Tibial Nerve Schwannoma: An Unexplained Cause of Lateral Foot Pain –
A Rare Case Report and Review

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Learning Point of the Article:
An unexplained lateral foot pain needs a meticulous examination of the entire length of the tibial nerve which should be confirmed by MRI scan and the excision biopsy remains the gold standard treatment of choice for schwannoma of the peripheral nerve.

Abstract

Introduction: Schwannoma is a benign tumor that arises from the peripheral nerve sheath. It presents as a discrete, often tender, and palpable nodule associated with neurogenic pain or paresthesia when compressed or traumatized. The growth rate is usually slow, and these lesions seldom exceed 2 cm in diameter.

Case Report: We report the case of a schwannoma arising from the tibial nerve located in the left popliteal fossa. The patient presented with the left foot pain in the lateral plantar region without any motor deficit. The pre-operative diagnosis was made with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan. He was subjected for neurolysis and excision biopsy of the lesion. The surgical specimen consisted of encapsulated white-yellow mass with irregular contours, measuring 2 × 3 cm. The cut section revealed cystic degenerations with areas of hemorrhage and necrosis. The patient reported symptom free in the post-operative period and during follow-up. Marginal excision appears to be recommended therapy for this tumorous lesion, without any evidence of recurrence during follow-up.

Conclusion: A benign nerve sheath tumor of a peripheral nerve could be a possibility for long-standing neuropathic pain in the foot, ankle, and leg, wherein all other possibilities have been ruled out. The meticulous examination of the entire length of the tibial nerve including sciatic nerve by palpation and percussion was helpful in diagnosis which should be confirmed by MRI scan. The excision biopsy remains the gold standard treatment of choice for schwannoma of the peripheral nerve.

Keywords: Schwannoma, popliteal fossa, tibial nerve.

Introduction

Among all peripheral nerve sheath benign tumors, schwannoma is the most common tumor arising in the Schwann cells of the peripheral nervous system [1]. They are well-encapsulated, slow-growing neoplasms that form within the perineurium and follow an indolent natural course [2]. The schwannomas are most commonly seen between the third and fourth decade of life with no gender predilection and an infrequent rate of malignant transformation [3,4].

Schwannomas are most commonly seen in head-and-neck region followed by lower extremities, especially in the foot and ankle [5]. They occur more frequently in the posterior tibial nerve and very rarely seen in tibial nerve in popliteal fossa [6,7]. Knight et al. in their review about benign solitary schwannomas, they documented 8.97% of cases of tibial nerve schwannomas [1]. Solitary schwannomas present as an asymptomatic mass or cause compressive neuropathy due to mass effect and displacement of nerve bundles. A typical presentation is pain and numbness of the plantar foot which can be mistaken due to lumbar radiculopathy. The clinical diagnosis can be missed or delayed due to the indolent course of these tumors, leading to the development of tarsal tunnel syndrome [8,9,10]. The management of schwannoma is meticulous resection of mass without any damage to the adjacent nerve due to their nerve sheath origin.

We report a patient with a lower extremity schwannoma affecting...
the tibial nerve with lateral foot pain after obtaining informed and written consent from the patient.

**Case Report**

A 32-year-old male presented at our institution with a history of pain over the lateral aspect of the left foot for 2 years of insidious onset. He complained of pins and needle sensation over plantar aspect of the left foot. There was no significant history of trauma. He noticed swelling behind the left knee in the past 6 months which was initially peanut shaped and gradually progressed to the present size.

