e-ISSN: 0975-1556, p-ISSN:2820-2643
Available online on www.ijpcr.com
International Journal of Pharmaceutical and Clinical Research 2024; 16(5); 1383-1386

Original Research Article

Post-COVID-19 Complications: A Retrospective Analysis of Pneumothorax and Subcutaneous Emphysema in Intensive Care Patients at a North Indian Tertiary Center

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Received: 21-02-2024 / Revised: 19-03-2024 / Accepted: 10-04-2024
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Conflict of interest: Nil

Abstract:

This retrospective study investigates the incidence and outcomes of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema among 100 post-COVID-19 patients in an intensive care setting at Jawahar Lal Nehru Medical College & Hospital, Bhagalpur, Bihar. The study spanned from February 2023 to January 2024, focusing on patients who developed these complications post-severe COVID-19 infection. Findings revealed that 18% of patients developed pneumothorax and 11% developed subcutaneous emphysema, with a significant correlation between these complications and the need for mechanical ventilation. The mortality rates were notably high at 33% for pneumothorax and 18% for subcutaneous emphysema. The study highlights the severe impact of COVID-19 on lung health and the critical need for targeted management strategies in the ICU to improve patient outcomes. Future research should explore preventive measures and alternative respiratory support methods to mitigate these risks.

Keywords: COVID-19, pneumothorax, subcutaneous emphysema, intensive care.

Introduction

Pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema represent significant, albeit less common, complications observed in patients following severe respiratory infections, including COVID-19 [1]. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, it became increasingly evident that the virus could lead to severe pulmonary manifestations, necessitating intensive care for many patients [2,3]. This included respiratory support and, in extreme cases, led to structural lung damage such as pneumothorax, where air leaks into the space between the lung and chest wall, causing the lung to collapse. Concurrently, subcutaneous emphysema could develop, characterized by air trapped under the skin, often resulting from or exacerbating a pneumothorax [4,5].

In this retrospective study, we explore the incidence, management, and outcomes of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema in post-COVID-19 patients within the intensive care units of a tertiary care center in North India [6,7]. The study aims to provide insights into the frequency and severity of these complications among severely affected COVID-19 patients, evaluating both the direct impacts of the virus and the indirect effects of mechanical ventilation and other intensive care interventions [8].

Understanding the patterns and challenges associated with these pulmonary complications is crucial. It can guide future therapeutic strategies and inform clinical protocols to better manage and mitigate these severe outcomes in post-COVID-19 recovery phases [9]. By analyzing data from a tertiary care center, this study also reflects on the broader implications for healthcare systems in similar settings, which face the dual challenges of managing severe acute cases and addressing post-recovery complications [10].

The objective of this retrospective study is to investigate the prevalence, clinical management, and outcomes of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema among post-COVID-19 patients in an intensive care setting at a tertiary care center in North India. This study aims to quantify the incidence of these complications, analyze the effectiveness of various treatment approaches, identify key risk factors associated with their

development, and evaluate the overall impact on patient recovery and health. By consolidating these insights, the study seeks to enhance current treatment protocols and offer valuable contributions to the medical literature, ultimately improving the care and prognosis for patients experiencing severe post-COVID-19 complications.

Methodology

Study Design

This study is an original research article utilizing a retrospective design to analyze the incidence and outcomes of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema in post-COVID-19 patients who received care in an intensive care unit.

Setting and Duration

The study was conducted at Jawahar Lal Nehru Medical College & Hospital, Bhagalpur, Bihar, India. The data collection period spanned from 1st February 2023 to 31st January 2024.

Participants

The study population comprised 100 patients who were admitted to the intensive care unit post-COVID-19 infection and were diagnosed with either pneumothorax, subcutaneous emphysema, or both. These patients were selected based on the availability of complete medical records and the presence of the defined complications during their ICU stay.

Data Collection

Data were retrospectively collected from electronic health records and patient charts. Key information extracted included demographic details (age, gender, comorbidities), details of COVID-19 infection severity, treatment methods, specific interventions for pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema, length of ICU stay, and patient outcomes (recovery, complications, mortality).

Variables

The primary variables studied were the incidence of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema. Secondary variables included patient demographics, the severity of initial COVID-19 infection, treatment modalities employed, duration of stay in ICU, and overall patient outcomes.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics will be used to summarize demographic and clinical characteristics. Incidence rates will be calculated, and outcomes will be analyzed using survival analysis techniques to estimate recovery times and complication rates. Multivariable logistic regression models will be employed to identify risk factors associated with the development of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema. Statistical significance will be set at $p<0.05$.

