Particularities of nailfold capillaroscopy in children – literature review

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ABSTRACT

Nailfold capillaroscopy is a simple, non-invasive and low-cost method, that is extremely important in the assessment of adults and children with definite or suspected connective tissue diseases. Peripheral microvascular changes found in nailfold capillaroscopy examination can provide useful information in differential diagnosis and therapy monitoring in majority of connective tissue diseases. Although in adult rheumatology this method has had an incredibly growing interest in the last decades, studies in paediatric population are fewer and generally, the capillaroscopic data used in children are extrapolated from adults. The normal capillaroscopic pattern in the paediatric population has some differences which must be known when performing nailfold capillaroscopy in children.

Keywords: paediatric, nailfold capillaroscopy, connective tissue diseases

INTRODUCTION

Nailfold capillaroscopy (NFC) is a non-invasive and extremely valuable method used for the study of microcirculation, with clinical applications in the assessment of adults as well as children with definite or suspected connective tissue diseases (CTDs) (1-13).

In adults, the main indication for nailfold capillaroscopy is Raynaud’s phenomenon, but in children this condition is rare, and the main indications are represented by CTDs, especially juvenile systemic sclerosis and juvenile dermatomyositis (JDM) (14-21).

Regardless of the patients’ age, adults or children, during the examination of nailfold capillaries the following aspects are observed and documented: skin transparency – subpapillary venous plexus; capillary distribution, density, dimensions (width and length), and shape (typical hairpin, tortuous, branched, bushy, dilated or giant capillaries); presence of haemorrhages or oedema and sometimes capillary blood flow (22,23,24).

In children as in adults, a normal nailfold capillaroscopic pattern is represented by a parallel and regular disposition of the distal row, capillaries having with the shape of an open hairpin or reversed U letter, with a thinner arm representing the arterial branch and a thicker arm representing the venous branch, and a density of 7-17 per millimetre, with an average of 9 capillary per millimetre (6,7,9,12,15,22,23,24).

The main particularities in children are represented by a greater visibility of the subpapillary venous plexus, a lower number of capillary loops per millimetre and a higher frequency of atypical capillary loops (10,12,13,25).

Nailfold capillaroscopy parameters

The subpapillary venous plexus is visible at birth and becomes progressively invisible with age, so children have a greater visibility of the subpapillary venous plexus compared to adults (22,24). With ageing, when the skin becomes more trans-
Capillary distribution is a capillaroscopic parameter useful in rheumatology clinical practice. In healthy subjects, whether children or adults, the capillary loops have a homogenous, parallel and ordered distribution, with equal distances between the ascending and descending branches. There is no consensus regarding the capillary width and capillary length are the ones more parameters but in the daily clinical practice, qualitative assessments of the capillary dimensions are considered satisfactory while the semi-quantitative assessments find their usefulness in clinical trials.

Some authors reported that 15-34% of healthy adults have abnormal capillaries, such as meandering loops, ectasia, bushy loops and bizarre loops. In the largest paediatric series, the presence of bushy capillaries has been reported in 6% of healthy children and bizarre capillaries in 27% of healthy children, the authors considering them as a distinct feature of children’s capillary network. It seems that children of pre-school age have evenly distributed, wide capillaries, with more tortuous, bizarre shapes, compared with adults.

Nailfold capillaroscopy in rheumatic disease

Of all connective tissue diseases, systemic sclerosis (SSc) has the most specific capillaroscopic pattern and nailfold capillaroscopy is a key investigation in the diagnosis of this disease. Depending on scleroderma microangiopathy degree and stage, the scleroderma pattern may be characterized by dilated/giant loops, reduced capillary density/avascular areas, meandering loops, haemorrhages and neo-angiogenesis. Capillary abnormalities observed in juvenile and adult SSc are similar. Several studies reported the simultaneous presence of giant capillaries and avascular areas in >60% of children with juvenile SSc. It is reported that, most children with nonspecific capillar abnormalities at the time of juvenile SSc, develop a scleroderma pattern during the course of the disease.

Approximately 60% of patients with JDM have a scleroderma pattern. In JDM, NFC shows more bushy capillaries compared with juvenile SSc. Although a variety of capillaries changes have been reported in 40-90% of adult and juvenile systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) cases, no specific pattern has been described. Capillaroscopic changes can also be seen in other paediatric rheumatic diseases but they are less striking than those seen in SSc and JDM.

CONCLUSION

The normal appearance of nailfold capillaries in children is similar to adults, the differences being represented by a lower number of capillary loops per millimetre, wider capillaries in young children,
a greater visibility of the subpapillary venous plexus and a higher frequency of atypical capillary loops. These differences should be known and considered in assessing the diagnosis of children with rheumatic diseases, especially CTDs.

Typical capillaroscopic patterns found in CTDs are similar in adult and paediatric population.

Nailfold capillaroscopy is not always easy to perform in children and a mandatory condition is a good collaboration with the patient. Paediatric patients may need prolonged accommodation time and more reassuring regarding the pain free procedure.

NFC is a feasible examination in children because it is a simple, non-invasive, low-cost, easy to perform and easy to repeat procedure, being also the best method for microangiopathy evaluation.

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