On examination, there was an oval mass of 2 × 3 × 1 cm, firm, non-pulsatile, non-fluctuant, non-transilluminating in the left popliteal fossa (Fig. 1) which was mobile in both directions. Skin over the swelling was pinchable. The patient was neurologically stable except with decreased sensation over lateral aspect (plantar region) of the left foot. Notably, the left popliteal and dorsalis pedis pulses were felt.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the left popliteal fossa revealed encapsulated round to oval shaped, eccentrically placed lesion seen within the intermuscular space in the posterior aspect of knee joint. Lesion shows homogenous isointense on T1 and heterogeneous hyperintense signal on T2. There are hypointense foci seen within the hyperintense area on T2 which is suggestive of fascicular sign. The sagittal image showed continuity of mass lesion with the tibia nerve displaying fat split sign, lesion measuring 2 × 3 × 1 cm (Fig. 2a, 2b, 2c).

Under spinal anesthesia, the patient underwent neurolysis of tibial nerve and excision biopsy of tumorous lesion (Fig. 3a, b) by incising the epineurium of tibial nerve since the tumorous lesion was eccentrically placed. As there was no disruption of tibial nerve continuity, no nerve repair was done. Gross resected specimen of tumorous mass of 2 × 3 × 1 cm and the cut specimen showing areas of hemorrhage, necrosis, and cystic spaces interspersed along the tumorous lesion (Fig. 4a, b). Histopathological examination (x40) of the lesion showed biphasic tumor consisting of compact hypercellular Antoni A areas and myxoid hypocellular Antoni B areas and nuclear palisading around fibrillary process of Verocay bodies without any neural elements seen (Fig. 5).

Immunohistochemistry (IHC) staining of the resected lesion revealed strong positivity for S-100 staining (Fig. 6).

The patient was regularly followed up at timely intervals for 9 months since the excision of the lesion. The follow-up period was uneventful. The patient had improved sensation over lateral aspect (plantar region) of the left foot and without any recurrence of tumorous lesion during the follow-up period.

**Discussion**

Schwannoma is also known as neurilenomas, neurocytomas, peripheral gliomas, neurinomas, and neurolemmomas. Being the most common peripheral nerve tumor, Schwannoma is usually an asymptomatic, slow-growing, solitary, eccentric, firm, well-
Histopathological findings

- Hypocellular Antoni B and spindle-shaped Schwann cells containing Antoni A areas with nuclear palisading
- Sheets of spindle cells with nuclear palisading with Verocay bodies
- Antoni A and Antoni B pattern with nuclear palisading and Verocay bodies
- Spindle-shaped cells with fibrillary eosinophilic cytoplasm, round to oval nuclei, and inconspicuous nuclei
- Verocay bodies with perivascular hyalinization and hemosiderin and fibrin deposition
- Encapsulated spindle cell tumor with a minimally pleomorphic fusiform nuclei with wavy eosinophilic cytoplasm; Antoni A and Antoni B areas along with Verocay bodies were seen
- Areas of moderate to high cellularity and scant stromal matrix comprising elongated cells with cytoplasmic processes arranged in fascicles along with less densely cellular areas consisting of loose meshwork of cells
- Surgical excision of mass
- Excision biopsy of the lesion
- En-mass resection of tumor with preservation of sciatic fascicles
- Surgical removal of mass along with decompression of tarsal tunnel
- Microneurosurgical total excision of mass lesion with separation of nerve fascicles from lesion
- Excisional biopsy of the anterior left tibia
- Excisional biopsy of the lesion
- Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy
- Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy
- Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy
- Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy
- Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy
- Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy
- Surgical biopsy of the tumorigenic mass

IHC findings

- S-100 protein positivity
- S-100 protein positivity
- S-100 protein positivity
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- S-100 protein positivity
- S-100 protein positivity
- S-100 protein positivity
- S-100 protein positivity
- S-100 protein positivity
- S-100 protein strongly positive

Diagnostic modality

- USG of knee and MRI of knee
- Core needle biopsy and MRI of the left ankle
- MRI of the left ankle
- MRI of the left knee and MRI of the left ankle
- FNAC of mass and USG and MRI of the left knee
- USG and MRI of knee joint
- USG and MRI of ankle joint
- USG and MRI of ankle joint
- eMRI of the left ankle and foot
- MRI of the right knee
- MRI of the left distal tibia
- USG and MRI of the left knee
- MRI of the left knee
- MRI of the left knee

