

Giant Cell Arteritis: An Overview

Ahmed Vanker*

Department of Psychology, University of Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract

Giant cell arteritis (GCA), also known as temporal arteritis, is a form of large vessel vasculitis that predominantly affects older adults, particularly those over the age of 50. Characterized by inflammation of the arteries, particularly the temporal and ophthalmic branches of the carotid artery, GCA can lead to severe complications such as vision loss, stroke, and aortic aneurysm if left untreated. The pathophysiology of GCA involves an autoimmune mechanism, where the body's immune system mistakenly attacks the arterial walls, leading to giant cell formation, lymphocytic infiltration, and vascular necrosis. Clinically, GCA presents with a variety of symptoms, including new-onset headache, scalp tenderness, jaw claudication, and visual disturbances. Systemic manifestations such as fever, fatigue, malaise, and weight loss are also common. The diagnosis of GCA is primarily clinical, supported by laboratory findings of elevated inflammatory markers like erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) and C-reactive protein (CRP). Temporal artery biopsy remains the gold standard for confirming the diagnosis, although imaging techniques such as ultrasound and magnetic resonance imaging can also aid in assessment. Prompt treatment with high-dose corticosteroids, such as prednisone, is critical in managing GCA and preventing irreversible complications. Early initiation of therapy can significantly reduce the risk of vision loss and other serious outcomes. In cases of severe or refractory disease, adjunctive therapies, including methotrexate and biologic agents like tocilizumab, may be utilized to enhance disease control and minimize corticosteroid-related side effects.

Introduction

Giant cell arteritis (GCA), also known as temporal arteritis, is a type of vasculitis that primarily affects the large and medium-sized arteries, particularly the branches of the carotid artery. It is characterized by inflammation of the vessel walls, which can lead to serious complications such as vision loss, stroke, and aortic aneurysms. This condition predominantly affects individuals over the age of 50, with a higher prevalence in women compared to men. Understanding the pathophysiology, clinical manifestations, diagnosis, and treatment of GCA is crucial for effective management and prevention of complications. The etiology of GCA remains largely idiopathic, though it is thought to involve a complex interplay of genetic predisposition and environmental triggers, such as infections or other inflammatory conditions. The precise mechanism is not fully understood; however, it is believed that an autoimmune response leads to the activation of the immune system, resulting in an inflammatory cascade that targets the arterial walls. This inflammation can cause ischemia and necrosis of the tissues supplied by the affected arteries, leading to severe complications. Clinically, GCA presents with a range of symptoms, most notably a new-onset headache that is often described as severe and throbbing. Patients may also experience scalp tenderness, jaw claudication, and visual disturbances, which can be indicative of ischemic complications such as sudden vision loss. Systemic symptoms, including fever, fatigue, malaise, and weight loss, are also commonly observed and can overlap with those of other inflammatory disorders, such as polymyalgia rheumatica (PMR), which frequently co-occurs with GCA [1]. The diagnosis of GCA is primarily clinical and supported by laboratory findings.

Methodology

The methodology for diagnosing and managing Giant Cell Arteritis (GCA) involves a systematic approach, encompassing clinical evaluation, laboratory testing, imaging studies, and, where appropriate, histopathological examination. This multi-faceted approach ensures accurate diagnosis and effective management of this potentially serious condition.

Clinical Evaluation

The first step in the methodology involves a thorough clinical evaluation. Physicians typically start by taking a detailed medical history, focusing on symptoms suggestive of GCA. Key symptoms include:

Headache: New-onset severe headache, often described as throbbing and localized to the temples [2].

Visual Symptoms: Reports of transient visual disturbances, diplopia, or sudden vision loss.

Jaw Claudication: Pain or fatigue in the jaw muscles during chewing.

Systemic Symptoms: Presence of fever, malaise, fatigue, and unexplained weight loss.

