World J Clin Cases 2022 November 26; 10(33): 12066-12461





Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 10 Number 33 November 26, 2022

MINIREVIEWS

12066 Review of risk factors, clinical manifestations, rapid diagnosis, and emergency treatment of neonatal perioperative pneumothorax

Zhang X, Zhang N, Ren YY

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Clinical and Translational Research

12077 Integrative analysis of platelet-related genes for the prognosis of esophageal cancer

Du QC, Wang XY, Hu CK, Zhou L, Fu Z, Liu S, Wang J, Ma YY, Liu MY, Yu H

12089 Comprehensive analysis of the relationship between cuproptosis-related genes and esophageal cancer

Xu H, Du QC, Wang XY, Zhou L, Wang J, Ma YY, Liu MY, Yu H

12104 Molecular mechanisms of Baihedihuang decoction as a treatment for breast cancer related anxiety: A network pharmacology and molecular docking study

Li ZH, Yang GH, Wang F

12116 Single-cell RNA-sequencing combined with bulk RNA-sequencing analysis of peripheral blood reveals the characteristics and key immune cell genes of ulcerative colitis

Dai YC, Qiao D, Fang CY, Chen QQ, Que RY, Xiao TG, Zheng L, Wang LJ, Zhang YL

Retrospective Study

12136 Diagnosis and treatment of tubal endometriosis in women undergoing laparoscopy: A case series from a single hospital

Jiao HN, Song W, Feng WW, Liu H

12146 Different positive end expiratory pressure and tidal volume controls on lung protection and inflammatory factors during surgical anesthesia

Wang Y, Yang Y, Wang DM, Li J, Bao QT, Wang BB, Zhu SJ, Zou L

12156 Transarterial chemoembolization combined with radiofrequency ablation in the treatment of large hepatocellular carcinoma with stage C

Sun SS, Li WD, Chen JL

12164 Coexistence of anaplastic lymphoma kinase rearrangement in lung adenocarcinoma harbouring epidermal growth factor receptor mutation: A single-center study

Zhong WX, Wei XF

Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 10 Number 33 November 26, 2022

Observational Study

Prognostic values of optic nerve sheath diameter for comatose patients with acute stroke: An observational 12175 study

Zhu S, Cheng C, Wang LL, Zhao DJ, Zhao YL, Liu XZ

12184 Quality of care in patients with inflammatory bowel disease from a public health center in Brazil

Takamune DM, Cury GSA, Ferrás G, Herrerias GSP, Rivera A, Barros JR, Baima JP, Saad-Hossne R, Sassaki LY

12200 Comparison of the prevalence of sarcopenia in geriatric patients in Xining based on three different diagnostic criteria

Pan SQ, Li XF, Luo MQ, Li YM

Prospective Study

12208 Predictors of bowel damage in the long-term progression of Crohn's disease

Fernández-Clotet A, Panés J, Ricart E, Castro-Poceiro J, Masamunt MC, Rodríguez S, Caballol B, Ordás I, Rimola J

Randomized Controlled Trial

12221 Protective effect of recombinant human brain natriuretic peptide against contrast-induced nephropathy in elderly acute myocardial infarction patients: A randomized controlled trial

Zhang YJ, Yin L, Li J

META-ANALYSIS

12230 Prognostic role of pretreatment serum ferritin concentration in lung cancer patients: A meta-analysis

Gao Y, Ge JT

CASE REPORT

12240 Non-surgical management of dens invaginatus type IIIB in maxillary lateral incisor with three root canals and 6-year follow-up: A case report and review of literature

Arora S, Gill GS, Saquib SA, Saluja P, Baba SM, Khateeb SU, Abdulla AM, Bavabeedu SS, Ali ABM, Elagib MFA

Unusual presentation of Loeys-Dietz syndrome: A case report of clinical findings and treatment challenges 12247

