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Commentary

Supraventricular Tachycardia in Children: A Review of Causes, Diagnosis, Management and Treatment Strategies

Tian Guo*

Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Xinjiang Medical University, Urumqi, China

DESCRIPTION

Cardiovascular disease remains one of the most significant global health challenges, accounting for 32% of deaths across all age groups worldwide. Among the various conditions falling under this umbrella, Supraventricular Tachycardia (SVT) stands out as one of the most common tachyarrhythmias, affecting approximately 1 in 500 children. SVT is defined as a rapid heart rhythm that originates from the atrial tissue above the Atrioventricular (AV) node and interventricular septum. While SVT is often treatable, its clinical implications can vary widely and its occurrence during important developmental periods, such as the fetal stage, can lead to severe complications, including fetal heart failure and hydrops fetalis. This a life-threatening condition marked by abnormal fluid accumulation in multiple fetal compartments.

SVT in children presents unique challenges for clinicians due to its complex etiology, variable presentation and potential for long-term complications. Given the high prevalence of this arrhythmia and its potential to result in severe consequences if left untreated, a detailed understanding of the condition is essential to optimize patient outcomes. This article provides a comprehensive review of SVT in pediatric patients, focusing on its epidemiology, types, clinical presentation, diagnostic methods, treatment options and possible complications. Additionally, we will study gaps in current scientific knowledge and propose areas for future research to further improve the understanding and management of SVT in children.

Epidemiology of SVT in children

SVT is the most frequent symptomatic tachyarrhythmia in children, with an incidence rate of about 0.1%-0.4%. It can occur in structurally normal hearts or be associated with congenital heart defects. Although SVT is often benign, the condition can cause significant hemodynamic instability in certain cases, particularly in neonates and young infants. In the fetal population, SVT occurs in approximately 1 in 1,000 pregnancies and accounts for a significant proportion of fetal arrhythmias.

SVT in children surround several distinct types, each with unique mechanisms and clinical implications. The most common types include:

Atrioventricular Reentrant Tachycardia (AVRT): This is the most prevalent form of SVT in children, accounting for up to 80% of cases. It is caused by an accessory pathway, such as in Wolff-Parkinson-White (WPW) syndrome that allows for reentrant electrical circuits involving the atria and ventricles.

Atrioventricular Nodal Reentrant Tachycardia (AVNRT): AVNRT is less common in younger children but more frequently seen in adolescents. It involves reentry within the AV node, leading to rapid heart rates.

Atrial Tachycardia (AT): AT originates from ectopic atrial foci, resulting in irregular tachyarrhythmias. While less common, it can be challenging to manage due to its refractory nature in some cases.

Junctional Ectopic Tachycardia (JET): JET is rare and often associated with postsurgical settings, particularly after congenital heart surgery.

Fetal SVT: In the prenatal setting, SVT poses a significant risk of hydrops fetalis and fetal demise if untreated. Early diagnosis and management are critical to improving fetal outcomes.

Clinical presentation

The clinical presentation of SVT in children depends on age, duration of arrhythmia and underlying cardiac or systemic conditions.

Neonates and infants: SVT in this age group often presents with nonspecific symptoms such as irritability, poor feeding, pallor, lethargy and tachypnea. Prolonged episodes can lead to congestive heart failure or shock.

Older children and adolescents: In older patients, SVT symptoms are more likely to include palpitations, dizziness, chest pain, shortness of breath and fatigue. In some cases, the arrhythmia may terminate spontaneously before medical evaluation.

Correspondence to: Tian Guo, Department Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Xinjiang Medical University, Urumqi, China, E-mail: guo@children.com.cn

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Fetal SVT: Fetal SVT can present as tachycardia on prenatal ultrasound. In severe cases, it may lead to fetal hydrops, characterized by skin edema, ascites and pleural or pericardial effusions.

Diagnosis

Timely and accurate diagnosis is essential for effective management. Diagnostic approaches include:

Electrocardiography (ECG): ECG is the cornerstone of SVT diagnosis. Key findings may include narrow QRS complexes and rapid regular rhythms. The presence of pre-excitation, such as a delta wave, may indicate WPW syndrome.

Holter monitoring and event recorders: These are used for intermittent symptoms or to capture paroxysmal episodes of SVT.

Electrophysiological Studies (EPS): EPS is an advanced diagnostic tool used to map the arrhythmogenic focus and is often performed in preparation for catheter ablation.

Prenatal imaging: Fetal SVT is typically diagnosed *via* Doppler ultrasonography, which reveals abnormal heart rhythms.

Treatment strategies for SVT depend on the patient's age, hemodynamic stability and the underlying mechanism of the arrhythmia.

Acute management

Stable patients: Initial treatment often involves vagal maneuvers, such as the Valsalva maneuver or the application of a cold stimulus to the face.

Pharmacological therapy: Intravenous adenosine is the first-line medication for terminating SVT in hemodynamically stable children. Other medications, such as beta-blockers or calcium channel blockers, may be considered based on the specific arrhythmia.

Unstable patients: Synchronized cardioversion is indicated in children with severe symptoms, such as hypotension, altered mental status or signs of heart failure.

Long-term management

Pharmacological prophylaxis: Antiarrhythmic medications, such as beta-blockers, are often used to prevent recurrent episodes in children with frequent SVT.

Catheter ablation: For children with recurrent or drug-refractory SVT, catheter ablation is a highly effective and curative option. The procedure involves radiofrequency or cryoablation to eliminate the arrhythmogenic pathway.

CONCLUSION

SVT is a common and clinically significant arrhythmia in children, with potential implications ranging from transient symptoms to severe complications. Advances in diagnostic tools and treatment options, such as catheter ablation and fetal arrhythmia management, have improved outcomes for many patients. However, continued research is needed to address unresolved questions and optimize care for this diverse population. A multidisciplinary approach involving pediatric cardiologists, electrophysiologists and other healthcare professionals remains critical to ensuring the best possible outcomes for the children with SVT. Management typically involves maternal administration of antiarrhythmic drugs, such as digoxin or flecainide, to control the fetal heart rates.