated on in Groups 1 and 2, respectively. The surgical operative time in Group 1 was 58.4 ± 2.8 minutes, as compared to Group 2 which was 43.0 ± 7.5 minutes. This difference of 15 minutes did achieve statistically significant difference ($p = 0.046$). The preoperative mean NDI score for Group 1 decreased from 37.7 ± 1.3 to 28.1 ± 1.0 at the two-year follow-up ($p = 0.131$).

In Group 2, the preoperative mean NDI score dropped from 36.0 ± 2.1 to 28.6 ± 2.0 at the two-year follow-up ($p = 0.558$). A statistical comparison of preoperative and postoperative outcomes between Groups 1 and 2 showed no statistically significant difference in the NDI scores ($p = 0.274$, $p = 0.182$, respectively).

Dysphagia occurred only in Group 1 (instrumented) with an incidence of 12% (six patients): their symptoms lasted on average 3 ± 0.6 weeks, recovery was within two to five weeks (Table 2), and severity was mild in all six patients. None of the patients in Group 2 complained of dysphagia. None of our patients complained of dysphonia in either group. There was statistically significant difference between the two groups regarding dysphagia incidence ($p = 0.012$). Table 3 summarizes the association of dysphagia with age, BMI, gender and level of surgery with the reported incidence of dysphagia in Group 1. During the study period of 2011–14, we had no re-operations or any major complications reported.

Table 2: Summary of incidence of postoperative dysphagia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dysphagia severity</th>
<th>First 24 hours</th>
<th>Two weeks</th>
<th>Five weeks</th>
<th>Six months</th>
<th>Two years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate/Severe</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Patients were seen at six weeks after surgery, but one patient noted dysphagia one week prior to the visit.

Table 3: Summary of association between various patient parameters and the presence or absence of dysphagia in Group 1 (instrumented)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dysphagia</th>
<th>No dysphagia</th>
<th>$p$-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of patients</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean body mass index (kg/m²)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical operative time (minutes)</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>0.880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated gender</td>
<td>50% male</td>
<td>52.7 % male</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated level of surgery</td>
<td>C3–4: 17%</td>
<td>C3–4: 18.42%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C4–5: 17%</td>
<td>C4–5: 13.15%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C5–6: 33%</td>
<td>C5–6: 44.73%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C6–7: 33%</td>
<td>C6–7: 21.05%</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>C7–T1: 2.63%</td>
<td></td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION
Patient education about the incidence, duration and severity of potential dysphagia has become a standard part of the consent procedure prior to anterior cervical surgery (4, 15, 16). The results of several retrospective and prospective studies on the topic of postoperative dysphagia after anterior cervical surgery indicated that spine surgeons should expect at least 50% of their patients to have complaints of at least mild and transient swallowing discomfort after these procedures (8, 17, 18). The majority of these patients’ symptoms tended to resolve by the sixth-month follow-up. Though rare, reports of dysphagia up to 12 months postoperatively, particularly in young female patients, had been published (4, 7). We sought to determine the incidence, duration and severity of postoperative dysphagia after anterior cervical surgery in the ambulatory surgery setting and whether the phenomenon was related to the presence of instrumentation.

There was a paucity of data which addressed these questions in the rapidly growing outpatient spine surgery arena, where preoperative patient selection and education, as well as intraoperative techniques and instruments, were designed to minimize tissue trauma, lessen operative and thus tissue retraction time, blood loss and complications.

In this retrospective series, Group 1 (instrumented anterior cervical surgery) revealed an incidence of dysphagia of 12%, a mean duration of three weeks and an overall mild severity. There was no associated dysphonia noted by our patients. For the non-instrumented control group (Group 2), none of our patients had dysphagia. Although there was a higher incidence in the instrumented group, all cases of dysphagia were transient, short in duration and mild in severity.

Several prospective and retrospective studies had assessed dysphagia after ACDF (14, 18–20). A prospective study by Rihn et al which assessed the incidence of dysphagia after ACDF compared with the control group noted that at two weeks after surgery, 71% of the patients complained of dysphagia, but it was reduced to 8% at 12 weeks after surgery (14). This demonstrated that dysphagia was transient in a majority of patients (14). Papavero et al also noted an incidence of dysphagia as high as 49.3% (18). A retrospective review by Zeng et al of 186 patients noted an incidence rate of 26.9% (20). These differences could be attributed to the type of study where retrospective reviews may not have collected all the data points.