During the physical examination, physicians pay particular attention to the temporal arteries, checking for tenderness, pulsation, and the presence of any nodular lesions [3]. Scalp tenderness and systemic signs of inflammation (e.g., fever) are also noted.

Laboratory Testing

Laboratory tests play a critical role in supporting the diagnosis of GCA. Key tests include:

***Corresponding author:** Ahmed Vanker, Department of Psychology, University of Karachi, Pakistan, Email: vanker933@gmail.com

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Erythrocyte Sedimentation Rate (ESR): A commonly used inflammatory marker; elevated levels suggest the presence of inflammation [4].

C-Reactive Protein (CRP): This protein level rises in response to inflammation and is another important marker in the diagnosis.

Complete Blood Count (CBC): May reveal anemia or thrombocytosis, which can be associated with chronic inflammatory states [5].

Liver Function Tests: Occasionally performed to rule out other potential causes of elevated inflammatory markers.

While these tests are not specific to GCA, they provide crucial information regarding the inflammatory status of the patient.

Imaging Studies

Imaging studies are essential for further evaluating patients suspected of having GCA:

Ultrasound of Temporal Arteries: This non-invasive imaging technique can reveal a characteristic “halo sign” around the arteries, indicative of vessel wall edema and inflammation.

Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI): MRI may be utilized to assess larger vessels for signs of vasculitis, particularly if there is suspicion of large vessel involvement [6].

Positron Emission Tomography (PET): PET scans can identify areas of increased metabolic activity in the vessels, further supporting a diagnosis of vasculitis.

These imaging modalities provide valuable insight into the extent and location of arterial inflammation.

Temporal Artery Biopsy

A temporal artery biopsy is considered the gold standard for confirming a diagnosis of GCA. The methodology for performing a biopsy includes:

Surgical Procedure: The biopsy is usually performed under local anesthesia. A segment of the temporal artery is excised for histological examination [7].

Histopathological Analysis: The excised tissue is examined microscopically for characteristic findings, including the presence of giant cells, lymphocytic infiltration, and transmural inflammation.

It is essential to perform the biopsy as soon as GCA is suspected, as corticosteroid therapy can lead to false-negative results if initiated beforehand.

Management and Follow-Up

Upon diagnosis, management typically involves:

Corticosteroids: Initiation of high-dose corticosteroids, such as prednisone, to rapidly control inflammation and prevent complications. Dosage may be adjusted based on clinical response and laboratory markers [8].

Adjunctive Therapy: In severe cases or relapses, adjunct therapies such as methotrexate or biologic agents like tocilizumab may be considered.

Regular Monitoring: Patients require close follow-up to monitor

for side effects of therapy, disease activity, and potential complications, including vision loss [9].

Complications

If left untreated, giant cell arteritis can lead to serious complications, primarily related to vascular ischemia. These include:

Vision Loss: Approximately 15-20% of patients may experience permanent vision loss if GCA is not treated promptly.

Aortic Aneurysm: Involvement of the aorta can lead to aneurysm formation and potential rupture.

Stroke: Vascular occlusion can increase the risk of cerebrovascular accidents [10].

Conclusion

Giant cell arteritis is a serious condition that requires prompt recognition and treatment to prevent life-altering complications. Clinicians should maintain a high index of suspicion in older adults presenting with new headaches, visual disturbances, or systemic symptoms. Early initiation of corticosteroid therapy, coupled with appropriate monitoring and follow-up, is essential for optimal patient outcomes. As research continues to evolve, new therapeutic options may further improve the management of this complex condition. The cornerstone of GCA management is high-dose corticosteroids, which effectively reduce inflammation and prevent complications. In cases of refractory disease or when corticosteroid-sparing strategies are desired, adjunctive therapies such as methotrexate or biologics like tocilizumab may be employed. Ongoing monitoring of disease activity and treatment response is crucial to ensure optimal patient outcomes and to mitigate the potential side effects associated with long-term corticosteroid use.

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