The Association of Third Molars with Mandibular Angle Fractures: A Meta-Analysis

(Lien entre la présence de la troisième molaire et les fractures à l’angle du maxillaire inférieur : une méta-analyse)

- Beate P. Hanson, M.D., M.P.H.
- Peter Cummings, M.D., M.P.H.
- Frederick P. Rivara, M.D., M.P.H.
- Mike T. John, D.D.S., M.P.H., Ph.D.

Somatic

Objectif : Estimer le risque relatif de fractures à l’angle du maxillaire inférieur, selon que la troisième molaire inférieure est présente ou absente.

Méthodologie : Une recherche documentaire a été faite dans MEDLINE et EMBASE, afin de relever les études d’observation utiles à la conduite d’une méta-analyse de cas-témoins. Pour être incluses, les études devaient comporter des données sur des patients souffrant d’une fracture du maxillaire inférieur et des données recoupées sur la présence d’une troisième molaire inférieure. Elles devaient aussi préciser s’il s’agissait d’une fracture à l’angle du maxillaire inférieur du côté ipsilatéral.

Résultats : Six études portant sur 3002 patients souffrant d’une fracture du maxillaire inférieur ont satisfait aux critères d’inclusion. Le risque relatif brut de fracture à l’angle du maxillaire inférieur, établi en comparant les patients avec et sans troisième molaire, a été estimé entre 1,2 et 12,7. Des signes d’hétérogénéité ont été observés entre les 6 études (p = 0,001) mais, après exclusion de 2 études ayant utilisé une méthodologie moins rigoureuse, le test d’homogénéité n’était plus statistiquement important (p = 0,22). Le risque relatif à partir des 4 études restantes a été estimé à 2,4 (IC à 95 % 1,9–3,0).

Conclusions : La présence d’une troisième molaire inférieure pourrait doubler le risque d’une fracture à l’angle du maxillaire inférieur, un résultat qui pourrait avoir une incidence sur les décisions cliniques visant l’extraction ou non de la molaire.

Mots clés MeSH : mandibular fractures/etiology; meta-analysis; molar, third/physiopathology

Cet article a été révisé par des pairs.

Mandibular fractures are common; the reported rate of occurrence is 11.5 per 100,000 person-years.1 People between the ages of 16 and 30 years account for 50.2% of these fractures. Mandibular fractures follow a pattern common to many injuries in that males and young adults are predominantly affected. Fractures of the mandibular angle account for about 40% of mandibular fractures.2

Because the lower third molar is located near the angle of the mandible, it has been hypothesized that its presence increases the risk of fracture. It is possible that a mandibular third molar weakens the jaw by decreasing the cross-sectional area of bone. If this is true, extracting the third molar and allowing the tooth socket to fill with bone may reduce the risk of an angle fracture. However, third molars are common, and extraction is costly and controversial in terms of both risks and benefits.3–9

Several published studies of patients with mandibular fractures have examined the relation between the presence of a third molar and the risk of fracture. Many are not formal case-control studies, but some can be analyzed as such providing that certain assumptions are met.10,11 Patients with an angle fracture of the mandible can be considered to be cases.
A randomized sample of the population from which the cases arose would constitute ideal controls; few would have a mandibular fracture. Published case series do not have such controls; however, provided that the presence of a third molar is not related to the risk of mandibular fracture in locations other than the angle and the referral or admission of people with mandibular fractures at sites other than the angle is not related to the presence of a third molar, then patients with mandibular fractures at locations other than the angle can be used as controls and should reflect the prevalence of third molars in the general population.

We employed these assumptions to estimate the relative risk of mandibular fracture among people with a third molar compared with those without a third molar, using available data from the published literature.

**Methods**

**Search Strategy**

A search of MEDLINE was conducted for articles published from 1966 to July 2000 and of EMBASE for publications from 1980 to July 2000. To identify relevant studies, the MEDLINE search was performed using the keywords “angle fracture” and “third molar.” The EMBASE search used the term “third molars.” No additional articles were identified in EMBASE that had not been found in the MEDLINE search. The reference lists of the relevant studies were examined and one additional study was identified.

**Inclusion Criteria**

To be included in this meta-analysis, studies had to meet one of the following criteria:

- A cohort study that reported the number of angle fractures among people with and without third molars.
- A case-control study that provided information about the proportion of those with a third molar among patients with angle fractures compared with those without angle fractures.
- A case series with information about the presence of a third molar in patients with fractures at the angle of the mandible and fractures elsewhere in the mandible.

An angle fracture was defined as a fracture located posterior to the second molar and extending from any point on the curve formed by the junction of the body of the mandible with the posterior border of the ramus.12

**Study Identification**

The search yielded 71 possible articles, all of which were obtained and examined. No cohort or case-control studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
<th>Years data collected</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>No. of cases and controls</th>
<th>Mean age of patients (years)</th>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Males, %</th>
<th>Injury mechanism (as described in paper)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tankersley and Abubaker</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Virginia, USA</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Patient case records and panoramic radiograph</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Altercation Motor vehicle crash Fall Gunshot Occupation Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee and Dodson</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>January 1993–1998</td>
<td>Atlanta, USA</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>Patient chart and panoramic radiograph</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Altercation Motor vehicle crash Fall Gunshot Occupation Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ma’aita and Alwrikat</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>January 1993–July 1997</td>
<td>Amman, Jordan</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>33.2</td>
<td>Patient records and panoramic radiograph</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>Motor vehicle crash Fall Fight Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ugboko and others</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>January 1976–July 1997</td>
<td>Ile-Ife, Nigeria</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>Patient case records and panoramic radiograph</td>
<td>75.3</td>
<td>Motor vehicle crash Fall Sports Gunshot Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuselier and others</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1990–2000</td>
<td>Dallas and Atlanta, USA</td>
<td>1,210</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>Patient chart and panoramic radiograph</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>No information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meisami and others</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>1995–2000</td>
<td>Toronto, Canada</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>No information</td>
<td>Patient chart and panoramic radiograph</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>Assault Fall Sports Motor vehicle crash Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data are for left angle fractures only.*

