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Nonexposed Variant of Bisphosphonate-associated Osteonecrosis of the Jaw: A Case Series

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: To report a case series of patients with the nonexposed variant of bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw—a form of jaw osteonecrosis that does not manifest with necrotic bone exposure/mucosal fenestration.

METHODS: Among 332 individuals referred to 5 clinical centers in Europe because of development of jawbone abnormalities after or during exposure to bisphosphonates, we identified a total of 96 patients who presented with the nonexposed variant of osteonecrosis. Relevant data were obtained via clinical notes; radiological investigations; patients’ history, and referral letters.

RESULTS: The most common clinical feature of nonexposed osteonecrosis was jaw bone pain (88/96; 91.6%); followed by sinus tract (51%), bone enlargement (36.4%); and gingival swelling (17.7%). No radiological abnormalities were identified in 29.1% (28/96) of patients. In 53.1% (51/96) of the patients; nonexposed osteonecrosis subsequently evolved into frank bone exposure within 4.6 months (mean; 95% confidence interval; 3.6-5.6).

CONCLUSIONS: Clinicians should be highly vigilant to identify individuals with nonexposed osteonecrosis, as the impact on epidemiological data and clinical trial design could be potentially significant. Although the present case series represents approximately 30% of all patients with bisphosphonates-associated osteonecrosis observed at the study centers, further population-based prospective studies are needed to obtain robust epidemiological figures.

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KEYWORDS: Avascular necrosis; Bisphosphonates; Jawbones; Jaws; Mandible; Maxilla; Osteochemonecrosis; Osteonecrosis

Osteonecrosis of the jaws is an increasingly common and clinically significant complication of bisphosphonate medications.1-3 Since 2003, more than 1000 cases of bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw have been documented in the literature,1-12 and more than 3500 cases have been reported to the Food and Drug Administration in the US alone.4,5 Reported prevalence ranges substantially from 0.01% to 28%,1,9 and high variability persists after correction for type/potency of bisphosphonates and underlying diseases (high-potency intravenous in cancer patients vs. low-potency oral bisphosphonates in osteoporosis patients).1-9 This is more likely to reflect inconsistency and
flaws in the collection of data rather than real variations in
the prevalence among populations.7

The lack of specific diagnostic criteria and a unani-
mously accepted definition of bisphosphonate-associated
osteonecrosis of the jaw is possibly the major cause of
this epidemiological inconsistency. Usually, bisphosphonate-associated
osteonecrosis of the jaw is defined
as an area of exposed bone in the
maxillofacial region that does not heal
within 6-8 weeks in a patient
who is receiving or has been ex-
posed to bisphosphonate medica-
tions (but not to radiotherapy to
the head and neck).1-8,13 It has
been described as avascular bone
 necrosis from histopathology re-
ports, although biopsy is usually
not required for its diagnosis.1,3,13

More recently, however, there
have been reports suggesting that
bisphosphonate-associated osteo-
neecrosis of the jaw, especially in
its early stages, can manifest signs
and symptoms in absence of bone
exposure.2,14-16 Jaw bone pain, si-
nus tract and gingival/bone swell-
ing in the absence of obvious den-
tal or jawbone disease other than osteonecrosis have
occasionally been reported weeks or months before the
onset of frank bone exposure.14-16

Transient, early-stage
“possible bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of
the jaws” and a “nonexposed variant of osteonecrosis”
have been proposed as terms for describing this mani-
festation.2,14-16 There remain, however, few studies describing in
detail such clinical features and little evidence regarding
their frequency and natural history.

We studied a series of patients who, after exposure to
bisphosphonates, developed jawbone symptoms/signs in ab-
sence of obvious bone exposure for whom no cause other
than osteonecrosis could be identified.

METHODS
Between 2007 and 2009, 332 individuals had been re-
ferred to 5 clinical centers in Europe with possible diag-
nosis of bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the
jaw because of development of jawbone abnormalities
after/exposure to bisphosphonate medications. A
total of 96 patients (29.8%) presented jawbone manifes-
tations that fulfilled the description of presumed nonex-
posed variant of bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis
of the jaws, as described in previous reports.2,14-16 Re-
lvant clinical features included: 1) jaw pain, 2) jaw bone
enlargement/gingival swelling, and 3) sinus tract, which
could not be related to dental disease or another local
or systemic disorder other than osteonecrosis.

