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Thrombosis: An Overview

Public Education

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Cite as: Thrombosis: An Overview. In: *Thrombosis: Public Education*. Brisbane (AU): Exon Publications. Online first 2024 May 19. ISBN: 978-0-6458663-7-7

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36255/thrombosis-overview

ABSTRACT

Thrombosis is a condition where blood clots form within blood vessels, potentially leading to serious health issues. This chapter first provides an overview of thrombosis. This is followed by an exploration of the history of thrombosis, tracing the evolution of medical understanding from ancient times to modern discoveries. It further explains the pathophysiology of thrombosis, detailing how blood clots form and the roles of platelets, clotting factors, and blood flow.

Keywords: arterial thrombosis; blood clotting; deep vein thrombosis; diagnosis of thrombosis; history of thrombosis; pathophysiology of thrombosis; symptoms of arterial thrombosis; treatment of thrombosis; venous thrombosis

INTRODUCTION

Thrombosis is a condition where blood clots form inside your blood vessels, obstructing the normal flow of blood. This can lead to severe health issues. Arterial thrombosis occurs when a blood clot forms in an artery. Arteries are the blood vessels that carry oxygen-rich blood from your heart to the rest of your body. When an artery gets blocked by a clot, the blood cannot reach vital organs like your heart or brain. This blockage can cause serious problems such as a heart attack or a stroke. Heart attacks happen when blood flow to a part of the heart is blocked, damaging the heart muscle. Strokes occur when the blood supply to a part of the brain is cut off, causing brain cells to die (1-8).

Venous thrombosis is another type of thrombosis that occurs in the veins. Veins are the blood vessels that return blood to your heart after it has delivered oxygen to your body. The most common form of venous thrombosis is deep vein thrombosis (DVT), which typically occurs in the legs. In DVT, a blood clot forms in a deep vein, causing pain, swelling, and sometimes redness. If a part of this clot breaks off, it can travel through the bloodstream to the lungs, resulting in a pulmonary embolism (PE). PE is a serious condition where the blood clot blocks blood flow in the lungs, causing difficulty in breathing, chest pain, and in severe cases, death.

Thrombosis can be triggered by various factors. These include genetic conditions, which make some people more prone to forming clots, and lifestyle factors such as smoking, lack of exercise, and poor diet. Certain medical conditions like cancer, obesity, and prolonged immobility (such as during long flights or bed rest after surgery) also increase the risk of thrombosis.

Symptoms of arterial thrombosis depend on the affected organ but may include chest pain, shortness of breath, and sudden numbness or weakness, especially on one side of the body. Symptoms of DVT include pain and swelling in the leg, often accompanied by warmth and redness. In the case of a pulmonary embolism, symptoms include sudden shortness of breath, chest pain that may become worse when you breathe in deeply, and a rapid or irregular heartbeat.

Diagnosing thrombosis involves various tests. For arterial thrombosis, doctors may use imaging tests like angiograms, where dye is injected into the blood vessels to show blockages. For DVT, ultrasound is commonly used to see the blood flow in the veins and detect clots. Blood tests can also help by measuring substances that are often elevated when a blood clot is present.

Treatment for thrombosis aims to prevent the clot from getting bigger and to stop new clots from forming. Medications called anticoagulants, or blood thinners, are commonly used. These drugs do not dissolve existing clots but prevent new ones from forming. In some cases, thrombolytic therapy, which uses drugs to dissolve clots, is necessary, especially for severe cases of arterial thrombosis or large pulmonary embolisms. For some patients, surgical procedures might be needed to remove

the clot or to insert a filter in a large vein to catch clots before they reach the lungs.

Reducing the risk of thrombosis involves managing risk factors. This can include lifestyle changes such as quitting smoking, maintaining a healthy weight, and staying active. For those at higher risk, doctors might prescribe anticoagulant medications as a preventive measure. During long periods of immobility, such as long flights or hospital stays, moving around regularly and doing leg exercises can help prevent clots from forming.

HISTORY OF THROMBOSIS

The history of thrombosis is a fascinating journey that spans centuries, showcasing the evolution of medical knowledge and the relentless pursuit to understand and combat this life-threatening condition. Thrombosis has been a recognized medical phenomenon for a long time, but our understanding of its causes, mechanisms, and treatments has developed significantly over the years.

In ancient times, the concept of blood clots and their effects on the human body was not well understood. Early physicians often attributed sudden illnesses and deaths to supernatural causes or imbalances of bodily humors. The Greeks, particularly Hippocrates, known as the Father of Medicine, made significant early contributions. Hippocrates documented observations of patients with swollen and painful limbs, conditions we now recognize as deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Despite these observations, the understanding of blood clots remained rudimentary.

The Renaissance period marked a turning point in medical history. Advances in human anatomy and physiology

provided new insights into how the body functions. Andreas Vesalius, a pioneering anatomist of the 16th century, made significant strides in understanding the circulatory system. However, it was not until the work of William Harvey in the 17th century that a breakthrough occurred. Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood laid the foundation for modern cardiovascular medicine. He described how blood moves through the body, though he did not specifically address thrombosis.

