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(Article begins on next page)

Hypothesis on the pathophysiology of small intestinal strangulation by a pedunculated lipoma

M. Gandini[1], D.E. Freeman[2], G. Giusto[1]

[1] Department of Veterinary Sciences, University of Turin, Grugliasco (TO), Italy

[2] Island Whirl Equine Colic Research Laboratory, Department of Large Animal Clinical Sciences, University of Florida, College of Veterinary Medicine, Gainesville, FL, USA

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Address correspondence to Dr. Gandini at marco.gandini@unito.it

Background: The current hypothesis proposed for strangulation of small intestine by a pedunculated lipoma in horses involves movement of the lipoma around the small intestine until it loops through its own pedicle. This mechanism is difficult to demonstrate during surgical correction.

Objectives: To examine an alternative explanation for strangulation by pedunculated lipoma that is logical and consistent with intraoperative findings. Methods: Analysis of the anatomical features of 11 cases of lipoma strangulation in horses. Results: In the proposed hypothesis, the stalk of the lipoma is tensed by the weight of the lipoma alone or by external forces on it from adjacent intestine. This produces a slit-like aperture formed by the stalk and the contiguous mesentery. One or more loops of intestine pass across the lateral edge of the stalk before turning into this aperture, either because of lack of space in the abdominal cavity or through the effects of peristalsis. The weight of the intestine itself causes the loop to “fall” into the aperture and become entrapped. This creates a half-hitch knot in which the loop of intestine uses the lipoma pedicle as a “post” around which it becomes strangulated.

Conclusions: The proposed hypothesis differs from the existing by requiring intestinal movement to create the strangulation, which is more plausible than the current proposal that the strangulation is caused by movement of the lipoma itself. It is also more consistent with surgical findings.

