Pathophysiological Mechanisms and Neurological Manifestations in COVID-19

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ABSTRACT
With increasing knowledge of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), we now understand that COVID-19 presents with various extrapulmonary manifestations with multiorgan involvement. Involvement of the central nervous system (CNS) occurs probably via transsynaptic spread or transfer across the blood–brain barrier. Hypoxia, immune-mediated injury, and vascular damage are the potential mechanisms for the CNS manifestations. Headache, dizziness, chemosensory disturbances, such as loss of smell, taste, encephalopathy, stroke, etc., are among the commonly encountered neurological presentations. Headache is identified as one of the red flag symptoms for COVID-19. Sudden onset of loss of smell and/or taste in the absence of nasal congestion can help in COVID-19 case identification and testing prioritization. Both hemorrhagic and ischemic brain injury is common in patients developing stroke. Besides these, COVID-19-associated CNS involvement demands more careful attention toward patients with existing neurological disorders especially that are managed with immunosuppressant agents. In all, neurological involvement in COVID-19 is not uncommon and may precede, occur concomitantly or after the respiratory involvement. It may also be the sole presentation in some of the patients necessitating high vigilance for COVID-19. In this review, we briefly discussed the pathogenesis of CNS involvement and some important neurological manifestations in COVID-19.

Keywords: Anosmia, Central nervous system, Coronavirus disease 2019, Encephalopathy, Headache, Stroke.

Indian Journal of Critical Care Medicine (2020): 10.5005/jp-journals-10071-23592

INTRODUCTION
Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus has affected over 12 million people and caused over half a million deaths globally.1 Coronavirus disease 2019 clinical syndrome can manifest with varying clinical features. A large number of patients with COVID-19 may remain asymptomatic, but many symptomatic patients have features like fever, dry cough, sore throat, dyspnea, fatigue, and myalgia. Though pulmonary involvement is typical, non-pulmonary, or atypical presentations are not uncommon.2 Coronavirus disease 2019 can present with neurological involvement with symptoms, such as headache, giddiness, and dizziness, and some may develop encephalopathy and stroke.1,3 Some of the neurological manifestations may be related to hypoxia or metabolic acidosis but the novel coronavirus has also been detected in the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF).2 The exact pathogenesis of neurological involvement remains unclear, but possible theories include thrombi formation in the brain vessels and binding of the virus to the angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE-2) receptors in the central nervous system (CNS).4,5 During this COVID-19 pandemic, intensivists must understand that patients may present with non-specific neurological symptoms that should not be ignored. Higher levels of vigilance are thus necessary for extrapolmonary and atypical symptoms, to prevent late diagnosis and to curtail the risk of COVID-19 transmission. In this review, we discuss the pathophysiology and neurological manifestations of COVID-19.

PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF CNS INVOLVEMENT
It is now known that the presence of ACE-2 receptors is essential for cellular entry of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2). The spike proteins on the viral surface bind to the ACE-2 receptor on the host cells and enter the cells.4
Neurological Manifestations, COVID-19, Pathophysiological Mechanism

The ACE-2 presence on the tissues determines viral cellular tropism. In humans, multiple tissues express the ACE-2 receptors including the epithelium of the airway, lung parenchyma, renal cells, small intestine, vascular endothelium, and the CNS.6

Neuroinvasion Mechanisms
Multiple mechanisms may underlie CNS involvement in SARS-CoV-2 infection, such as transfer across synapses from the infected neurons, entry via the olfactory nerve, transfer via vascular endothelium, or white cells traversing the blood–brain barrier (BBB).

Transsynaptic Spread
Transfer across the synapses has been documented for various coronaviruses (e.g., avian bronchitis virus, hemagglutinating encephalomyelitis virus 67, etc.).18 Retrograde transsynaptic spread with either endocytosis or exocytosis and fast axonal transport of vesicles along the microtubules are suggested mechanisms for transfer of coronaviruses.5 These mechanisms have also been postulated as possible route for CNS entry of SARS-CoV-2 after crossing cribriform plate of ethmoid bone. Loss of smell and taste are common in COVID-19, and the presence of these symptoms have a good predictive value in assessing household contacts of COVID-19 patients.9,10 However, damage to the olfactory epithelium rather than to olfactory neuronal cells has been the suggested mechanism for loss of smell.9

Passage across BBB
Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 can invade CNS by passage across vascular endothelial cells (all endothelial cells express ACE-2) or by passage of virus infected leukocytes through the BBB, known as the Trojan horse mechanism.6 As SARS-CoV-1 which infects cell types expressing ACE-2, such as lymphocytes, granulocytes, and monocytes, SARS-CoV-2 is also expected to infect these cells.11–13 Increased permeability of BBB caused by systemic inflammation in the COVID-19 infection might allow passage of infected immune cells and thereby virus entry into the CNS.14

Pathophysiology of Neurological Damage
Multiple mechanisms of neurological injury are postulated and predominantly include hypoxic brain injury, immune-mediated damage, and cerebrovascular injury.