Clinical presentation

- Soft mass in popliteal fossa without any neurological deficit
- Mass on left ankle without any neurological involvement
- Swelling around inner aspect of the left ankle with pain over ankle and foot
- Pain in posterior pelvis near the right sacroiliac joint
- Persistent dull aching pain of the left lower limb, which got aggravated during walking without any neurological deficit; painless mass behind the left knee joint
- Painful swelling in the posterior aspect of knee without any neurological involvement
- Left foot and ankle pain with symptoms of tarsal tunnel syndrome
- Painless mass behind the right knee with preservation of sciatic nerve; difficulty in sitting on chair
- Painful swelling on the anterior aspect of his distal left tibia
- Painful lump in the left distal femur
- Painful swelling in the left leg
- Painful swelling in the right tibia
- Pain over lateral aspect of the left foot with pins and needle sensation; swelling behind the left knee joint

Management

- Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy
- Marginal excision of the tumor
- Enucleation of the tumorigenic mass
- Excision biopsy of the lesion
- Surgical excision of mass

Table 1: Review of lower extremity schwannoma from 2013 to 2020

| Author and year of the study | Delay in diagnosis | Clinical presentation | Diagnostic modality | Histopathological findings | IHC findings | Management |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|--------------|------------|
| Komurcu et al. [23] (2013)  | 2 years 6 months   | Soft mass in popliteal fossa without any neurological deficit | USG of knee and MRI of knee | Hypocellular Antoni B and spindle-shaped Schwann cells containing Antoni A areas with nuclear palisading | S-100 protein positivity | Surgical exploration and excisional biopsy |
| Hallahunet et al. [10] (2014) | 10 years           | Mass on left ankle without any neurological involvement | Core needle biopsy and MRI of the left ankle | Sheets of spindle cells with nuclear palisading with Verocay bodies | S-100 protein positivity | Marginal excision of the tumor |
| Banshulkar and Nistane [24] (2015) | 5 years           | Swelling around inner aspect of the left ankle with pain over ankle and foot | MRI of the left ankle | Antoni A and Antoni B pattern with nuclear palisading and Verocay bodies | - | Enucleation of the tumorigenic mass |
| Madi et al. [25] (2016)    | 2 years            | Chronic left calf pain and tingling sensation in the left foot with swelling behind the left knee | USG of the left knee | Verocay bodies with perivascular hyalinization and hemosiderin and fibrin deposition | - | Excision biopsy of the mass |
| Minet et al. [26] (2016)   | 1 year 6 months    | Swelling behind the left knee without any neurological deficit | USG of left knee | Verocay bodies without areas of hemorrhage and necrosis | - | Excision biopsy of the lesion |
| Lakhotia et al. [27] (2016) | 3 months           | Pain in posterior pelvis near the right sacroiliac joint | MRI of pelvis | Features of subperiosteal cellular benign schwannoma | S-100 protein positivity | Excision biopsy of the lesion |
| Nahar and Goyal [28] (2018) | 2 years            | Persistent dull aching pain of the left lower limb, which got aggravated during walking without any neurological deficit; painless mass behind the left knee joint | FNAC of mass and USG and MRI of the left knee | Encapsulated spindle cell tumor with minimally pleomorphic fusiform nuclei with wavy eosinophilic cytoplasm; Antoni A and Antoni B areas along with Verocay bodies were seen | - | En-mass resection of tumor with preservation of sciatic fascicles |
| Patil [29] (2018)          | 2 months           | Swelling in the posterior aspect of knee without any neurological involvement | USG and MRI of knee joint | Areas of moderate to high cellularity and scant stromal matrix comprising elongated cells with cytoplasmic processes arranged in fascicles along with less densely cellular areas consisting of loose meshwork of cells | - | Surgical excision of mass |
|                            | 1 year             | Pain over back of knee and calf region | USG of popliteal fossa | | | |
|                            | 1 year 4 months    | Pain and paresthesia in the lateral aspect of upper one-third of the left leg | CT and MRI of the left leg | | | |
| Jha et al. [30] (2019)     | 6 years            | Left foot and ankle pain with symptoms of tarsal tunnel syndrome | eMRI of the left ankle and foot | Spindle-shaped Schwann cells with eosinophilic cytoplasm and basophilic nuclei in a collagenous stroma with thick, hyaline walls vessels | - | Surgical removal of mass along with decompression of tarsal tunnel |
| Satyartheet al. [31] (2019) | 2 years            | Painless mass behind the right knee with preservation and difficulty in sitting on chair | MRI of the right knee | Well-capsulated lesion with Antoni A and B areas | - | Microneurosurgical total excision of mass lesion with separation of nerve fascicles from lesion |
| Moussa et al. [32] (2020)  | 10 years           | Painful swelling on the anterior aspect of his distal left tibia | MRI of the left distal tibia | Well-encapsulated lesion formed of spindle cells with thin wavy spindle nuclei and nuclear palisading (Verocay bodies) and without mitosis or areas of hemorrhage and necrosis | S-100 protein positive | En bloc excision of the mass from anterior left tibia |
| Patro et al. [33] (2020)   | 2 years            | Painful lump in the left distal femur | USG and MRI of the left knee | Features of Antoni A and Antoni B areas and Verocay bodies without areas of hemorrhage and necrosis | S-100 protein and collagen type IV positivity | Excisional biopsy of the lesion |
|                            | 1 year 6 months    | Painful swelling in the left tibia | MRI of the left leg | | | |
|                            | 1 year 2 months    | Painful swelling in the right tibia | MRI of the right leg | | | |
| Current study              | 2 years            | Pain over lateral aspect of the left foot with pins and needle sensation; swelling behind the left knee joint | MRI of the left knee | Biphasic tumor with compact hypercellular Antoni A areas and myxoid hypocellular Antoni B areas and nuclear palisading around fibrillary process of Verocay bodies without any neural elements | S-100 protein strongly positive | Neurolysis of tibial nerve at popliteal fossa with excision biopsy |