In horses, small intestinal strangulation by a pedunculated lipoma is a common cause of obstruction, representing 3 to 7% of all colic cases and, 7 to 13% of all horses undergoing exploratory laparotomy for investigation of colic signs.[1] The pathogenesis of pedunculated lipoma strangulation has been attributed to movement of the lipoma around a loop of intestine, wrapping it with its stalk [2] to form a "bola" (from Spanish, meaning "ball"; it is a type of throwing weapon made of weights on the ends of cords, used to capture animals by entangling their legs). Spontaneous movement of the lipoma around the loops of intestine to become entangled as described is unclear.[2,3] Also, if the lipoma were to move around the long segments of intestine and mesentery as seen in many clinical cases, the pedicle would be too short to allow enough room for the lipoma to pass under it, as is typically illustrated. Furthermore, it is not clear why some lipomas tend to lie dormant and others lead to intestinal strangulation.[3] A lipoma originates from plaques of fat between the two serosal layers of the mesentery. As it grows, its weight stretches the serosa to form a pedicle that attaches it to the mesentery. In the study by Edwards and Proudman[2], the authors found that strangulating lesions were significantly associated with the weight of the lipoma. They found that lipomas causing strangulating lesions were in the range of 33 to 688 g, while those causing nonstrangulating lesions ranged from 3 to 259 g. These findings led the authors to state that "Any lipoma heavier than 33 g has the potential to cause intestinal obstruction".[2] The length of the stalk or pedicle of a lipoma could also play a role in the pathogenesis of strangulation,[4] because generally strangulating lesions are caused by lipomas with a long pedicle. Nonstrangulating lesions are caused by lipomas with a pedicle that originates close to the junction between mesentery and intestine in most cases.[2] There are some cases, where a short stalked lipoma can cause strangulation of a loop of intestine [2](Fig 1). The length of the intestine that becomes entrapped by the lipoma can vary considerably and many loops of intestine can be entrapped by one pedunculated lipoma. This is difficult to explain with the existing "bola" model. Strangulation by lipoma can take several forms, including strangulation by omental lipoma or mesenteric lipoma, strangulation of small intestinal mesentery only, strangulation of multiple loops or loops of variable lengths, and involvement of lipomas of variable size. The mechanism hypothesized in this report could be compatible with all these different forms. The anatomo-pathological features of cases of pedunculated lipoma in horses submitted to colic surgery provided the basis to the proposed hypothesis to explain how a lipoma can strangulate the small intestine. In one clinical case, our hypothesis was supported by finding that the lipoma strangulation could be corrected by reversing the mechanism proposed for movement of the intestine relative to the lipoma pedicle (Fig 1-7) Furthermore, in several other cases we found that the stalk of the lipoma was of such a length that the lipoma extended ventral to the length of the mesentery and intestine combined at that location. We hypothesize that the stalk is kept under tension by the weight of the lipoma or by ventral traction on it exerted by surrounding intestinal loops. The tension on the stalk produces a slit-like aperture or narrow gap between the stalk itself and the adjacent, usually contiguous mesentery, or the small intestine (Fig. 1). The position of the lipoma relative to the intestine may also play a role. If the stalk is of such a length that the lipoma lies ventral to the small intestine, a larger slit-like aperture is created that could accommodate long segments of small intestine. At this point, one or more loops of intestine that are initially found lateral to the stalk (Fig. 2), can turn into this aperture under the influence of peristalsis or to occupy the available space created (Fig. 3). Peristaltic waves then travel from proximal to distal when this loop becomes obstructed by the mesentery and the lipoma stalk. As the entrapped loop fills with fluid, it draws progressively more intestine into the gap between pedicle and mesentery.[4]The peristalsis of the proximal portion of intestine that entered the slit opening will pull the loop out of the incarceration. In addition to fluid distention, peristalsis of the distal portion will pull the intestine into the opening. The increased weight of the segments that enter the opening act to overcome the effect of peristalsis in drawing intestine out of the incarceration. The balance between distention drawing intestine into the entrapment and peristalsis pulling intestine out of it could determinate the length entrapped, eventually reaching a point at which the degree of entrapment is complete. These forces lead to the involvement of a length of entrapped intestine that can be a few centimeters to several meters by the time peristalsis ceases and distention reaches its limit. This mechanism can also explain how strangulation by lipomas of the distal jejunum often involve the ileum[4]. These mechanism have been proposed by Kopf[4] for inguinal hernia incarceration, but may also apply to lipoma strangulation. At this stage, the weight of the intestine that passes into the opening will cause it to “fall” through the loop, thereby “cinching” the incarceration. (Fig. 4) In fact, until occlusion of the lumen is complete, the peristaltic wave forces contents into the incarcerated segment thereby increasing its weight and ultimately causing the strangulation. Peristalsis of the distal segment can, by that point, reach a limit and cease to contribute to further incarceration of bowel. The tightness of the incarceration is determined by the lipoma becoming entrapped within a distended intestinal segment compressed by the stalk so that it forms two points of distention too close to each other to allow the lipoma to retract from between them. The weight and the distension of the entrapped loop influences the system by causing the “post” formed by the stalk of the lipoma to turn in a half-hitch that strangulates the loop of intestine (Fig. 5-6), thus causing the lipoma to wrap on its own stalk and making the reverse process impossible (Fig. 7). At this stage the intestine starts to undergo ischemic changes. In the same manner in which one loop of intestine can enter the aperture and become strangulated, so can a second loop of intestine, thus explaining the incarceration of multiple loops by a single lipoma stalk. The above hypothesis can also explain why lipomas of different size and weight can entrap the intestine. In fact in both cases produce strangulation because, in our opinion, they are less likely to produce a fixed post. In our hypothetic model, the relative length of the stalk is more critical than the weight of the lipoma to produce the strangulation. When the stalk is of such a length that it allows the formation of a long aperture, the possibility of the intestine becoming securely entrapped increases. If the stalk originates close to the intestine, but is of such a length to allow the lipoma to be blocked underneath the small intestine, it may produce a small but sufficient opening into which the intestine can migrate. (Fig. 8-A, 8-B) In his article, Edwards considered this type of presentation peculiar of non-strangulating pedunculated lipomas (Fig. 9A) but short stalked lipomas can cause strangulation, and this can be only explained by assuming the intestine moves around the stalk. Large lipomas with a short stalk (Fig 9B) can also produce mild, recurrent colic by stretching the mesentery, as also reported by others.[5,6] The above hypothesis can also explain why small lipomas can entrap the intestine. In such cases the weight of the lipoma may not be sufficient to tense the stalk , but the length of the stalk can predispose to the entrapment (Fig 8-C). In the same way , this hypothesis could also explain why some lipomas tend to lie dormant and some lead to severe intestinal damage. Either (in some cases both) the weight of the lipoma and length of the stalk are responsible for the tension on the stalk itself. Small lipomas with a long stalk and heavy lipomas with a relatively shorter stalk are those most likely to cause strangulation (Fig 8-C and 8-D). Relatively small lipomas with a relatively short stalk are less likely to produce enough tension on the stalk to allow the movement of the intestine. In such cases the lipoma and its stalk are likely pushed aside from the intestinal movement. (Fig 8-E) unless clinched by another viscus (Fig. 8-F). Our model can also explain the incarceration of intestine without strangulation.[7] These case are rare, and can be explained by insufficient time or the optimal conditions (length of the stalk, weight of the lipoma, intestinal content, weight of the entrapped loop) to reach completion. The model we hypothesized can also explain strangulation caused by omental lipomas, in which case the omentum acts as a stalk. Despite being found in large numbers, lipoma of the small colon mesentery reportedly cause strangulation in only few cases[2]. Anatomy, content, weight, mobility and peristalsis of the small colon are very different from those of the small intestine, and may not allow the movement of the loop of intestine necessary to cause strangulation as described in our model. Alternatively, this model cannot explain why in some cases only the mesentery is involved in the strangulation, as described by Bauck et al.,[8] and a complete different mechanism can be responsible.