Hypoxia-induced Brain Injury
Pneumonia is characteristic in SARS-CoV-2 infection and in severe cases results in respiratory insufficiency and resultant hypoxia. Chronic persistent hypoxia can result in neurological injury. Hypoxia coupled with peripheral vasodilatation, anaerobic metabolism, and accumulation of toxic waste leads to neural swelling, cerebral edema, and progressive cerebral injury.15,16

Immune-mediated Brain Injury
Severe COVID-19 infection is characterized by cytokine storm with dysregulated release of excessive quantities of inflammatory cytokines [e.g., interleukin (IL) 6] along with the activation of immune cells, such as T cells, macrophages, and endothelial cells. The excessive cytokine release results in vascular leakage, activation of complement and coagulation cascade proceeding disseminated intravascular coagulation and ultimately multiorgan failure.17

Cerebrovascular Injury
Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 binding to the endothelial ACE-2 receptors may lead to increase in luminal pressure in the vessels, which may cause bleeding in the brain. In addition, abnormalities in coagulation system, such as thrombocytopenia, increased levels of D-dimer contribute to intracerebral bleeding especially in severely ill COVID-19 patients.16

Other Potential Mechanisms
Nerve cells lack major histocompatibility complex antigens, and therefore, viral elimination depends on the action of cytotoxic T cells. Neuronal apoptosis after virus infection may also exert a relatively protective effect. In addition, the homeostasis characteristics of the cells in the CNS assist in existence of the virus.14

Neurological Manifestations in COVID-19
Current evidence indicates that COVID-19 involves not only the CNS but also peripheral nervous system (PNS). Table 1 enlists the neurological manifestations that are discussed below.

CNS Manifestations
Headache
Though non-specific, headache is one of the predominant symptoms in COVID-19 and the reported incidence varies from 3% to up to one-third of patients.6,16 In hospitalized patients, headache prevalence varies from 11 to 34%. Characteristically, headache in COVID-19 is moderate–severe bilateral headache with pulsating or pressing quality in the temporoparietal, forehead, or periorbital region. Headache may be gradual in onset or sudden and responds poorly to common analgesics. Relapse rate is high.18 A Cochrane COVID-19 Diagnostic Test Accuracy Group identified headache along with symptoms of fever, arthralgia/myalgia, and fatigue as red flags for COVID-19 (positive likelihood ratio of ≥5).19 However, the exact pathophysiology of headache is unclear. The suggested contributory mechanisms include direct viral invasion of the nervous system as well as the cytokine release syndrome. Release of the cytokines and chemokines stimulating the nociceptive sensory neurons may be the cause of the pain. Additionally, activation of peripheral trigeminal nerve endings also contributes to headache development.18,20,21

Table 1: Neurological manifestations in COVID-19

| System                     | Neurological manifestations                          |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Central nervous system    | Headache                                            |
|                           | Dizziness                                           |
|                           | Impaired consciousness                              |
|                           | Toxic–metabolic encephalopathy.                     |
|                           | Hypoxic encephalopathy.                             |
|                           | Acute hemorrhagic necrotizing encephalopathy.       |
|                           | Encephalitis.                                       |
|                           | Seizures                                            |
|                           | Stroke                                              |
|                           | Acute myelitis.                                     |
| Peripheral nervous system | Chemosensory disturbances                           |
|                           | Loss of smell.                                      |
|                           | Loss of taste.                                      |
|                           | Guillain–Barré syndrome                             |
|                           | Skeletal muscle damage                              |
Dizziness
Dizziness is another non-specific symptom that may be evident in 10–14% patients with COVID-19. In some reports, dizziness was reported in up to 20% cases. A meta-analysis of 33 studies (7,559 participants) reported an identified dizziness prevalence of 8.7% (95% CI 5.02–13.43).

