Complications of Tympanostomy Tubes Inserted for Facilitation of Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy

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Objective: To document the incidence of complications occurring secondary to placement of tympanostomy tubes in patients undergoing hyperbaric oxygen therapy.

Design: Retrospective chart review.

Setting: Tertiary referral center.

Patients: Forty-five patients referred to the Department of Otolaryngology for inability to tolerate hyperbaric oxygen therapy between January 1, 1990, and December 31, 1995.

Interventions: All patients underwent bilateral myringotomy and tube placement.

Outcome Measures: Charts were reviewed for complications of tube placement, including otorrhea, otalgia, hearing loss, persistent perforations, and tinnitus.

Results: Seventeen (38%) of 45 patients experienced complications, with most having more than 1. Most complications occurred after conclusion of hyperbaric oxygen therapy. Otorrhea was most common, occurring in 13 patients (29%). Persistent tympanic membrane perforations occurred in 7 patients (16%).

Conclusions: The rate of complications is higher than reported for placement of tympanostomy tubes in other patient populations. Coexisting illness, such as diabetes mellitus, may contribute to the development of complications in patients undergoing hyperbaric oxygen therapy. Alternative methods of tympanostomy, with emphasis on shorter duration of intubation, should be considered in this patient population.


Hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBO) has become commonplace in many medical centers as clinical experience continues to document efficacy. The physiologic basis for the treatment is that the partial pressure of oxygen in the lungs will be increased in direct proportion to an increase in atmospheric pressure.1 Elevation of the partial pressure of oxygen in hypoxic tissues to normal or even supranormal levels enhances fibroblast proliferation, supports collagen deposition, stimulates angiogenesis and epithelialization, and enhances leukocyte bactericidal activity.2 Also, oxygen tension remains elevated in subcutaneous tissues for several hours after treatment, which further improves the healing process.3 These factors have led to the application of HBO as an adjunctive measure for treating conditions resulting from tissue hypoxia, such as clostridial myonecrosis, severe crush injuries with traumatic ischemia, necrotizing fasciitis, chronic osteomyelitis, and nonhealing wounds in diabetic patients and patients with peripheral vascular disease.4 In addition, HBO has emerged as the primary treatment modality for carbon monoxide poisoning, decompression sickness, and air embolism.5

Middle ear barotrauma is the most common adverse effect of HBO.6 As the ambient pressure within the chamber is increased to 2 atmospheres, a patient must be able to equalize the pressure within the middle ear by autoinsufflation. If a significant pressure gradient is allowed to develop, severe otalgia may occur, followed by hemorrhage or serous effusion. Additional reported complications of middle ear barotrauma include tympanic membrane perforation, ossicular chain disruption, or even oval or round window rupture, with resultant vertigo or sensorineural hearing loss.7

Instructing patients in proper autoinsufflation techniques during compression can minimize the risk of barotrauma during HBO.8 Adding oral and topical de-
congestants to the regimen is indicated when nasal congestion compromises performance of autoinsufflation. Some patients continue to experience difficulty despite these measures, resulting in the need for myringotomy and tympanostomy tube insertion to allow continuation of HBO.

Most tympanostomy tubes are inserted for sequelae of otitis media. The patients undergoing HBO represent a distinct subpopulation of all patients receiving tubes. Often, these individuals have no antecedent history of otitis media. The purpose of this study was to retrospectively examine the complication rate in patients who undergo tympanostomy tube insertion for facilitation of HBO.

During the study period, more than 1000 patients received HBO, yielding an approximate 4% incidence of patients requiring tube placement. Of the 45 patients identified, 25 were female (56%) and 20 were male. Their ages ranged from 20 to 86 years, with a mean of 59 years. The indications for HBO were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease Process</th>
<th>No. (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diabetic foot ulcer</td>
<td>30 (67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venous stasis ulcer</td>
<td>7 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoradionecrosis</td>
<td>2 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Necrotizing fasciitis of the neck and face</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gluteal abscess</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon monoxide poisoning</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clostridial myonecrosis</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharyngocutaneous fistula</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteomyelitis of the sternum</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only 1 patient with a history of otitis media was identified. This individual had a chronic perforation in one ear, while the other ear was normal.

Twenty-one patients (47%) had no follow-up in otolaryngology clinics. Included in this number are 4 patients who died of their disease within 6 months of receiving HBO. An additional 10 patients did not complete the planned course of HBO and were unavailable for follow-up. Because of the advanced age and the severity of illness of some of these patients, additional deaths owing to disease may have occurred. Seven patients were followed up only in hyperbaric medicine and reported no complaints referable to the ear over a 3- to 14-month period after tube placement. The final status of the tympanic membrane is not known in all of these patients, but for calculations in this report, these patients were ascribed to the regimen. Twelve patients (27%) were lost to follow-up because of patient refusal, poor medical condition, and subsequent unavailability for follow-up. Persistent perforations were often the cause of hearing loss. The magnitude of additional hearing loss was not quantified, as formal audiometry was not performed in all cases. Individuals developed as much as 30 dB of conductive loss.

Interestingly, patients with diabetes mellitus had a higher incidence of complications. Fifteen (45%) of 33 patients with diabetes mellitus developed complications.

**RESULTS**

Tymanostomy tubes are required for continuation of HBO in 1% to 21% of patients. Factors that may increase the incidence of barotrauma, and thus the need for tubes, include endotracheal intubation, preexisting eustachian tube dysfunction, and altered anatomy of the eustachian tube or nasopharynx. Patients with severe neurologic disease or mental retardation are also likely to develop barotrauma owing to an inability to learn proper autoinsufflation techniques. Treatment with topical and oral decongestants is thought to provide some benefit in alleviating symptoms of nasal congestion, allowing improved autoinsufflation.

The incidence of complications after the insertion of tympanostomy tubes has been widely studied. Early postoperative otorrhea develops in approximately 5% to 10% of patients. Several authors have noted an increased incidence when active infection is present at the time of tube placement, as indicated by culture or mucoid effusion. Otorrhea may occur at any time during intubation in approximately 20% of patients. Large-bore tubes and increasing duration of intubation are associated with a greater incidence of otorrhea. Luxford and Sheehy noted a lower incidence of otorrhea.
The duration of intubation may also play a role in the development of complications. Patients undergoing HBO develop eustachian tube dysfunction secondary to the treatment, but they require assistance with middle ear ventilation only for the duration of the therapy. At our institution, HBO averages 4 weeks. Most of the complications in this series became evident after the completion of HBO. Thus, the application of hyperbaric oxygen is not thought to play a role in the development of complications. A shorter duration of intubation may be beneficial in reducing complications of tympanostomy in this patient population. We are currently performing a prospective trial of short-term tympanostomy techniques to address this issue.

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