**Table 1 Characteristics of included studies**
were found. Nineteen case series were identified, the original articles were reviewed and 7 were selected. These 7 studies contained information about the relation between the mandibular third molar and angle fracture. Subsequently, studies that investigated this relation in exposure or outcome subgroups were excluded. One study was excluded because the same patients were also part of a study by Lee and Dodson. Two others were excluded because one was restricted to sports injuries, and the other only included subjects with incompletely erupted third molars. One additional study, published only as an abstract, was found by searching the bibliographies of the 4 studies identified in MEDLINE. Four studies that presented cross-tabulated information about angle fracture and third molars were included. In addition, 2 studies published in 2002 and recommended during review of this manuscript were included.

Subanalysis of Original Data

Data from the 4 published studies allowed calculation of only crude odds ratios. Because these estimates might be affected by confounding, the authors contacted and asked to provide their original data. One original data set was received from T.B. Dodson. Two additional studies published only as an abstract, were found by searching the bibliographies of the 4 studies identified in MEDLINE. Four studies that presented cross-tabulated information about angle fracture and third molars were included. In addition, 2 studies published in 2002 and recommended during review of this manuscript were included.

Analysis

Information regarding the location of mandibular fracture and the presence of a lower third molar was extracted from each study and used to calculate odds ratios for the association of fracture with the presence of a third molar. Odds ratios were used to approximate relative risks, and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated. Results were summarized across studies using the Mantel-Haenszel method. This fixed-effect method was considered appropriate, but random-effects estimates were also calculated using the method of DerSimonian and Laird. A formal test of homogeneity was undertaken to establish whether it was reasonable to assume that the estimate of relative risk across studies was consistent. All analyses were carried out using the statistical package Stata (v. 6.0, Stata Statistical Software, College Station, Texas, 1997).

Results

Of the 6 studies accepted for the main analysis (Table 1), 3 were conducted in the United States, one in Jordan, one in Nigeria, and one in Canada. These studies were published between 1995 and 2002. The total number of patients was 3,002: 835 with an angle fracture (cases) and 2,167 with some other fracture of the mandible (controls). The crude relative risk estimates in the 6 studies ranged from 1.2 to 12.7. The summary relative risk ratio across all 6 studies was 2.8 (95% CI 2.3–3.5) (Table 2). The random-effects estimate was slightly higher (relative risk ratio 3.1), and the 95% CI was greater (2.0–5.0).

There was evidence of heterogeneity across the 6 studies ($p = 0.001$). The possible reason for this was explored by eliminating each study in turn in addition to eliminating the study.
by Tankersly and Abubaker, because these results were published as an abstract, allowing us only limited ability to assess the methods. Discarding the study by Meisami and others resulted in nonsignificant homogeneity (p = 0.22).

Summary relative risk estimates for the remaining 4 studies were 2.4 (95% CI 1.9–3.0) using the Mantel-Haenszel method and 2.3 (95% CI 1.7–3.1) using the random-effects method.

Individual level data from one study showed little confounding by sex (adjusted odds ratio 2.3) or age (adjusted odds ratio 2.4). The risk ratio adjusted for mechanism of injury (2.8 with 95% CI 1.5–5.2) differed slightly from the crude risk ratio.

Discussion

In this meta-analysis, the results from 6 case series were analyzed as if they were case-control studies to estimate that the risk of an angle fracture of the jaw in people with a lower third molar is approximately double that in people without a lower third molar.

One mechanism by which third molars have been hypothesized to increase the risk of angle fractures is by occupying osseous space and, thereby, weakening the angle region. In support of that hypothesis, mandibular fractures have been reported to occur occasionally (at a very low incidence of 0.0046%) after wisdom tooth removal (when the angle region is weakened further because the tooth is extracted) when usual food is consumed.

The identified studies were case series, not case-control studies. However, assuming that in patients with a mandibular fracture at nonangle locations, the presence of a lower third molar does not influence either the risk of fracture or the likelihood of referral or admission, it is reasonable to analyze these data as if they came from case-control studies. Patients with fractures at nonangle locations should, on average, represent the prevalence of third molars in the population from which the patients with angle fractures arose. A similar study design has been used in case-control studies of bicycle helmets and head injuries. However, if the presence of a third molar influences the risk of fracture to parts of the jaw other than the angle, the estimates presented here could be biased.

The available published data allowed us to calculate only crude risk estimates. Adjusted relative risk estimates might differ from the crude estimates. When this possibility was examined in one study, adjusting for age and sex revealed no confounding by these variables, whereas adjusting for mechanism of injury resulted in an estimate of 2.9. If the confounding influence of age, sex and mechanism of injury is similar in the other 5 studies, then the true summary relative risk estimate may be slightly greater than our estimate of 2.8 for all studies.

If the association that we found is causal, then this might be taken into account, along with other factors, in any decision regarding the removal of third molars.

Références