Impaired Consciousness
A study from China reported impaired consciousness in 37% of hospitalized COVID-19 patients. It could result from various causes, such as toxic–metabolic encephalopathy, seizures, or from demyelinating disease. Additionally, direct CNS infection with parenchymal involvement may cause impaired consciousness.

Toxic-metabolic Encephalopathy
Hospitilized COVID-19 patients have various derangements, such as severe inflammation, cytokine storm, sepsis, and renal dysfunction. The cytokine storm in severe COVID-19 is associated with increased levels of ILs, such as IL-2, IL-6, IL-7, granulocyte colony-stimulating factor, interferon-γ inducible protein 10, monocyte chemoattractant protein 1, macrophage inflammatory protein 1-α, and tumor necrosis factor α. Along with the accumulation of toxic metabolic products, increased levels of cytokines and other inflammatory markers contribute significantly to toxic–metabolic encephalopathy.

Hypoxic Encephalopathy
In patients with severe pneumonia, hypoxia is very common. In some cases, hypoxia may be severe and results in a confusional state. A retrospective case series from China reported hypoxic encephalopathy in 20% of patients.

Acute Hemorrhagic Necrotizing Encephalopathy
Poyiadji et al., reported the first case of acute hemorrhagic necrotizing encephalopathy in a female airline worker in her late 50s. The characteristic features included symmetric, multifocal lesions with variable thalamic involvement. A retrospective analysis assessed COVID-19 patients with new-onset of neurological involvement. Among 27 critically ill patients, 20 (74%) had encephalopathy, 2 (7%) had acute necrotizing encephalopathy, and 5 (19%) had vasculopathy. Acute hemorrhagic necrotizing encephalopathy is a rare complication in viral diseases and a possible pathogenic mechanism is cytokine storm with BBB disruption and ultimate damage to the brain parenchyma.

Encephalitis
The first case of meningoencephalitis was reported in Japan. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the brain showed hyperintensity along the wall of right lateral ventricle and hyperintense signal changes in the right mesial temporal lobe and hippocampus. Importantly, nasopharyngeal swab for the specific SARS-CoV-2 RNA was negative but it was detected in the CSF.

Stroke
Seizeure as a presenting feature is rare in COVID-19. In a case report from Sohal and Mossammam, a 72-year-old man was diagnosed with COVID-19 and had comorbidities, such as hypertension, coronary artery disease with stent, type II diabetes, and end-stage kidney disease on hemodialysis. The patient developed multiple episodes of tonic–clonic movements of his upper and lower extremities on the third day of admission. Seizures responded to anti epileptic treatment.

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Acute Myelitis
Reports of acute necrotizing myelitis, acute transverse myelitis, and acute disseminated encephalomyelitis indicate wide variety in neurological involvement with SARS-CoV-2. Treatment with steroids, immunomodulators, and plasma therapy proved beneficial in these cases.

PNS Manifestations
Chemosensory Disturbances
Loss of taste and smell are now established symptoms of COVID-19. While analyzing the data of 3,563 patients from 18 studies, Borsetto et al., reported that the overall prevalence of alteration of the sense of smell or taste was 47%. The prevalence rates varied between 31 and 67% in severe and mild-to-moderate symptomatic patients, respectively. The loss of smell and taste preceded other symptoms in 20% of cases and it was concomitant in 28%. These sensory disturbances may be the only presenting symptoms in some patients. The pathogenesis of such chemosensory disturbances is yet to be fully understood, the hypotheses proposed is that SARS-CoV-2 might alter the cells and circuits involved in chemosensory processing and thereby change perception. This hypothesis along with other potential mechanisms of pathogenesis of change of smell and taste are extensively reviewed by Cooper and colleagues which readers can refer for further information.

Currently, COVID-19 patients with mild disease are home-quarantined. In household contacts of such home-quarantined patients, Boscolo-Rizzo et al., reported loss of smell or taste in 22.3% contacts and 4.0% of contacts had loss of smell or taste in the absence of other symptoms. Dawson et al., reported loss of taste and/or smell as the fourth most reported symptom (62%) among COVID-19 patients. Presence of these symptoms had the highest positive predictive value (83%; 95% CI 55–95%) among household contacts. Thus, the presence of sudden onset loss of taste and/or smell in people without nasal congestion should be considered for COVID-19 case identification and testing prioritization.