Azrad-Daniel S, Cupa-Galvan C, Farca-Soffer S, Perez-Zincer F, Lopez-Acosta ME

12257 Peroral endoscopic myotomy assisted with an elastic ring for achalasia with obvious submucosal fibrosis: A case report

Wang BH, Li RY

12261 Subclavian brachial plexus metastasis from breast cancer: A case report

Zeng Z, Lin N, Sun LT, Chen CX

12268 Case mistaken for leukemia after mRNA COVID-19 vaccine administration: A case report

Lee SB, Park CY, Park SG, Lee HJ

Orthodontic-surgical treatment of an Angle Class II malocclusion patient with mandibular hypoplasia and 12278 missing maxillary first molars: A case report

П

Li GF, Zhang CX, Wen J, Huang ZW, Li H

Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 10 Number 33 November 26, 2022

12289 Multiple cranial nerve palsies with small angle exotropia following COVID-19 mRNA vaccination in an adolescent: A case report

Lee H, Byun JC, Kim WJ, Chang MC, Kim S

12295 Surgical and nutritional interventions for endometrial receptivity: A case report and review of literature Hernández-Melchor D, Palafox-Gómez C, Madrazo I, Ortiz G, Padilla-Viveros A, López-Bayghen E

12305 Conversion therapy for advanced penile cancer with tislelizumab combined with chemotherapy: A case report and review of literature

Long XY, Zhang S, Tang LS, Li X, Liu JY

Endoscopic magnetic compression stricturoplasty for congenital esophageal stenosis: A case report 12313 Liu SQ, Lv Y, Luo RX

12319 Novel hydroxymethylbilane synthase gene mutation identified and confirmed in a woman with acute intermittent porphyria: A case report

Zhou YQ, Wang XQ, Jiang J, Huang SL, Dai ZJ, Kong QQ

12328 Modified fixation for periprosthetic supracondylar femur fractures: Two case reports and review of the literature

Li QW, Wu B, Chen B

12337 Erbium-doped yttrium aluminum garnet laser and advanced platelet-rich fibrin+ in periodontal diseases: Two case reports and review of the literature

Tan KS

12345 Segmental artery injury during transforaminal percutaneous endoscopic lumbar discectomy: Two case

Cho WJ, Kim KW, Park HY, Kim BH, Lee JS

12352 Pacemaker electrode rupture causes recurrent syncope: A case report

Zhu XY, Tang XH, Huang WY

12358 Hybrid intercalated duct lesion of the parotid: A case report

Stankevicius D, Petroska D, Zaleckas L, Kutanovaite O

12365 Clinical features and prognosis of multiple myeloma and orbital extramedullary disease: Seven cases report and review of literature

Hu WL, Song JY, Li X, Pei XJ, Zhang JJ, Shen M, Tang R, Pan ZY, Huang ZX

12375 Colon mucosal injury caused by water jet malfunction during a screening colonoscopy: A case report

Patel P, Chen CH

12380 Primary malignant pericardial mesothelioma with difficult antemortem diagnosis: A case report

Oka N, Orita Y, Oshita C, Nakayama H, Teragawa H

12388 Typical imaging manifestation of neuronal intranuclear inclusion disease in a man with unsteady gait: A case report

Ш

Gao X, Shao ZD, Zhu L

Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 10 Number 33 November 26, 2022

12395 Multimodality imaging and treatment of paranasal sinuses nuclear protein in testis carcinoma: A case

Huang WP, Gao G, Qiu YK, Yang Q, Song LL, Chen Z, Gao JB, Kang L

12404 T1 rectal mucinous adenocarcinoma with bilateral enlarged lateral lymph nodes and unilateral metastasis: A case report

Liu XW, Zhou B, Wu XY, Yu WB, Zhu RF

12410 Influence of enhancing dynamic scapular recognition on shoulder disability, and pain in diabetics with frozen shoulder: A case report

