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Review

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A CLINICAL GUIDELINE FOR STRUCTURED ASSESSMENT OF CT-IMAGING IN CONGENITAL LUNG ABNORMALITIES

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Abbreviations:

CLA	Congenital Lung Abnormalities
CPAM	Congenital Pulmonary Airway Malformation
BPS	Bronchopulmonary Sequestration
CLE	Congenital Lobar Emphysema
BC	Bronchogenic Cyst
CT	Computed Tomography
ILS	Intralobar Sequestration
ELS	Extralobar Sequestration
PPB	Pleuropulmonary Blastoma

Educational aims

The reader will be able:

- To comprehend the broad spectrum of CT-imaging findings as well as variable nomenclature in congenital lung abnormalities

- To understand why the overlap between abnormalities on pathology make distinction on CT-imaging difficult and unreliable

- To understand why radiological appearances should not be categorized using a pathology based classification system

- To structurally assess and report chest CT findings of congenital lung abnormalities utilizing uniform nomenclature

Future research directions

- Prospective imaging studies utilizing uniform nomenclature may make comparison between studies more reliable and expand our understanding of congenital lung abnormalities

- Validate the use of the structured report for clarity of radiological reports

Keywords:

- Congenital lung disease, Computerised Tomography scan, lung malformation, pediatric pulmonology, lung surgery

Abstract

Objectives: To develop a clinical guideline for structured assessment and uniform reporting of congenital lung abnormalities (CLA) on Computed Tomography (CT)-scans.

Materials and Methods: A systematic literature search was conducted for articles describing CT-scan abnormalities of congenital pulmonary airway malformation (CPAM), bronchopulmonary sequestration (BPS), congenital lobar emphysema (CLE) and bronchogenic cyst (BC). A structured report using objective features of CLA was developed after consensus between a paediatric pulmonologist, radiologist and surgeon.

Results: Of 1581 articles identified, 158 remained after title-abstract screening by two independent reviewers. After assessing full-texts, we included 28 retrospective cohort-studies.

Air-containing cysts and soft tissue masses are described in both CPAM and BPS while anomalous arterial blood supply is only found in BPS. Perilesional low-attenuation areas, atelectasis and mediastinal shift may be found in all aforementioned abnormalities and can also be seen in CLE as a cause of a hyperinflated lobe. We have developed a structured report, subdivided into five sections: Location & Extent, Airway, Lesion, Vascularization and Surrounding tissue.

Conclusions: CT-imaging findings in CLA are broad and nomenclature is variable. Overlap is seen between and within abnormalities, possibly due to definitions often being based on pathological findings, which is an unsuitable approach for CT imaging. We propose a structured assessment of CLA using objective radiological features and uniform nomenclature to improve reporting.

Introduction

Structured prenatal screening and technical advances in prenatal ultrasound imaging have led to an increase in the detection of congenital lung abnormalities (CLA) [1]. Postnatally, computed tomography (CT) is the gold standard for diagnosis in pre-operative patients due to its high spatial resolution and short acquisition times. Yet, the diagnosis can be challenging due to overlapping features and inconsistent use of nomenclature [2].

The most common CLA in order of prevalence are congenital pulmonary airway malformation (CPAM), bronchopulmonary sequestration (BPS), congenital lobar emphysema (CLE) and bronchogenic cyst (BC).

CPAM is a cystic malformation with aberrant connection to the tracheobronchial tree caused by overgrowth of terminal bronchioles. Its appearance on postnatal imaging is dependent on the subtype (type 0 - 4) of CPAM, and varies from a mass consisting of multiple small cysts to large air-filled cysts (figures 1-2) [4]. BPS is an non-afunctional lung mass without a connection to the bronchial tree, and vascularized by systemic arteries (figures 3-4). A distinction is made between intra-lobar sequestration (ILS), which is located within the pleura of the lung, and extra-lobar sequestration (ELS) which is contained within its own pleura. Both types receive systemic arterial blood supply and often differ in venous drainage as ILS commonly drain to the pulmonary vein, while ELS often drain to the azygos system. A hybrid BPS is reported when a sequestration is seen in conjunction with CPAM [5]. CLE is a hyperinflation of lung tissue that usually occupies a whole lobe and is caused by abnormal bronchial wall development or external compression on an airway (figure 5) [6]. Some prefer the term hyperinflation instead of emphysema as overdistention of intact alveoli is found on pathology opposed to destructed alveoli in emphysema [7]. We encourage the use of the newer term Congenital Lobar Overinflation (CLO) as this more accurately describes this disease, but will use CLE throughout this paper to prevent confusion in the literature review. BC is a fluid-filled cyst, typically located in the mediastinum near the carina, but also occurring within the lung parenchyma [8]. Contents may have a mucoid substance or appear milky due to calcium depositions within the cyst [8,9].