Video fluoroscopic swallow evaluation (VSE) is considered the gold standard for assessing dysfunctional swallowing and has been used to investigate postoperative dysphagia following anterior cervical surgery. Frempong-Boadu et al found that 48% of the patients who had VSE preoperatively were found to have pre-existing dysfunction in the swallowing mechanism; however, there were no preoperative complaints by any of these patients (19). Our choice of the Bazaz-Yoo dysphagia questionnaire was not only because it was the most widely used tool, but also because it provided direct patient-reported feedback that was clinically relevant for assessing the patient’s severity of dysphagia (4).

We reported no biases but noted limitations of the study. These include its retrospective nature, a single-surgeon centre and no video fluoroscopic evaluation. Our preliminary results showed that in this study, postoperative dysphagia occurred with similar patterns and trends of the hospital reported outcomes, with instrumented procedures showing a significant increase in dysphagia incidence compared with non-instrumented surgery. We acknowledge that the use of an anterior cervical procedure with no instrumentation as a control group may potentially confound our results due to oesophageal retraction, neck dissection, endotracheal intubation and selection criteria for surgery. It was difficult to analyse and control the extent of retraction to achieve adequate exposure. However, we noted that the same operative techniques and retractor system were used in both groups. The selection criteria variable was not specifically analysed as the type of surgery performed was based on the pathology. The severity of disease preoperatively and its relation to dysphagia had not been shown in the literature. The main variable as a cause of dysphagia between the groups was the use of instrumentation. Although oesophageal retraction had been intuitively considered to be a risk factor for postoperative dysphagia, correlational analyses were inconclusive on whether it was a causative factor (18).

There had been evidence to suggest that the presence of an endotracheal tube during surgery did not significantly impact the incidence of postoperative dysphagia (17). While evidence existed which identified C5–6 as the most frequently encountered cervical level associated with postoperative dysphagia, our results were not conclusive enough to address this question. This was likely due to the patient population in this study.

This study showed that surgical operative time, although clinically different, was not statistically significant, demonstrating that the variable of surgical operative time as a risk factor for dysphagia was the same in both groups and negligible. Overall, the trend
was towards instrumented procedures showing a greater incidence of dysphagia.

We would like to highlight from our experience some general clinical pearls for outpatient anterior cervical surgery to minimize the risk of dysphagia. These include maintaining a consistent operating team and limiting the extent of tissue dissection and trauma. The surgical team should try to keep surgical operative time (21) and retraction time (22) to a minimum and avoid unnecessary multilevel surgery (23) by operating on the worst level.

AUTHORS’ NOTE
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REFERENCES

APPENDIX

A standard postoperative protocol

Postoperative protocol given prior to discharge from ambulatory surgery center

1. Most incisions are closed with subcuticular sutures that will dissolve on their own.
2. Cover area to avoid getting incision wet for 2–3 days.
3. While showering avoid allowing water to hit incision directly, apply water resistant bandage.
4. Cover the incision with dry sterile gauze dressing daily and cover with paper tape, until advised at 1st postoperative appointment.
5. Call if concerned with wound. Pain, reddened, increased drainage.
6. Steri-strips fall off in 10–12 days.
7. Monitor temperature daily. Fever greater than 101.5°F, please call.
8. Pain is expected after surgery. If pain is not relieved by pain medications or getting progressively worse, call office to let us know. Weakness and tingling in
extremities can be part of healing process especially after surgery.

Medications: Patients may take over-the-counter (OTC) laxatives and stool softeners for constipation. Follow the administration instructions on the product package. Stool softeners such as: Colace, Pericolace, Surfkak, Senokot-S

Laxatives such as: Milk of Magnesia, Dulcolax, Senokot, and Herbal teas
Suppositories such as: Dulcolax and Glycerin

IF THERE ARE ANY ISSUES DO NOT HESITATE TO CALL
Dr (): xxx-xxx-xxxx