Mohamed AA

12416 Acute myocardial necrosis caused by aconitine poisoning: A case report

Liao YP, Shen LH, Cai LH, Chen J, Shao HQ

12422 Danggui Sini decoction treatment of refractory allergic cutaneous vasculitis: A case report

Chen XY, Wu ZM, Wang R, Cao YH, Tao YL

12430 Phlegmonous gastritis after biloma drainage: A case report and review of the literature

Yang KC, Kuo HY, Kang JW

12440 Novel TINF2 gene mutation in dyskeratosis congenita with extremely short telomeres: A case report

Picos-Cárdenas VJ, Beltrán-Ontiveros SA, Cruz-Ramos JA, Contreras-Gutiérrez JA, Arámbula-Meraz E, Angulo-Rojo C, Guadrón-Llanos AM, Leal-León EA, Cedano-Prieto DM, Meza-Espinoza JP

12447 Synchronous early gastric and intestinal mucosa-associated lymphoid tissue lymphoma in a Helicobacter pylori-negative patient: A case report

Lu SN, Huang C, Li LL, Di LJ, Yao J, Tuo BG, Xie R

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

12455 Diagnostic value of metagenomics next-generation sequencing technology in disseminated strongyloidiasis

ΙX

Song P, Li X

12458 Diagnostic value of imaging examination in autoimmune pancreatitis

Wang F, Peng Y, Xiao B

Contents

Thrice Monthly Volume 10 Number 33 November 26, 2022

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CASE REPORT

Multiple cranial nerve palsies with small angle exotropia following COVID-19 mRNA vaccination in an adolescent: A case report

Heejin Lee, Jun Chul Byun, Won Jae Kim, Min Cheol Chang, Saeyoon Kim

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Several vaccines against the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 have been approved and widely distributed, raising public concerns regarding the side effects of immunization, as the incidence of ease. Although many adverse events following the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccine have been reported, neurological complications are relatively uncommon. Herein, we report a rare case of multiple cranial palsies following COVID-19 vaccination in an adolescent patient.

CASE SUMMARY

A previously healthy, 14-year-old Asian girl with facial palsy presented to the emergency department with inability to close the right eye or wrinkle right side of the forehead, and pain in the right cheek. She had received second dose of the COVID-19 mRNA vaccine (Pfizer-BioNTech) 18 days before onset of symptoms. She was diagnosed with Bell's palsy and prescribed a steroid (1 mg/kg/day methylprednisolone) based on symptoms and magnetic resonance imaging findings. However, the next day, all sense of taste was lost with inability to swallow solid food; the gag reflex was absent. Horizontal diplopia was also present. Due to worsening of her condition, she was given high-dose steroids (1

g/day methylprednisolone) for 3 days and then discharged with oral steroids. Improvement in the symptoms was noted 4 days post steroid treatment completion. At the most recent follow-up, her general condition was good with no symptoms except diplopia; ocular motility disturbances were noted. Hence, prism glasses were prescribed for diplopia relief.

CONCLUSION

Small-angle exotropia was observed in the facial, trigeminal, and glossopharyngeal nerve palsies, in our patient. The etiology of this adverse effect following vaccination was thought to be immunological.

Key Words: SARS-CoV-2; COVID-19; COVID-19 vaccine; Multiple cranial nerve palsies; Facial nerve palsy; Diplopia; Exotropia; Case report

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Core Tip: Novel mRNA coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) vaccines have been developed against severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2. These vaccines are highly effective in preventing COVID-19; however, many side effects have been reported following vaccination. Neurological complications are relatively uncommon but have been reported variously. However, the occurrence of multiple cranial nerve (CN) palsy is rare. Based on our knowledge, this is the first pediatric case of multiple CN palsies following COVID-19 vaccination. Our case demonstrated facial, trigeminal, glossopharyngeal nerve palsies with small-angle exotropia were observed. The etiology of CN palsy following vaccination may be immunological.

