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Abstract

Background: Lumbar disc herniation is a common orthopedic challenge warranting surgery in special situations. Lumbar discectomy is said to provide considerable relief when performed in early stages of the disease. The present study was carried out to evaluate the outcomes of lumbar discectomy based on duration of sciatica in a single institution setting among South Indian population.

Methods: In this prospective study, 50 patients with lumbar herniation were divided into 3 sub cohorts accordingly to the duration of sciatica. All these 50 patients were analysed clinically and the diagnosis confirmed with MRI and underwent laminectomy and discectomy. They were scored with ODI questionnaire preoperatively and postoperatively on 10th day, 3rd month, 6th month and 1 year.

Results: Patients in all the sub cohorts showed improvement following the surgery but patients with duration of sciatica less than 12 months showed significant improvement than patients with duration of sciatica more than 12 months. As the duration of sciatica increases the functional outcome of the surgery reduces.

Conclusion: The duration of sciatica has a significant predictive value on the functional outcome of laminectomy and discectomy. If the duration of sciatica increases the surgical outcome is poor. There are complications associated with surgical intervention which has to be emphasised while selecting the patient for the same. In view of the favourable natural course of herniation of lumbar disc and possible complications associated with surgery, most authors recommend a minimum period of conservative management for 2 months. We recommend not to exceed 12 months of conservative management as the risk of poor functional outcome increases significantly after that.

Keywords: Lumbar discectomy, intervertebral disc prolapse, laminectomy

Introduction

Lumbar disc herniation is a common disease encountered in the orthopedic practice. It is clinically manifested as sciatica, with prolonged duration of pain and other associated symptoms. Whenever patients present with sciatica or with features suggestive of neural root compression and cases refractory to non-operative treatment surgical options have been exercised. There is growing interest in understanding the best surgical mode of intervention and the best time to intervene surgically. Weber, Holme and Amlie [1] reported that 70% of patients with sciatica have a considerable reduction in pain within four weeks? However, surgery is necessary in only 10% of patients who have incomplete resolution of symptoms [2, 3]. It has been suggested that the probability of symptoms resolving with conservative treatment decreases progressively with time [4]. In many studies prolonged morbidity has been regarded as a negative predictor [5-11]. However some have contradicted this impression [12, 13]. In a controlled, prospective, long-term study, Weber [14] randomized 126 patients between surgical and nonsurgical treatments. At 1 year, those in the surgical group had fewer complaints related to pain. At 4 years, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. One can conclude that surgical intervention should be limited to patients with a significant neurological deficit or to those patients who are unable to engage in the lifestyle they desire because of sciatica. Weber [14] also demonstrated that less than 2% of the patients in both groups remained symptomatic at the end of 10 years.

It is clearly a mistake and potentially dangerous to carry out conservative treatment in all patients with herniated discs, especially because many reports indicate that patients with long standing pre-operative symptoms have fewer chances of obtaining satisfactory results from
surgery than those whose symptoms are of short duration \(^\text{[6, 15, 16]}\). With this background, the present study was carried out to analyse if there is any association between the duration of sciatica over the functional outcome of lumbar discectomy, the ideal time to operate upon to achieve the best result and the post-operative complications.

**Methodology**

**Study setting and participants**

The present study was carried out as a prospective study among patients presenting with sciatica in the outpatient department of Orthopedics of our tertiary teaching institution for a period of one year. A total of 50 patients diagnosed with lumbar disc herniation were taken up for the study.

**Inclusion criteria**

All skeletally mature patients with sciatica with disc herniation and compression of the exiting nerve root confirmed by Magnetic resonance imaging and treated by Primary Lumbar Discectomy are included in this study.

**Exclusion criteria**

- Failed back syndrome
- Double level disc prolapse
- High lumbar disc prolapse
- Spinal Canal Stenosis
- Metastasis
- Associated with other pathological conditions

**Ethical approval and informed consent**

Approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study. Each participant was explained in detail about the study and informed consent was obtained prior to the data collection.

**Data collection**

The data was collected using standardized tools by a single observer. ODI questionnaire was used to assess the disability preoperatively under all sterile precautions with second generation cephalosporins used for surgical prophylaxis. ODI under all sterile precautions with second generation cephalosporins used for surgical prophylaxis. ODI was calculated on the 10th post operative day, 3rd month, 6th month and 1 year respectively and the absolute ODI score was calculated.

