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Abnormalities in the Teeth in Young Patients Undergoing Chemotherapy

Yuko Asao*

Department of Pediatric Dentistry, Hiroshima University Hospital, Hiroshima, Japan

Introduction

Chemotherapy is a vital and often lifesaving treatment modality for various cancers, including those affecting pediatric patients. While chemotherapy targets rapidly dividing cancer cells, it also affects normal cells, leading to a range of side effects. Among these, dental abnormalities are significant concerns for pediatric patients due to their growing and developing bodies. This paper explores the various dental abnormalities that can arise in pediatric patients undergoing chemotherapy, the mechanisms behind these abnormalities, preventive measures, and management strategies. Enamel hypoplasia is a common dental abnormality in children receiving chemotherapy. It refers to the defective formation of the enamel, leading to thin, pitted, or grooved surfaces on the teeth [1]. This condition arises because chemotherapy agents can disrupt the ameloblasts (enamel-forming cells) during tooth development. Ameloblasts are highly sensitive to insults, and their damage during critical periods of enamel formation can result in hypoplastic defects.

Description

Chemotherapy can also interfere with the development of tooth roots. The cells responsible for root formation, known as odontoblasts, can be adversely affected by chemotherapy, leading to short or malformed roots. This condition can compromise the stability and longevity of teeth, making them more prone to early loss or orthodontic complications. Tooth agenesis, or the congenital absence of one or more teeth, can be a consequence of chemotherapy. The exact mechanism is not entirely understood, but it is believed that chemotherapy-induced damage to the dental lamina or progenitor cells involved in tooth development can lead to agenesis. This condition can pose significant challenges for both function and aesthetics in pediatric patients [2,3]. Oral mucositis is a painful and debilitating condition characterized by inflammation and ulceration of the oral mucosa. It is a common side effect of chemotherapy in pediatric patients. The rapidly dividing cells of the oral mucosa are particularly susceptible to the cytotoxic effects of chemotherapy, leading to mucosal breakdown, ulceration, and secondary infections. Xerostomia, or dry mouth, occurs when chemotherapy affects the salivary glands, reducing saliva production. Saliva plays a crucial role in maintaining oral health by neutralizing acids, providing lubrication, and protecting against microbial infections. Reduced saliva flow can lead to increased risk of dental caries, oral infections, and discomfort in pediatric patients.

Candidiasis, a fungal infection caused by Candida species, is prevalent among immunocompromised pediatric patients undergoing chemotherapy. The disruption of normal oral flora and the immunosuppressive effects of chemotherapy create a conducive environment for fungal overgrowth. Candidiasis presents as white, curd-like plaques on the mucosa, which can be painful and interfere with eating and oral hygiene. HSV infections can reactivate during chemotherapy, leading to painful oral and perioral lesions. The immunocompromised state induced by chemotherapy can exacerbate these infections, causing significant discomfort and potential complications [4].

Some chemotherapy agents, particularly those used in hematologic malignancies can cause gingival hyperplasia. This condition is characterized by an overgrowth of gingival tissue, leading to swelling, bleeding, and difficulty in maintaining oral hygiene. Gingival hyperplasia can be exacerbated by poor oral hygiene and pre-existing periodontal disease. Pediatric patients undergoing chemotherapy are at increased risk for periodontal disease due to immune suppression and alterations in oral flora. Periodontal disease can manifest as gingivitis or periodontitis, leading to inflammation, bleeding, and potential tooth loss if not managed appropriately. Chemotherapy drugs are designed to target rapidly dividing cells, but this non-specificity also affects normal cells with high turnover rates, such as those in the oral cavity. The direct cytotoxic effects of chemotherapy on ameloblasts, odontoblasts, and mucosal cells lead to developmental defects, mucositis, and other dental abnormalities. Chemotherapy-induced immunosuppression predisposes pediatric patients to infections, including those in the oral cavity. The reduced immune response allows opportunistic pathogens, such as Candida and HSV, to proliferate, leading to infections that can further compromise oral health.