The 19th century saw further advancements. In 1846, German pathologist Rudolf Virchow made a groundbreaking contribution by identifying the key factors that contribute to thrombosis. Virchow's triad, as it is now known, consists of three primary factors: changes in the vessel wall, changes in blood flow, and changes in the composition of blood. Virchow's work established a framework for understanding the mechanisms behind thrombosis and highlighted the importance of blood flow and vessel integrity.

During the early 20th century, research into thrombosis accelerated, driven by the need to address the high incidence of thrombotic events during and after World War I. Advances in medical technology and laboratory techniques allowed scientists to study blood clotting in greater detail. The discovery of anticoagulant medications, such as heparin in the 1920s and warfarin in the 1940s, revolutionized the treatment and prevention of thrombosis. These drugs, which help prevent blood clots from forming, became crucial tools in managing patients at risk for thrombotic events.

The mid-20th century witnessed significant progress in the surgical management of thrombosis. Techniques such as thrombectomy, the surgical removal of blood clots, were

developed to treat severe cases. The introduction of imaging technologies, like ultrasound and angiography, allowed doctors to visualize blood clots within the body, leading to more accurate diagnoses and targeted treatments.

In recent decades, the field of thrombosis research has continued to evolve rapidly. The development of novel anticoagulants, including direct oral anticoagulants (DOACs), has provided more options for patients and improved safety profiles compared to older medications. Researchers have also made strides in understanding the genetic factors that predispose individuals to thrombosis, paving the way for personalized medicine approaches.

Thrombosis remains a significant public health concern worldwide. Public awareness campaigns, advancements in medical technology, and ongoing research efforts have contributed to better prevention, diagnosis, and treatment strategies. Today, healthcare professionals are equipped with a wide array of tools and knowledge to manage thrombosis effectively, reducing the risk of complications and improving patient outcomes.

PATHOPHYSIOLOGY OF THROMBOSIS

To understand how thrombosis occurs, it is essential to know about the process of blood clotting, the role of different blood components, and the factors that can trigger clot formation.

Blood clotting, also known as coagulation, is a natural process that helps stop bleeding when we get injured. When a blood vessel is damaged, the body quickly responds to prevent excessive blood loss. This response involves a

complex interaction between cells and proteins in the blood. Platelets, which are small cell fragments, play a crucial role in this process. They rush to the site of injury, stick to the damaged area, and form a temporary plug. This is the first step in clot formation.

While platelets are doing their job, a series of proteins in the blood, called clotting factors, are activated in a specific order. This chain reaction is known as the coagulation cascade. These clotting factors work together to produce a protein called fibrin. Fibrin strands weave through the platelets, creating a stable and durable blood clot that seals the wound and prevents further bleeding.

In healthy conditions, this clotting process is tightly regulated to ensure clots form only when necessary and are dissolved once healing is complete. However, when the balance between clot formation and clot breakdown is disrupted, thrombosis can occur. Thrombosis happens when clots form inside blood vessels without an obvious injury, blocking blood flow and potentially causing serious health problems.

As mentioned above, Rudolf Virchow, a pioneering scientist in the 19th century, identified three main factors that contribute to thrombosis, known as Virchow's triad. These factors include changes in the blood vessel wall, changes in blood flow, and changes in the composition of blood.

Changes in the blood vessel wall can be caused by injury, inflammation, or damage due to conditions like atherosclerosis, where fatty deposits build up inside the arteries. These changes can create a rough surface that encourages clot formation. When the inner lining of the blood vessel, called the endothelium, is damaged, it triggers the clotting process even without external injury.

Changes in blood flow can also lead to thrombosis. Normally, blood flows smoothly through vessels. However, when blood flow is slowed or becomes turbulent, it can cause clots to form. Conditions like prolonged immobility, such as sitting for long periods during travel or being bedridden after surgery, can slow down blood flow in the legs, increasing the risk of deep vein thrombosis (DVT). Turbulent blood flow, which can occur in areas where blood vessels are narrowed or twisted, can also promote clot formation.

Changes in the composition of blood refer to alterations in the levels of clotting factors and other proteins involved in coagulation. Certain medical conditions, like cancer or genetic disorders, can increase the tendency of blood to clot. For example, people with inherited clotting disorders may produce too much of certain clotting factors or have deficiencies in proteins that normally prevent clotting. Hormonal changes, such as those during pregnancy or while taking birth control pills, can also affect blood composition and increase the risk of thrombosis.

CONCLUSION

Thrombosis, the formation of blood clots in blood vessels, is a complex condition with significant health implications. The history of thrombosis shows how medical understanding has evolved, leading to better diagnosis and treatment. Understanding the pathophysiology reveals the intricate processes involved in clot formation and the factors that contribute to it. By recognizing the causes, symptoms, and mechanisms of thrombosis, individuals can take proactive steps to manage and prevent it.

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