**Results**

The mean age of the study participants was 36 years and majority of the participants were males. Pain and deficits is the common indication of surgery when compared to that of only pain in all the sub cohorts. (Table 1) There were no post-operative complication in sub cohort A and B whereas in sub cohort C there was one with incidence of 6.67 %. (Table 2) On analyzing the change of ODI score of the entire cohort with respect to duration of sciatica spearman’s correlation coefficient was found be \(- 7.18 \) with p value \(<0.0005\) (significant), which signifies a high inverse correlation i.e: as the duration of sciatica increases the change in ODI score reduces. (Figure 5)

On comparing the preoperative ODI score with 10th post op day, 3rd month, 6th month and 1 yr within the same cohort it was found that all groups had significant improvements which is shown by low ODI score during the various post op follow up. The ODI scores of patients with pain was compared with patients having pain and deficit within the individual sub cohorts at various post op follow up and it was found that the p value is statistically not significant. The Indication of surgery has no significant influence on the functional outcome. (Table 3) The change in mean ODI score is highest in the sub cohort A and least in the sub cohort C. (Table 4)

| Sub cohort | N | Indication for surgery | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------|---|------------------------|-----------|------------|
| A(< 6 months) | 19 | Pain and deficits | 2 | 10.52 |
| B(6-12 months) | 16 | Pain | 2 | 12.5 |
| C(>12 months) | 15 | Pain and deficits | 3 | 20 |

| Sub cohort | N | Frequency of complications | Percentage of complications |
|------------|---|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| A(<6 months) | 19 | 0 | 0 |
| B(6-12 months) | 16 | 0 | 0 |
| C(>12 months) | 15 | 1 | 6.67 |

| Sub cohort | Indication for surgery | Pre-op mean ODI | Post-op 10th day Mean ODI | Post-op 3rd month Mean ODI | Post-op 6th month Mean ODI | Post-op 1yr Mean ODI |
|------------|------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| A(< 6 months) | Pain | 63.33 | 37.78 | 26.67 | 26.67 | 26.67 |
| B(6-12 months) | Pain | 61.11 | 40 | 27.77 | 26.66 | 26.66 |
| C(>12 months) | Pain | 61.26 | 40 | 25.55 | 24.91 | 24.91 |

The change in mean ODI score is highest in the sub cohort A and least in the sub cohort C. (Table 4)
Table 4: Comparison of mean change in the ODI between the duration of symptoms

| Sub cohort   | Pre op Mean ODI | Post op 1 year Mean ODI | Mean change in ODI from Pre-op to 1 yr Post-op |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| A(<6 months) | 65.4963         | 23.3916                 | 42.1047                                       |
| B(6-12 months) | 61.2481       | 25.1356                 | 36.1125                                       |
| C(>12 months) | 51.7020        | 33.1827                 | 18.5193                                       |

Discussion

The study showed a significant improvement in the Preoperative ODI to the post operative ODI score within the sub cohort. When the sub cohorts were compared with each other by using the ODI score it was found that there was a increased risk of poor results if the duration of sciatica exceeded 12 months, which is comparable and similar to a study conducted by L.C.L. Ng, P.Sell [17]. Also there was no difference between patients who were operated upon various intervals within 12 months of onset of sciatica.

The reported threshold of the duration of sciatica which is associated with poor outcomes is variable in literature. Hurme and Alaranta [4] found the results to be better in those patients in whom the duration of sciatica did not exceed 2 months. Dvorak et al. [3] concluded that patients with sciatica less than 6 months duration had better long term operative results. The most recent prospective cohort study of Nygaard et al. [7] suggested that the duration of sciatica was 8 months. This study shows that there is only marginal improvement in the ODI score on post op 10th day which gradually improves and attains maximum at around post-op 3rd month and virtually remains same. In this study the change of ODI score of the
entire cohort with respect to duration of sciatica shows a high inverse correlation. i.e. as the duration of sciatica increases the change in ODI score reduces, and the change in ODI score is maximum for the sub cohort A compared to sub cohort B and C. These results are comparable to a study conducted by L.C.L. Ng, P.Sell [17].

Conclusion

The duration of sciatica has a significant predictive value on the functional outcome of laminectomy and discectomy. If the duration of sciatica increases the surgical outcome is poor. There are complications associated with surgical intervention which has to be emphasised while selecting the patient for the same. The level of disc involvement is equal in all the subcohorts and L4-L5 disc is more commonly involved than L5S1 disc. There is no influence of indication of surgery on the outcome of laminectomy and discectomy. In view of the favorable natural course of herniation of lumbar disc and possible complications associated with surgery, most authors recommend a minimum period of conservative management for 2 months. We recommend not to exceed 12 months of conservative management as the risk of poor functional outcome increases significantly after that.

Declaration

Conflict of interest: Nil
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Ethical approval: Obtained

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