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INTRODUCTION

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious respiratory disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The global pandemic has continued since the first case was reported in December 2019, and to address this issue, several vaccines against this virus have been approved and widely distributed, raising public concerns regarding the side effects of immunization. Many adverse events following messenger RNA COVID-19 vaccines have been reported, although the underlying mechanism is not fully understood[1,2]. Neurological complications are relatively uncommon but have been reported variously [3-6]. Cranial nerve (CN) palsies after vaccination are rare, and only one case of multiple CN palsies has been reported. There is no standard treatment for CN palsies as a side effect of vaccination; however, the use of steroids for treatment of CN palsy is mentioned in the existing scientific literature [5-7]. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first pediatric case of multiple CN palsies following COVID-19 vaccination. In this case, small-angle exotropia was observed not only in the facial, but also in the trigeminal and glossopharyngeal nerve palsies. The timeline is shown in Table 1.

CASE PRESENTATION

Chief complaints

A previously healthy, 14-year-old Asian girl with facial palsy presented to the emergency department.

History of present illness

She had received a second dose of the mRNA COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer-BioNTech) 18 days before the onset of symptoms.

History of past illness

Prior to this event, the patient had no history of any illness. She had received routine childhood



Table 1 Timeline of the case				
	Time	Event	Evaluation	Management
	-18 day	COVID-19 vaccination; Second dose		
ER visit, admission	0	Right facial nerve palsy	Brain MRI + CISS: Focal enhancement at Right IAC	Methylprednisolone 1 mg/kg/day
	1	Right trigeminal nerve palsy; Right glossopharyngeal nerve palsy; Small angle exotropia	Extraocular muscle examination: Small angle exotropia	Methylprednisolone 1000 mg/day for 3 days
Discharge	3			Steroid tapering
	7	Symptoms started to improve		
Frist, follow- up	13			
Last, follow- up	+2 mo	All symptoms had disappeared except diplopia	Extraocular muscle examination: Small angle exotropia (improved)	Prescription of prism glasses

COVID-19: Coronavirus disease 2019; ER: Emergency room; MRI: Magnetic resonance imaging; CISS: Constructive interference in the steady state; IAC: Internal acoustic canal.

immunization in Korea and had suffered no side effects.

Personal and family history

The patient had no relevant personal or family history.

Physical examination

There were no abnormal findings on the general physical examination. Neurological examination revealed that her right evelid did not completely close, and the corner of her right mouth was drooping. An asymmetric wrinkle was observed on her right forehead, and tenderness was observed on her right face.

Laboratory examinations

Reverse transcriptase polymerase chain reaction for the detection of SARS-CoV-2 from nasopharyngeal swabs was negative, and routine blood tests, including inflammatory markers, revealed no abnormalities. There were no symptoms or signs of infection, and the inflammation markers (CRP, ESR) were normal, so no other virus tests were performed.

Imaging examinations

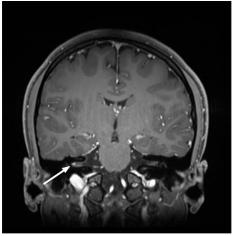
Brain magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) with constructive interference in the steady state was performed to assess the cranial nerves, and a focally enhancing lesion in the right internal acoustic canal was confirmed (Figure 1).

FINAL DIAGNOSIS

On the first day of admission, she was diagnosed with Bell's palsy based on the symptoms and MRI findings. However, the following day, trigeminal and glossopharyngeal nerve palsy were additionally confirmed with small-angle exotropia (Figure 2). Considering that there was no evidence of a specific infection and no suspicious history other than vaccination, the most probable etiology was immunemediated neuropathy.

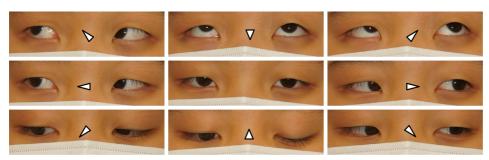
TREATMENT

The patient was diagnosed with Bell's palsy and received steroid administration (1 mg/kg/day methylprednisolone). However, this standard dose of steroid was ineffective and her condition worsened; therefore, she was given high-dose steroid administration (1 g/day methylprednisolone) for 3 days and was then discharged with oral steroids (with tapering from the high dose over 11 days).