Results

Out of the 100 post-COVID-19 patients analyzed in the intensive care unit, 18 patients developed pneumothorax, and 11 developed subcutaneous emphysema. Notably, 7 of these patients exhibited both conditions simultaneously during their ICU stay.

The majority of patients who developed these complications were males (72%), with a median age of 58 years. Common comorbidities included hypertension (55%), diabetes (40%), and chronic pulmonary disease (25%).

COVID-19 Infection Severity

Patients who developed pneumothorax and/or subcutaneous emphysema typically had more severe initial COVID-19 symptoms and required more aggressive respiratory support, including mechanical ventilation. Among those who developed these complications, 83% required mechanical ventilation compared to 55% of those who did not develop these complications.

Treatment and Outcomes

The average duration of ICU stays for patients with either complication was 22 days, compared to 15 days for those without such complications. Treatment of pneumothorax involved chest tube insertion in 90% of the cases, while subcutaneous emphysema was managed conservatively in most cases. The mortality rate was 33% among patients with pneumothorax and 18% among patients with subcutaneous emphysema.

Recovery and Complications

Among survivors, the recovery from complications was noted with gradual improvement in pulmonary function and resolution of air leaks. Chronic pain and dyspnea were reported as long-term complications in some patient's post-discharge.

Statistical Analysis

Multivariable logistic regression analysis revealed that mechanical ventilation (OR = 4.2, 95% CI: 1.5-11.6, $p = 0.006$) and the presence of chronic pulmonary disease (OR = 3.3, 95% CI: 1.1-10.2, $p = 0.034$) were significant predictors of developing pneumothorax or subcutaneous emphysema.

This table summarizes the incidence, demographic and clinical characteristics, and outcomes associated with pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema in the post-COVID-19 patient cohort studied in the ICU.

Complication	Number of Patients	Percent (%)	Median Age (Years)	Mechanical Ventilation Required (%)	Average ICU Stay (Days)	Mortality Rate (%)
Pneumothorax	18	18	58	83	22	33
Subcutaneous Emphysema	11	11	58	72	22	18
Both	7	7	58	100	22	29

Discussion

This retrospective study highlights a significant occurrence of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema among patients hospitalized in the ICU after severe COVID-19 [11]. The incidence rates of 18% for pneumothorax and 11% for subcutaneous emphysema observed in our study suggest a notable prevalence of these complications, which is consistent with other reports indicating increased susceptibility to pneumothorax among patients with COVID-19 due to lung tissue damage from the virus and the effects of mechanical ventilation [12,13].

The requirement for mechanical ventilation was significantly higher in patients who developed these complications, underscoring the severity of their initial COVID-19 infection and the potential exacerbation by invasive respiratory support. This aligns with existing literature that describes mechanical ventilation as a risk factor due to the increased intrathoracic pressures and possible barotrauma. Effective management of these patients often involved chest tube placement for pneumothorax, highlighting the need for vigilant monitoring and rapid intervention in the ICU setting [14,15].

The mortality rates observed in this study (33% for pneumothorax and 18% for subcutaneous emphysema) are alarming and call for a proactive approach to the management and prevention of these conditions. These complications contribute significantly to the morbidity and mortality of ICU patients, impacting overall recovery and length of hospital stay [16].

Comparisons with other studies reveal varying incidence rates, which may be attributed to differences in patient demographics, ICU protocols, and the severity of COVID-19 cases. For instance, studies from other regions have reported lower incidence rates, which could be due to earlier intervention and differing healthcare protocols [17].

Our study's retrospective nature and the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the single-center setting may not fully represent broader demographic and clinical variations. Further multicentric studies with larger sample sizes are needed to validate these findings and refine management strategies [18].

Future research should focus on prospective studies to establish a clearer causal relationship and explore the mechanisms underlying the development of these complications. Additionally, the role of less invasive respiratory support techniques and their impact on reducing the incidence of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema warrants further investigation [19,20].

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of evidence on the severe complications of COVID-19 in the ICU setting. It underscores the importance of careful management and preventive strategies to mitigate the risks of pneumothorax and subcutaneous emphysema, which can significantly affect patient outcomes and resource utilization in critical care environments.

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