Most CLA are asymptomatic and thus are often missed if not detected prenatally. In some cases they may be an incidental finding, such as BC, which may cause dysphagia, persistent cough or retrosternal chest pain [9]. ELS and CPAM type 2 may be diagnosed in association with other congenital anomalies such as congenital diaphragmatic hernia, vertebral anomalies and congenital heart disease [10,11]. However, most BPS remain asymptomatic, especially ELS [7,12,13]. In contrast, CLE usually causes respiratory distress within the first 6 months and earlier presentation is associated with worse distress [14]. More recently, bronchial atresia is increasingly being reported in conjunction with CPAM and CLE as a diagnosis depicting an abrupt interruption of the airway with a distal mucus plug. However, this is more likely a feature which may be found in combination with the underlying CLA rather than a diagnosis on its own [15,16].

While surgical resection is the generally accepted treatment in symptomatic patients, the management in asymptomatic patients is still under debate [17]. Standardized guidelines for describing radiological CLA-related features on chest CT are lacking, although a clear pathological classification exists [11]. We aimed to summarize the radiological appearance of parenchymal abnormalities in CLA on chest CT and devised a standardized, objective manner of assessing and reporting them.

Materials and Methods

Systematic literature search

To assess current descriptions in the literature we conducted a systematic literature search in accordance with PRISMA guidelines [18]. A search of all published reports on postnatal CT-imaging of CLA was carried out in the PubMed, EmBase, Medline, Web of Science, Cochrane and Google Scholar database in August 2017 and updated in July 2019. The search strategy is summarized in figure 6 and search terms are supplied in the online supporting information.

All articles published in English until August 2018 and describing a paediatric cohort with a median/mean age ≤ 18 years were included. Articles and case-series exceeding 5 cases, describing parenchymal CT-abnormalities of CPAM, BPS, CLE and BC, were studied in detail. Articles with a cohort consisting of multiple CLA and < 5 cases for each individual diagnosis were included as well. Articles that only described prenatal imaging and articles reporting findings of other than the aforementioned CLA were excluded. Articles reporting only confirmation of diagnosis by means of CT-imaging without describing specific parenchymal abnormalities in detail were excluded as well.

Data extraction & construction of guide

From each article we extracted all CT-imaging descriptions for the CLA concerned, and based our approach on distinctive features which may be useful in diagnosis and clinical decision-making. The paediatric surgeon and pulmonologist screened for clinically relevant features with implications for further management and the paediatric radiologist added essential features for diagnosis. Using the information extracted from these articles, a structured way of reporting was developed by consensus (Figure 7). Reporting of these features was translated into objective radiological terms with help of the Fleischner Society lexicon [19].

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Results

The updated literature search resulted in 1581 citations of which 158 remained after title/abstract screening and 28 after assessing full texts (figure 6). Articles were independently assessed by two reviewers (SH, BE) and discordant selections were discussed to reach a consensus. All 28 articles reported a retrospective study; no randomized controlled trials were found.

Article characteristics and CT-imaging features can be found in Ttables 1a-d; bar charts visualizing the weighted prevalence of each feature are displayed in Ffigure 8. The prevalence of features for each abnormality alongside corresponding bar charts are shown in descending order in the online supplements.

CPAM was described in 16 articles and identified as air-containing cysts in all 16 [7,20-34]. Thirteen of these articles distinguish between a single cyst and multiple cysts [7,20-31]; four also describe fluid-filled cysts [7,24,27,30] and four describe air-fluid levels [21,24,30,33]. Ten articles describe a soft tissue mass which is dependent on the type of CPAM [7,20-22,26,29-32,34]. Perilesional low-attenuating lung parenchyma (four articles) [23-25,34], emphysema (four articles) [21,26,27,33], atelectasis (six articles) [21,23,24,26,32,33] and hyperinflation (five articles) [22,23,30-32] are described, as well as mediastinal shift (six articles)[22,23,28,30,32,33].