Exclusion of dental or primary bone disease other than
osteonecrosis was based on clinical and radiological assess-
ment. Patients’ characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Relevant details of nonexposed bisphosphonate-associ-
ated osteonecrosis of the jaws were obtained via clinical
notes, patients’ histories, and re-
ferral letters. The average fol-
low-up from osteonecrosis diag-
nosis to final data collection was
12.6 months (range 6-24 months).

Presence of radiological abnormali-
ties detected with an orthopanomogram or computed tomography, and
subsequent development of trans-
mucosal necrotic bone exposure,
where present, were also recorded.

Hospital and primary care records
were reviewed to collect details of
medical and drug history (including
underlying disease, type and dura-
tion of bisphosphonate therapy), as
well as surgical procedure to the
jaw bones before osteonecrosis
development. We used the defini-
tion of spontaneous nonexposed
bisphosphonate-associated osteo-
necrosis of the jaws when there
was no history of dental surgery to
the affected area over the 6 months preceding osteonecrosis
development.

RESULTS
Ninety-six (28.9%) of 332 (71.1%) patients were diagnosed
with nonexposed bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis
of the jaws (Table 1). Thirty were male and 66 female, and
their age ranged from 38 to 90 years (mean: 68 years, 95%
confidence interval [CI], 66-71). The underlying diseases
that required treatment with bisphosphonate included mul-
tiple myeloma (43 patients, 44.8%), osteoporosis (25 pa-
tients, 26.04%), metastasizing breast cancer (19 patients,
19.8%), prostate cancer (5 patients, 5.2%), and renal cancer
(4 patients, 4.2%) (Table 1).

Eighteen patients (18.8%) had been exposed to alendro-
nate only, whereas 39 had zoledronate (40.6%) and 12
patients had pamidronate (12.5%) monotherapies. Four pa-
tients were exposed to clodronate (4.2%), 12 individuals
(12.5%) used both pamidronate and zoledronate, and the
remaining patients were exposed to various associations of
alendronate, zoledronate, pamidronate, clodronate, and ibandr-
onate (Table 1).

The mean duration of bisphosphonate therapy before
diagnosis of nonexposed osteonecrosis was 37.0 months
(range 5-120 months; 95% CI, 31.6-42.5). In 21 patients
(21.8%) the duration was 5-12 months, while 23 individu-
als (23.9%) had taken bisphosphonates for 13-24
months before nonexposed bisphosphonate-associated
osteonecrosis of the jaw was diagnosed. Exposure to 25-36 and 37-60 months of bisphosphonate therapy was associated with jaw osteonecrosis in 12 (12.5%) and 20 (20.8%) patients, respectively. Twenty-one individuals (21.8%) had used bisphosphonate for more than 60 months before bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw occurred. In total, 44 (45.8%) individuals had a history of bisphosphonate exposure 24 months before the development of symptoms or signs of nonexposed osteonecrosis (Table 1, Figure).

In the subgroup of patients who had used only alendronate, we observed that the length of therapy before diagnosis of bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw ranged from 12 to 96 months (mean 62.8; 95% CI, 47.1-78.5). Patients who developed nonexposed jaw osteonecrosis after exposure to zoledronic acid or pamidronate only did so after 8-62 (mean 24.1; 95% CI, 16.1-32.0) and 5-120 months of therapy (mean 45.3; 95% CI, 18.6-65.9), respectively.

Overall, the most common clinical feature of nonexposed osteonecrosis was jaw bone pain, which was reported by 88 patients (91.6%), followed by sinus tract formation (49 patients, 51%), bone enlargement (35 patients, 36.4%), and gingival enlargement (17 patients, 17.7%) (Table 2). These symptoms/signs developed spontaneously in all patients, with no history of dental surgery during the previous 6 months having been reported.