Clinical importance: improved understanding of the manner in which intestine becomes entrapped by a lipoma could provide a method of resolving the strangulation. Strangulations by lipoma can be freed by transecting the stalk, sometimes blindly and deep in the abdomen, which could risk injury to major mesenteric vessels and mesentery.[9] Reversing the direction followed by the lipoma during strangulation, based on our hypothesis (Fig. …), might be an easier and less risky alternative in some cases, especially if the tightness of strangulation was not exacerbated by tissue swelling.

.Further studies and particularly in clinical cases are needed to develop this technique. If the proposed mechanism is valid, administration of motility-inhibiting drugs (such as hyoscine,alfa-2 agonists or even opiates) in the early phases of the process, i.e. in the first visit by referring veterinarians, could reduce the amount of intestine entrapped and prevent involvement of the ileum. This may also apply to inguinal hernias and epiploic foramen entrapments, which undergo a similar process after entrapment according to Kopf. [4] The proposed mechanism could also underscore the importance of early referral, which could prevent the recruitment of a long segment into the entrapment and the tightness of the strangulation.

Conclusions: The proposed hypothesis is intended to provide an alternative mechanism to explain strangulation by a pedunculated lipoma. The goal is to develop a better understanding of the process and thereby improving methods of correction.

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Figure legends

FIGURE 1: lipoma suspended across the mesentery.

FIGURE 2: the intestine moves across the stalk.

FIGURE 3: because of the peristalsis or lack of space in the abdominal cavity, the intestine enter

the split-like opening

FIGURE 4: because of the effects of distension and peristalsis, more intestine is drawn into the opening

Fig. 5: the weight of the intestine cause the loop to “fall”

Fig. 6: an half-hitch knot is formed and strangulation start

FIGURE 7: with the increase in volume of the strangulated loop the knot knot became irreversible

FIGURE 8: diagrams of the different hypothesis for “dormant” and pathologic lipomas. A) Large lipoma with stalk originating close to the mesentery-intestine junction; B) small lipoma with stalk originating close to mesentery-intestine junction: its weight is not sufficient to keep the stalk under tension, but this is obtained by the fact that the lipoma is clinched between the intestine and the abdominal wall or other viscera; C) small lipoma with stalk

originating in the proximal mesentery: the stalk is of sufficient length to originate the same condition as in “B”; D) Large lipoma with stalk originating in the proximal mesentery: the weight and size of the lipoma are sufficient to put the stalk under tension; E) Small lipoma with stalk originating in the proximal mesentery: the weight of the lipoma is not sufficient to put the stalk under tension; F) Small lipoma with stalk originating in the proximal mesentery clinched by surrounding viscera: as in “E” the weight of the lipoma is not sufficient to put the stalk under tension but this may be action of surrounding viscera.

FIGURE 9: Short stalked lipomas: A) Mechanism for strangulation of the intestine by short stalked lipomas as hypothesized by Edwards and Proudman **(needs permission for re-printing);** B) A large, short-stalked lipoma causing recurrent colics.