Guillain–Barré Syndrome (GBS)
So far, 16 cases of GBS after COVID-19 have been published. Guillain–Barré syndrome affects peripheral nerves and manifests as demyelinating neuropathy with ascending paresthesia and weakness. Though temporal association with occurrence of GBS was seen in many reports (duration of onset of symptoms varied from 5 to 10 days postinfection), the evidence of direct invasion of nerves or nerve roots is unclear. In such cases where follow-up duration may be short, acute-onset chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy (A-CIDP) should be considered among the differential diagnosis. Treatment with immunoglobulins, plasma exchange may help in better recovery.

Skeletal Muscle Damage
Mao et al., reported muscle injury in 19.3 and 4.8% of severe and non-severe category of COVID-19 patients, respectively. Angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 receptors are also expressed on skeletal muscles, and invasion of skeletal muscles through ACE-2 receptors may play a key role in the pathogenesis of injury. Additionally, increased lactate levels, low pH, and low oxygen levels add up to muscle pain. Such pain may not be responsive to analgesics and viral exclusion may relieve the pain.

Consideration for COVID-19 Patients with Preexisting Neurological Disorders
Patients with preexisting neurological disorders may have a disease spectrum that may put them at a greater risk of acquiring COVID-19 infection. It should be noted that patients aged >65 years, comorbid lung disease, diabetes, renal disease on dialysis, or receiving immunosuppression are at risk of severe disease. We discuss few important neurological disorders that may put patients at higher risk of COVID-19 infection, below.

Multiple Sclerosis (MS)
Patients with MS being treated with disease-modifying therapies that have immunosuppressive effects are at a risk of severe COVID-19 infection. However, continuation of disease-modifying therapies, such as steroids, is advised. In patients at high risk of exposure to COVID-19, the MS International Federation recommends that before using additional immunosuppressive therapy (e.g., interferons, glatiramer acetate, or natalizumab), risks and benefits of such treatments should be considered. Interferons and glatiramer acetate are unlikely to impact negatively on COVID-19 severity.

Neuromuscular Disorders
Among major neuromuscular disorders, patients with myasthenia gravis or Lambert–Eaton myasthenic syndrome who have respiratory muscle weakness are at risk of severe COVID-19. The International Myasthenia Gravis/COVID Working Group recommends continuing ongoing treatment. Social distancing and telemedicine visits are advised for patients receiving immunosuppressive therapy. As hydroxychloroquine exacerbates myasthenia symptoms, its use is contraindicated.

Epilepsy
Patients with epilepsy are not at higher risk of infection and as none of the antiepileptic drugs have immunosuppressive properties they can be safely continued. A survey of 100 epilepsy patients from Iran found that 31% of patients had hardship obtaining their drugs and 6% had worsening of their seizure control status in the past 4 weeks. In treating patients of epilepsy with COVID-19, potential drug–drug interactions should be kept in mind considering the effects of inhibitors or inducers of cytochrome P450 system.

CNS Effects of COVID-19 Therapies
Among the currently used treatments for COVID-19, hydroxychloroquine can cause irritability, psychosis, peripheral neuropathy, and neuromyopathy. It is contraindicated in myasthenia gravis patients. It interacts with antiepileptic drugs, such as lacosamide and lamotrigine. As it lowers seizure threshold, special consideration should be given in patients with existing epilepsy. With tocilizumab, headache and dizziness are common. Rarely, multifocal cerebral thrombotic microangiopathy may occur. Remdesivir is relatively free of neurological effects. A single case of delirium in a mechanically ventilated patients was reported in a remdesivir trial.

Conclusion
Coronavirus disease 2019 is a multisystem disorder and SARS-CoV-2 has neurotropicity similar to other coronaviruses. Neurological involvement is common in COVID-19 and patients may present
with only neurological symptoms. Neurological manifestations may precede, occur concomitantly or after respiratory involvement. Prompt identification of symptoms with high index of suspicion especially in severe COVID-19 patients is necessary. Further research should focus on the short- and long-term CNS complications and their sequelae in patients of COVID-19.

Acknowledgments

We thank Dr Vijay Chamle (Head, Medical Affairs, Urikh Pharmaceuticals, Mumbai) and Dr Vijay Katekhaye (Quest MedPharma Consultants, Nagpur) for their contribution to the drafting and reviewing of the manuscript.

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