Epidermoid Cyst of the Floor of the Mouth: A Case Report

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ABSTRACT

Dermoid cysts are malformations that are rarely observed in the oral cavity. Histologically, they can be further classified as epidermoid, dermoid or teratoid. We report a case in which a 25-year-old man developed an epidermoid cyst presenting as a large sublingual swelling causing speech and swallowing difficulties. The differential diagnosis for dermoid cysts includes infections, tumours, mucous extravasation phenomena and abnormalities arising during embryonic development. In this case, aspiration of the cyst produced a keratin-containing liquid, which proved to be useful in preoperative diagnosis. The lesion was surgically excised using an intraoral approach. Microscopic examination revealed a dermoid cyst of the epidermoid type. After 12 months of follow up, the cyst had not recurred. This case shows that dermoid cysts may be successfully diagnosed and managed using a series of simple yet effective clinical manoeuvres.

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Case Report

A 25-year-old man presented with a swelling below his tongue. Medical history was noncontributory. The patient could not say precisely when the lesion initially developed, but reported speech and swallowing difficulties for the past 2 months. Extraoral examination was unremarkable, and palpable lymph nodes could not be identified. Intraoral examination revealed a 5 cm × 5 cm, sessile, nonulcerated, smooth-surfaced, normal-coloured, well-defined sublingual swelling occupying the entire floor of the mouth (Fig. 1a). The lesion was slightly movable, rubbery and painless on palpation. No additional mucosal lesions were present. With the tentative diagnosis of ranula, aspiratory puncture was carried out. This revealed a keratin-containing liquid (Fig. 1b), which pointed to a new diagnostic hypothesis of dermoid cyst.

Surgical excision of the lesion was performed through an intraoral midline incision under local anesthesia (Fig. 1c). Macroscopically, the lesion appeared encapsulated and contained a keratin-like yellow material (Fig. 1d). Microscopic examination revealed a cystic cavity lined with orthokeratinized squamous epithelium, with keratin in the lumen. The cyst wall was composed of fibrous connective tissue. Skin appendages, such as sebaceous glands, hair follicles and sweat glands, were absent (Figs. 2a and 2b). Final histologic diagnosis was dermoid cyst of the epidermoid type. The patient was followed for 12 months with no signs of recurrence.

Discussion

Several theories have been proposed to explain the development of dermoid cysts. They may result from entrapment of ectodermal tissue of the first and second branchial arches during fetal development. They could represent a variant form of the thyroglossal duct cyst. Finally, previous surgical or accidental events could lead to traumatic implantation of epithelial cells into deeper tissues.

Longo and others found that men are affected more often than women in the ratio 3:1, with mean age 28 years. Other authors claim that no gender predilection exists. In our case, the sublingual swelling suggests that the lesion was above the mylohyoid muscle, which is the most common location. Our patient reported speech and swallowing difficulties, which are fairly common symptoms. However, the patient could not determine precisely when the swelling had initially developed. We believe it is unlikely that the lesion achieved the size on presentation in only 2 months; most likely, the cyst had
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gone unnoticed until it grew large enough to cause the reported symptoms.

When dealing with swellings in the sublingual region, 4 main groups of lesions should be considered: infections, tumours, mucous extravasation phenomena and anatomic abnormalities arising during embryonic development. Table 1 summarizes the clinical features important in the differential diagnosis of sublingual or cervical swellings.

In our case, the hypothesis of an infection was discarded due to the period of evolution and the absence of pain and of intraoral infectious foci. Malignant tumour was ruled out in view of the lesion’s clinical aspect and the absence of lymphadenopathy, although the latter is admittedly an imprecise indicator of malignancy. We were then left with 2 main diagnostic possibilities: a mucous extravasation phenomenon and an anatomic abnormality. Because the clinical aspect was compatible with ranula and because ranulas are far more common than dermoid cysts, this was our first hypothesis. Later, on collection of keratin-containing fluid through aspiratory puncture, a dermoid cyst became the more plausible choice.

In some instances, where the differential diagnosis of sublingual swellings is more challenging, imaging techniques may be used for preoperative diagnosis and surgical planning. Fine-needle aspiration is a safe, cost-effective and reliable tool for preoperative diagnosis of dermoid cysts. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) allow more precise localization of the lesion, and also enable the surgeon to choose the most appropriate approach.

Table 1 Differential diagnosis of swellings of the floor of the mouth or neck

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Lesion</th>
<th>Signs and symptoms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tumours</td>
<td>Benign (mesenchymal, salivary gland) tumours</td>
<td>Displacement of adjacent structures, slow-growing, smooth surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malignant tumours</td>
<td>Ulcerated surface, invasion of adjacent structures, metastatic lymph nodes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mucous extravasation phenomena</td>
<td>Ranula</td>
<td>Bluish-translucent coloration, soft, fluctuant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embryonic abnormalities</td>
<td>Dermoid cyst</td>
<td>Swelling in midline floor of the mouth or neck; slow-growing, painless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cervical lymphoepithelial cyst</td>
<td>Upper lateral neck swelling without an intraoral component</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thyroglossal duct cyst</td>
<td>Classically in the midline of the neck; first 2 decades of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infections</td>
<td>Intraoral source of infection (periapical abscess, pericoronitis, sialadenitis)</td>
<td>Rapid progression, pain, fever; warm overlying skin; obvious intraoral source</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Dermoid cysts are histologically differentiated as epidermoid, dermoid or teratoid. There are no data on the incidence of the various forms; however, epidermoid cysts are said to be most common and teratoid cysts least common. In our case, the cyst showed simple squamous epithelium without skin appendages, characterizing it as an epidermoid cyst. Dermoid cysts contain skin appendages, and teratoid cysts contain endodermic and mesodermic elements in the cyst wall.

In most cases, dermoid cysts are treated by enucleation. Surgical access depends on the location and size of the lesion. Surgical approaches, such as transcervical, extended median glossotomy, median glossootomy and midline incision, may be performed. In our case, excision was achieved without major complications by employing intraoral access under local anesthesia. This approach is supported by Akao and colleagues who state that intraoral access must be attempted first, even if dealing with a large cyst. The intraoral approach leads to good cosmetic and functional results.

When intraoral access is complicated, a combined intraoral and extraoral approach should be used. Extraoral incision is mandatory only when the cyst lies under the geniohyoid muscle. Surgical excision is normally achieved without major complications and prognosis is very good. However, it should be kept in mind that surgery on the floor of the mouth may damage
structures in the sublingual space, leading to potentially life-threatening complications. Hemorrhage and hematoma formation may ensue and could lead to significant swelling and edema of the floor of mouth and tongue, resulting in respiratory distress and airway obstruction from elevation of the tongue against the palatal vault. Recurrence of dermoid cysts is not expected, and malignant transformation is rare.

In conclusion, we describe a case of dermoid cyst successfully diagnosed and managed by following simple yet effective steps. To obtain the correct diagnosis of cystic sublingual swellings, aspiratory puncture should always be performed. Differential diagnosis includes infections, tumours, mucous extravasation phenomena and embryonic abnormalities. Surgical excision is the treatment of choice and may be performed under local anesthesia through intraoral access, with no recurrence expected.

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