BPS was described in ten articles and identified as a soft-tissue mass with an anomalous arterial blood supply in all ten [5,7,12,13,20,23,27,34-36]. Aerated cysts are described in six articles [12,13,20,23,35,36] and three articles distinguish between a single cyst and multiple cysts [13,23,35]. Two articles describe air-fluid levels [12,35] and one article describes fluid filled cysts [13]. Perilesional emphysema is described in two articles [5,12] and perilesional low-attenuating lung parenchyma in four [7,13,23,34]. Two articles describe atelectasis [23,35] and one described mediastinal shift [23]. Low-attenuation [5] and air within the mass [12] are each described in one article.

CLE was described in ten articles and identified as hyperinflation of the affected segment in nine of the ten articles [6,7,14,20,28,34,37-39]. One article describes only emphysematous changes in the lung parenchyma [40], whereas five describe this in addition to hyperinflation [6,7,14,34,38]. These abnormalities are variably

reported in combination with mediastinal shift (eight articles) [6,7,14,28,37-40], herniation of lung through the mediastinum (seven articles) [6,14,28,37-40], atelectasis of neighbouring lobes (six articles) [6,14,37-40] and decreased lung vessel attenuation (five articles) [7,20,28,37,40]. A bronchial stenosis is described in six articles [6,14,34,37,38,40]. One described a normal bronchial tree [39] and three did not report these findings [7,20,28].

Mediastinal and parenchymal BC was described in four articles [7,8,20,27] and identified as a solitary, round or ovoid cystic structure in three articles [7,8,20]. Two describe a soft tissue mass [8,27], two a well-defined, smooth border [7,20] and one article describes atelectasis of neighbouring structures [8].

Anomalous artery in BPS, contralateral herniation and vessel attenuation in CLE were the only exclusive features.

We assessed all the features described in our literature search, categorized them based on anatomical distribution as is customary in lung CT imaging [41] and selected features relevant for radiological diagnosis and/or surgical planning. These features were divided into five clinically important main categories: the location and extent, airway connection, characterization of the lesion, vascularization and aspect of surrounding lung tissue.

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Discussion

Our results show a broad range of CT- imaging findings in CLA and inconsistent use of nomenclature. Imaging features clearly overlap between and within various abnormalities. This is partly due to definitions being based on pathological findings, which might not be the best approach for CT-imaging [2,34,42,43]. A glossary of terms for thoracic imaging is provided by the Fleischner Society, but it is not uniformly used and not specifically developed for CLA [19].

Overlap in CT-imaging features

In CPAM, various cystic abnormalities corresponding to the respective subtypes are seen. Depending on the composition of the cohort, either single aerated cysts are described [32-34] or multiple cysts [7,20-31]. In CPAM type 3, a soft tissue mass can be seen, also one of the most common features in BPS. The systemic arterial blood supply to the lung mass in BPS distinguishes this entity from a CPAM although this is not always easily discernible. Perilesional features such as low-attenuation, mediastinal shift, and atelectasis may be seen in all CLA due to mass effect and are dependent on the size and location of the lesion[30,44]. In both BPS and CPAM the terms hypodense area and emphysema are variably used to describe an area of low attenuation although emphysema suggests structural lung damage. Similarly, in CLE the terms hyperinflation or overinflation are sometimes preferred instead of emphysema because pathological examination shows overdistended but intact alveoli in contrast to the destructed alveoli seen in emphysema [7]. Previous studies assessing correlations between CT findings and pathology show a good correlation and accurate diagnosis of the type of CLA on CT. Yet, distinguishing CPAM subtypes and hybrid lesions proved to be more difficult [8,23-25,29,34]. Previous studies suggested different classification systems for the various CLA based on either clinical relevance, pathological appearance or pathogenesis [2,43,45-47]. Each classification system has its merits and limitations and, so far, no consensus has been reached on the optimal classification of these CLA.