Table 1 Characteristics of Patients and Type and Duration of Bisphosphonate Therapy before Development of Osteonecrosis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>Patients n (%)</th>
<th>Sex and Mean Age, Years (Range)</th>
<th>Bisphosphonate Therapy (No. of Patients)</th>
<th>Mean and Median Duration of Bisphosphonate Therapy before Osteonecrosis Development (Months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple myeloma</td>
<td>43 (44.8%)</td>
<td>22 F 21 M 68.9 (50-82)</td>
<td>Zoledronate (23) Pamidronate (8)</td>
<td>Mean: 35.02 Medial: 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoporosis</td>
<td>25 (26.0%)</td>
<td>24 F 1 M 68.96 (38-88)</td>
<td>Alendronate (18) Clodronate (3)</td>
<td>Mean: 57.28 Medial: 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metastasizing breast cancer</td>
<td>19 (17.85%)</td>
<td>19 F 64.2 (43-85)</td>
<td>Zoledronate (8) Pamidronate (3)</td>
<td>Mean: 38.94 Medial: 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metastasizing prostate cancer</td>
<td>5 (5.2%)</td>
<td>5 M 76 (72-90)</td>
<td>Zoledronate (4) Pamidronate (1)</td>
<td>Mean: 23.0 Medial: 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metastasizing renal cancer</td>
<td>4 (4.2%)</td>
<td>3 M 1 F 67.5 (56-69)</td>
<td>Zoledronate (4)</td>
<td>Mean: 20.52 Medial: 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure Scatter plot of patients affected by nonexposed osteonecrosis categorized by underlying disease and with detail of bisphosphonate agents (oral vs. intravenous) and therapy duration. The horizontal lines indicate the median values of therapy duration in each disease group. BC = breast cancer; MM = multiple myeloma; OST = osteoporosis; PC = prostate cancer; RC = renal cancer.
Twenty-eight patients (29.1%) had no demonstrable radiological abnormalities (orthopantomogram or computed tomography scan), whereas 68 (70.9%) had evidence of osteolysis with/without osteosclerosis (Table 2).

In 51 patients (53.1%) nonexposed osteonecrosis subsequently progressed into frank bone exposure over a period of time ranging from 0.5 to 14 months (mean 4.6; 95% CI, 3.6-5.6). Such a progression was not observed in the remaining 45 patients (46.9%), who did not develop obvious evidence of bone exposure throughout the observation period (up to 2 years).

**DISCUSSION**

The present observational study is the largest published series of patients who had been exposed to bisphosphonates and developed jaw bone symptoms/signs in the absence of bone exposure. These patients were classified as being affected by nonexposed bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw because: 1) there was no obvious evidence of dental infection or other jaw bone disease (eg, metastases) that could cause those symptoms/signs, and 2) some of them subsequently developed frank bone exposure.

Although most studies define bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaws as an area of long-lasting exposed necrotic bone, the existence of a nonexposed variant of osteonecrosis has been recently suggested. The rationale behind this definition is based on the hypothesis that the osteonecrosis might develop within the bone marrow, potentially causing pain, bone enlargement/gingival swelling, and sinus tract due to intrabony edema/inflammation, in the absence of frank mucosal fenestration and bone exposure. Necrotic bone exposure could then occur spontaneously or following exposure to local triggering factors, such as surgery or trauma.

Models of osteonecrosis of the hip and other long bones provide evidence for this hypothesis, which is also supported by recent experimental demonstration of development of nonexposed intrabony medullar necrosis in dogs exposed to bisphosphonates. Only 2 clinical human studies have reported a small number (n = 7) of patients with a nonexposed variant of bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw. Mawardi et al and Junquera and Gallego described 5 and 2 patients, respectively, who had been exposed to bisphosphonates and subsequently developed pain, bone enlargement/gingival swelling, and tooth mobility with no evidence of necrotic bone exposure and no obvious dental disease. All patients but one showed radiological abnormalities and developed subsequently frank bone exposure. In addition, a transient early stage of bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaws described as nonexposed variant was included in recent classifications.

The present case series differs from previous reports because abnormal radiological findings were not considered a necessary diagnostic criterion for bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaws and the nonexposed variant proved to be a separate entity in approximately 50% of patients. However, we cannot draw firm conclusions as it cannot be excluded that frank bone exposure would occur at a later time following the onset of nonexposed osteonecrosis. Similarly, as more advanced diagnostic tests such as magnetic resonance imaging and bone scintigraphy were not consistently available, we cannot exclude that early radiological abnormalities could be identified in the affected areas.

Nevertheless, our observations would suggest that the relative frequency of nonexposed versus traditional exposed bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw is clinically relevant (one third of all osteonecrosis cases observed...
at the 5 clinical centers), although further prospective population-based studies are required.

Clinicians should be aware that a significant proportion of patients with bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaw could present with persistent jaw bone pain, bone enlargement, gingival swelling, or sinus tract before or instead of frank bone exposure. Further, only 50% of the cases of nonexposed bisphosphonate-associated osteonecrosis of the jaws would subsequently progress to frank exposed osteonecrosis, and up to one third would show no obvious radiological abnormalities. The impact of these findings upon epidemiological data and the design of future studies could be significant.

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References