Interfrontal Sinus Septal Cell: A Cause of Obstructing Inflammation and Mucoceles

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AJNR Am J Neuroradiol 2008, 29 (7) 1369-1371
doi: https://doi.org/10.3174/ajnr.A1107
http://www.ajnr.org/content/29/7/1369
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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE: Recent interest in the origin and complications associated with frontal intersinus septal cells prompted us to review our material looking for cases of the uncommon occurrence of a mucocele developing within such a cell. The purpose of this article was to present the imaging findings on 4 cases of mucoceles arising within surgically proven frontal intersinus septal cells.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: A retrospective review of the case material in our department of otolaryngology since 2000 was made looking for cases of patients with surgically proven frontal intersinus septal cell mucoceles. Institutional review board approval for the review was obtained. Four cases were identified that also had CT and/or MR imaging studies. Examples of 4 additional classic frontal sinus mucoceles and 3 anterior ethmoid mucoceles were also identified for comparison.

RESULTS: All 4 of the cases of frontal intersinus septal cell mucoceles had an expanded midline frontal sinus cell, which thinned the posterior and/or anterior frontal sinus tables. The classic frontal sinus mucoceles were either to the left or right side, and any table thinning was off midline. The ethmoid mucoceles were clearly centered below the frontal sinuses.

CONCLUSIONS: The rare occurrence of a frontal intersinus septal mucocele can be diagnosed on CT and MR imaging studies, because its appearance in the midline is clearly distinct from the more common classic frontal sinus mucoceles that develop within the left or right frontal sinus proper. Distinction is also routinely made from large anterior ethmoid mucoceles.

Discussion

There are 3 principal groups of cells that impact the frontal sinuses. Of these, the supraorbital cells have received the greatest attention with regard to their role in the pathogenesis of frontal sinus disease and its management. These cells pneumatize the orbital plate of the frontal bone posterior to the frontal recess. They generally arise from anterior ethmoid cells, but they can also develop from a posterior cell, and they may be multiple. They drain into the frontal recess anterior to the frontal sinus ostium. Their incidence has been estimated at 5%-15% in dissection studies, but imaging studies have detected a much greater prevalence (62%).

The intrafrontal (intrabullar, type III and IV) cells have the lowest incidence estimated at 1%-2%. On review of approximately 600 CT scans, Bent et al detected them in 9 skulls (1.5%). In a later study of 50 patients examined with multiplanar CT, Lee et al found type III cells in 8% of cases.

Finally, there is the intersinus septum cell (ISSC), which is common but has received the least attention in the literature. These cells are defined as a pneumatization within the midline of the frontal sinuses or paramedian bony lamella (septum) between the frontal sinuses. Van Alyea noted them to be the most frequent cell, present in 28 (11.6%) of his 242 dissection specimens. In a coronal CT scan study of 300 heads (200 patients with chronic sinusitis and 100 cadavers) by Merrit et al, an ISSC was identified in 34%, 10 having multiple cells. The cells extended var-

Received February 26, 2008; accepted March 2.

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DOI 10.3174/ajnr.A1107

ious distances along the height of the septum. Paradoxically, a multiplanar 3D-CT scan study of 50 heads found a prevalence of 14%. In a prospective CT scan study performed in the coronal and axial planes of 200 consecutive nonsinusitis patients, Som and Lawson found ISSC in 30.5% of the cases, also having variable extension along the septum. However, this study revealed communications between most of these cells (85.5%) and the frontal sinus, suggesting that most of these cells may arise as diverticular extensions from the frontal sinuses rather than by the evagination of anterior ethmoid air cells from the frontal recess.

The literature contains few references regarding pathology of the ISSC. Van Alya noted that the ISSC may pneumatize sufficiently to obstruct the frontal ostium. Merrit et al reported 5 patients in their series of 200 patients with chronic sinusitis to have disease in an ISSC, of which 3 cases failed treatment. Chiu and Vaughan reported enlarging a narrow frontal recess by removing an ISSC. Lawson also stated that, when a deviated intersinus septum is found to impinge on the frontal sinus ostium, an air cell in the lower part of the septum should be suspected.

The present study documents that an ISSC may become a mucocele sufficiently large to unilaterally block the frontal sinus outflow, or it may enlarge massively to form a giant mucocele.

**Fig 1.** A 37-year-old woman presented with a feeling of pressure in her forehead. A, An axial T2-weighted MR image shows an expanded interfrontal sinus septal cell with high signal intensity. B, A CT scan shows the mucocele thinning the midline posterior frontal sinus table.

**Fig 2.** A 43-year-old man presented with a headache. An axial T1-weighted MR image shows an expanded interfrontal sinus septal cell with high (proteinaceous) signal intensity. There was thinning of the central posterior sinus table.

**Fig 3.** A 57-year-old woman presented with a slowly growing mass in her lower forehead. An axial T1-weighted MR image shows an expanded interfrontal sinus septal cell with high signal intensity. This mucocele has obstructed the left frontal sinus proper. At surgery, the right frontal sinus drainage was patent and just behind the mucocele.

**Fig 4.** A 68-year-old woman presented with a painful forehead mass. An axial T2-weighted MR image shows a minimally expanded interfrontal sinus septal cell with high signal intensity. This mucocele extended through the midline anterior table and caused a Pott puffy tumor in the overlying scalp (arrow).
cocele involving both frontal sinuses. Such a mucocele usually erodes the anterior and/or posterior sinus tables.

Current management of frontal and frontoethmoidal mucoceles is principally by endoscopic marsupialization into the nasal cavity, with external procedures reserved for inaccessible and recurrent lesions. Intersinus septal mucoceles present an algorithm shift. Although many small mucoceles may be successfully treated endonasally, large ones expand bilaterally, often sequestering the lateral recesses of the frontal sinus, and require external surgery (osteoplastic flap) primarily for management.

Conclusions

When a frontal sinus mucocele is seen to arise in the midline rather than primarily to one side of the frontal sinus, an uncommon mucocele arising within an interfrontal sinus septal cell should be considered. This may impact what the surgeon must do to correct the problem.

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