In our opinion, a more objective description depending on the most relevant findings is needed. This will ensure that future studies use the same parameters, which facilitates comparison of study findings. In

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order to achieve this, we have constructed a structured radiologic report which can be used as a guide for structured assessment and uniform reporting of CT-imaging findings in CLA. We have subdivided this into five sections (Location & Extent, Airway, Lesion, Vascularization and Surrounding tissue) and explain the relevance of the features.

Location & Extent (figure 7, section A)

The location and extent of the CLA is essential for the clinical management and potential surgical plan [34]. For instance, it is known that upper lobe involvement is associated with more severe symptoms [14,37,38]. Similar to reporting CT-imaging of cystic fibrosis, we suggest reporting the affected lobes as well as the extent in each lobe expressed as the affected volume in thirds (up to ⅓ lobe, up to ⅔ lobe, complete lobe; see figure 7, section A) [48]. This lobe-oriented approach is clinically relevant as a lobectomy is preferred over a wedge resection, due to more frequent postoperative complications such as persistent air leakage, residual disease in up to 15% of cases [49] and risk of malignancy in the residual tissue [50,51].

We suggest reporting the affected lobes as well as the extent in each lobe expressed as the affected volume in thirds

Airway (figure 7, section B)

Different CLA can be distinguished by looking at the connection to the bronchial tree. In BPS and BC no airway connection with the bronchial tree is found whereas in CPAM and CLE an aberrant connection may be identified [52]. An aberrant connection can either be a bronchomalacia or bronchial atresia, both of which can be diagnosed with bronchoscopy, inspiratory and expiratory CT-scan, cine-CT, dynamic MRI and on pathology [53,54]. On CT-imaging, bronchomalacia can be diagnosed in cooperative children by computing the change in cross-sectional area between inspiration and expiration [7,53]. In non-cooperative children, CT is performed in cine-mode or by changing lung volume under anaesthesia [55]. Atresia is an abrupt complete interruption of the bronchus which can be identified on CT-imaging as a mucus plug distal from the atresia and a local hypodense region distally. The mucus plug is formed due to

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accumulated mucus produced in the patent distal bronchus (mucocele) [15,16,56]. The hypodense region is a result of hyperinflation of the excluded lung parenchyma by collateral ventilation through the pores of Kohn [57]. Especially in smaller children, atresia may be difficult to diagnose due to the small diameter of distally located airways in relation to the resolution of the CT-scanner [53].

We suggest noting the airway connection as normal, bronchomalacia or bronchial atresia.

Lesion (figure 7, section C)

CLA lesions are variable in appearance and can be characterized as cystic, solid or hybrid lesions. Cystic lesions can be seen in CPAM, BPS and BC and can be distinguished by number, size and content of the cyst(s). Hybrid lesions exhibit features of both CPAM and BPS.

In CPAM, the average cyst size and size of the largest cyst are used to determine the subtype. A cut off at 2 cm for largest cyst size is suggested for distinguishing CPAM types 1 and 4 from type 2, while a soft tissue mass is seen in CPAM types 0 and 3 [7,20,23-25,27,30,31,33,34]. Classification on the basis of cyst size and aspect showed a good correlation with final histological diagnosis [23-25,30,34], although cyst size may be dependent on age and growth of the child and the cut-off values are arbitrarily chosen. Due to the association between CPAM type 4 and pleuropulmonary blastoma (PPB), classification is desirable to determine treatment and follow-up. PPB is a rare, aggressive, paediatric lung tumour which appears as a distally located cystic or solid mass [58,59]. The risk of PPB type 1 is significantly increased in CPAM type 4; still it is often thought to be the same entity [60,61]. Distinction on imaging is difficult, although cystic PPB lesions seem to have a bigger largest cyst, are septated and more often contain solid components [22,23].

In BPS, the appearance of ILS ranges from aerated cystic lesions to homogeneous or heterogeneous solid lesions. This variation may be the result of collateral airflow to the homogeneous solid lesion through the 'pores of Kohn'. Depending on the degree of this airflow, the appearance might become more heterogeneous with hypodense areas or air-filled cysts [13,62-66]. In contrast, ELS rarely contains air as it is

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separated from the normal lung parenchyma by its own pleura. Thus, the presence or absence of air may be used to distinguish ELS from ILS [5,7,12,13].