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Figure 1 Brain magnetic resonance imaging. A focal enhancement revealed at right internal auditory canal (arrowed) in T1 weighted image.



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Figure 2 The extraocular muscle examination 4 prism diopters (PD) exotropia at distant and 8 PD exotropia at near fixation without definite adduction limitation were demonstrated.

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

The patient's symptoms improved 4 days post completion of the steroid course. At the most recent follow-up, her general condition was good, and all the symptoms (except diplopia) disappeared. Follow-up CN examination revealed no abnormal findings with an exception of an ocular motility disturbance; thus, prism glasses were prescribed for diplopia relief.

DISCUSSION

A novel mRNA COVID-19 vaccine has been developed against SARS-CoV-2, such as Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. mRNA induces an immune response against the spike protein present on the viral surface by producing copies of the fake spike protein, resulting in antibody production against this protein[1,7,8]. These vaccines are highly effective in preventing COVID-19; however, many side effects have been reported following vaccination. Local adverse reactions (such as pain and swelling) and systemic reactions (such as fatigue and headaches) are commonly reported [1,2]. Neurological complications are relatively uncommon but have been reported variously. Shafiq et al[3] reviewed 78 patients who experienced such side effects, and facial nerve palsy was the most common event. Other CN palsies have also been reported [4,5]. However, the occurrence of multiple cranial palsies is rare. To date, there has been only one case in which a 29-year-old male patient developed left oculomotor, abducens, trigeminal, and facial palsies 6 days after receiving the first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine[6]. The neurological complications following other type of vaccines have also been reported. Cosby et al[9] reviewed immune-related vaccine adverse events by searching PubMed for articles published between January 1945 and August 2018 and reported neuromuscular phenomenon such as Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS). Other Immunologically mediated neurological complications were also reported[10,11]. About cranial nerve palsies, there are several studies reporting CN palsies following other vaccines. According to US Vaccine Adverse Event reporting system, the most commonly reported vaccine was seasonal influenza vaccine, followed by Hemophilus influenzae type b and Human papillomavirus vaccine[12,13].

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first pediatric case of multiple CN palsies following COVID-19 vaccination. Our case demonstrated facial, trigeminal, and glossopharyngeal nerve palsies. The etiology of CN palsy following vaccination is suspected to be immunological. Previous reports have suggested that the vaccine may damage the myelin sheaths and surrounding axons, causing demyelinating neuropathies such as Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), Bell's palsy, and acute disseminated encephalomyelitis[14]. In the present case, multiple CN palsies and small-angle exotropia were observed. The extraocular muscles are susceptible to neurotoxins because they have a higher ratio of nerve fibers to the extraocular muscle fibers (1:3 to 1:5) compared to that of other skeletal muscles (1:50 to 1:125)[9]. The ocular motility findings of our patient were similar to those of previous reports of exotropia and diplopia caused by snakebites or insect sting[15]. Immune-mediated toxin after vaccination may affect the neuromuscular junction of the extraocular muscles, which leads to exotropia and diplopia. In adults, cardiac complications such as myocarditis and cardiac dysfunction have been reported[16,17]. It is known that the disease course of COVID-19 in children is milder than in adults, but cardiac complications such as cardiogenic shock and myocardial dysfunction also have been [18-20]. Therefore, it is important to consider vaccination according to the patient's underlying disease and risk of complications.

CONCLUSION

This case highlights a rare adverse effect of the mRNA COVID-19 vaccine in children. Our patient developed multiple CN palsies with small angle exotropia and substantially recovered after a steroid treatment. The most suspected etiology is the vaccine-induced immune response. There are very few cases of side effects caused by COVID-19 vaccine in children. As the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to increase, more studies on the side effects of vaccination, especially in children, are crucial.

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