Chemotherapy can alter the oral environment by affecting saliva production and the microbial balance. Xerostomia and changes in oral flora increase the risk of dental caries and periodontal disease. The reduction in saliva flow diminishes the natural protective mechanisms of the oral cavity, making it more susceptible to damage and infection. The timing of chemotherapy administration is crucial, as it can coincide with critical periods of dental and skeletal development. Disruption during these periods can lead to long-term developmental abnormalities such as enamel hypoplasia, root malformations, and tooth agenesis. A comprehensive dental assessment before initiating chemotherapy is essential to identify existing dental issues and formulate a preventive plan. This assessment should include a thorough examination, radiographs, and a detailed medical history to identify any predisposing factors for dental complications. Educating pediatric patients and their caregivers about the importance of maintaining good oral hygiene is crucial. Proper brushing techniques, the use of fluoride toothpaste, and regular flossing can help reduce the risk of dental caries and periodontal disease.

Fluoride applications, including fluoride varnishes and gels, can help strengthen enamel and prevent dental caries. Regular fluoride treatments should be part of the preventive strategy for pediatric patients undergoing chemotherapy [5]. Diet plays a significant role in maintaining oral health. Reducing the intake of sugary foods and beverages, encouraging a balanced diet rich in vitamins and minerals, and ensuring adequate hydration can help mitigate the risk of dental problems. Frequent dental check-ups during chemotherapy are essential for monitoring oral health and promptly addressing any emerging issues. These visits allow for the early detection and management of dental abnormalities, reducing the risk of complications. Management of enamel hypoplasia involves both preventive and restorative approaches. Preventive measures include the use of fluoride treatments and dental sealants to protect the affected teeth. Restorative treatments, such as composite resin restorations or crowns, can help restore the function and

***Address for Correspondence:** Yuko Asao, Department of Pediatric Dentistry, Hiroshima University Hospital, Hiroshima, Japan; E-mail: asao.yuko@huhh.jp*

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aesthetics of hypoplastic teeth.

Root malformations can be challenging to manage, particularly if they lead to instability or early loss of teeth. Orthodontic evaluation and intervention may be necessary to address malocclusion and ensure proper alignment of teeth. Endodontic treatments, such as root canal therapy, may be required for teeth with compromised pulp due to root malformations. The management of tooth agenesis depends on the number and location of missing teeth. Prosthetic options, such as partial dentures or dental implants, can help restore function and aesthetics. Orthodontic treatment may also be necessary to address spacing issues and ensure proper alignment of remaining teeth.

Oral mucositis management focuses on pain relief, infection prevention, and promoting mucosal healing. Strategies include the use of mouth rinses (e.g., saline or chlorhexidine), topical analgesics, and cryotherapy (ice chips). Maintaining good oral hygiene and avoiding irritants (e.g., spicy or acidic foods) are also important. Management of xerostomia involves both symptomatic relief and preventive measures. Saliva substitutes and stimulants (e.g., sugar-free chewing gum) can help alleviate dryness [6]. Ensuring adequate hydration, using humidifiers, and avoiding dry or salty foods can also help manage xerostomia. Antifungal medications, such as nystatin or fluconazole, are used to treat oral candidiasis. Maintaining good oral hygiene and controlling predisposing factors, such as xerostomia, are essential for preventing recurrence.

Antiviral medications, such as acyclovir or valacyclovir, are used to treat HSV infections. Early intervention and maintaining good oral hygiene can help reduce the severity and duration of outbreaks. Gingival hyperplasia management includes maintaining excellent oral hygiene and professional dental cleanings. In severe cases, surgical intervention (gingivectomy) may be necessary to remove the overgrown tissue and improve oral hygiene access.

Conclusion

Management of periodontal disease involves both non-surgical and surgical approaches. Non-surgical treatments include scaling and root planing to remove plaque and tartar. In more advanced cases, surgical interventions, such as flap surgery or bone grafts, may be necessary to restore periodontal health. A 7-year-old patient undergoing chemotherapy for acute lymphoblastic leukemia presented with multiple hypoplastic defects on the permanent first molars and incisors. The dental team implemented a preventive plan that included regular fluoride varnish applications and the placement of dental sealants. Composite resin restorations were used to address the aesthetic and functional concerns. The patient was also enrolled in a dietary counseling program to reduce sugar intake and promote oral health.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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