In BC, the common mediastinal localization makes it difficult to characterize the cyst and to distinguish it from malignant neoplasms and lymphadenopathy [7]. However, BC may occur in the lung parenchyma as well and present with a smooth well-defined cyst wall, opposed to a thick irregular wall. Contrast agents usually enhance surrounding tissue rather than the BC. Furthermore, opposed to homogeneous BC, a heterogeneous mass with central contrast-enhancement is more suggestive for a mediastinal neoplasm [7,8].

BC are commonly fluid filled and as such can objectively be distinguished from a soft tissue mass if the region of interest measurement is lower than the cut-off value of 20 Hounsfield units [23] or by comparing content to fluid in the gall bladder or spinal canal [7,8,20,27]. An internal air-fluid level and enhanced thick cyst wall are signs of infection [4].

For cystic lesions, we suggest noting the structure as well as the average cyst size and size of the largest cyst. Content should be noted as air-filled, fluid-filled or air-fluid level.

For solid lesions, we suggest noting the size expressed as volume in thirds of the affected lobe as well as the homogeneity of the lesion.

Vascularization (figure 7, section D)

Abnormal vascularization is an important distinctive feature of BPS and is often the only difference between BPS and CPAM type 3 on CT imaging. Particularly for planning surgery or interventional radiology, the number, size and origin of abnormal vessels is important. Spontaneous regression of ELS is more likely with arterial blood supply by multiple small arteries opposed to a large feeding artery [67]. Venous drainage to the pulmonary vein is common in ILS, while ELS often drain to the azygos system. This may help distinguishing between different types of BPS [35]. Hypervascularity is often seen in BPS and is caused by a high systemic blood pressure in the low-resistance lung circulation [5,13,36].

We suggest reporting both the arterial and venous vascularization as well as the origin and number of aberrant vessels.

Surrounding tissue (figure 7, section E)

Surrounding lung tissue may be affected by the lesion and show abnormalities as well. Mediastinal shift and atelectasis may be seen in large lesions and increase the risk of becoming symptomatic [30]. Growth and increasing solid appearance are other concerning features [44,68]. In PPB , mediastinal shift, hyperdensity and lack of hypodensity [23] is seen more often as well as pleural effusion and right side predominance [69]. Hyperinflation is seen in both CPAM and PPB, although studies contradict each other on its predictive value [22,23].

Perilesional low-attenuation areas indicate poorly perfused or ventilated regions [70]. It is hypothesized these regions may be CLE alongside CPAM, which would support the hypothesis that all CLA share a common pathogenesis [15,16,34,45].

Worsening of symptoms may occur after chest tube insertion when CPAM or CLE is misdiagnosed as a pneumothorax. Although commonly misdiagnosed as such, a pneumothorax is rarely associated with CLE [22,24,37,38,40,60]. Vascular markings and low-attenuation surrounding the cyst suggest a CPAM [28], while cranial or caudal lung compression is seen in CLE opposed to lung collapse towards the hilum.

We suggest noting abnormalities of surrounding parenchyma such as mass effect, mediastinal shift or herniation. Atelectasis, low-attenuation areas or air-trapping and emphysema should be noted as volume in thirds of the affected lobe [48].

Conclusion

Due to the wide variety of CT-imaging features in CLA, assessment and reporting can be difficult. Distinction may be hard and depends on the quality and type of scan. The inconsistent nomenclature

when describing these abnormalities leads to confusing, non-uniform and incomplete reports [34]. Radiological appearances should not be categorized using a pathological classification as the overlap between abnormalities in both imaging features and pathology make distinction on CT-imaging difficult and unreliable [2]. When a structured approach is used, uniform and complete reports with well-defined terms are made, which is beneficial in clinical decision-making [71,72]. In our structured report we have captured key features of structural changes required for diagnosing the different CLA and clinical decision-making. Structured assessment and reporting of objective radiologic features utilizing uniform nomenclature is time-efficient and could improve the diagnostic accuracy. Using this method and avoiding subjective interpretation could lead to better quality of reports in CT- imaging of CLA. We aim to test the proposed structured report in a large multi-centre longitudinal study.

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