CT: Computed tomography, USG: Ultrasonography, MRI: Magnetic resonance imaging
A benign nerve sheath tumor of a peripheral nerve could be a possibility for long-standing neuropathic pain in the foot, ankle, and leg where all other possibilities are ruled out. The meticulous examination of the entire length of the tibial nerve including sciatic nerve by palpation and percussion was helpful in diagnosis which should be confirmed by MRI scan. The excision biopsy remains the gold standard treatment of choice for schwannoma of the peripheral nerve.

**Conclusion**

A benign nerve sheath tumor of a peripheral nerve could be a possibility for long-standing neuropathic pain in the foot, ankle, and leg where all other possibilities are ruled out. The meticulous examination of the entire length of the tibial nerve including sciatic nerve by palpation and percussion was helpful in diagnosis which should be confirmed by MRI scan. The excision biopsy remains the gold standard treatment of choice for schwannoma of the peripheral nerve.
Clinical Message

The meticulous examination of the entire length of the tibial nerve including sciatic nerve by palpation and percussion was helpful in diagnosis which should be confirmed by MRI scan. The excision biopsy remains the gold standard treatment of choice for schwannoma of the peripheral nerve.

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**Conflict of Interest:** Nil

**Source of Support:** Nil

**Consent:** The authors confirm that informed consent was obtained from the patient for publication of this case report

**How to Cite this Article**

Kumar R, Ranjan R, Jeyaraman M, Kumar S. Tibial Nerve Schwannoma: An Unexplained Cause of Lateral Foot Pain – A Rare Case Report and Review. Journal of Orthopaedic Case Reports 2020 December;10(9):1-6.