Magnetic Resonance Imaging Findings of Olfactory Bulb in Anosmic Patients with COVID-19: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Background Anosmia is one of the symptoms in individuals with SARS-CoV-2 infection. In anosmic patients, SARS-CoV-2 temporarily alters the signaling process in olfactory nerve cells and olfactory bulb (OB), which eventually damages the structure of the olfactory epithelium, leading to a permanent disorder in the olfactory pathway that this damaged structure is showed in MRI imaging

Method Two investigators independently searched four databases consisting of PubMed, ProQuest, Scopus, and Web of Science for relevant records as of November 11, 2020 with no time, space, and language restrictions. Google Scholar was also searched for the related resources within the time limit of 2020. All the found articles were reviewed based on the PRISMA flow diagram. Qualitative studies, case reports, editorials, letters, and other non-original studies were excluded from this systematic analysis.

Results Initial search yielded 434 records. After reviewing the titles and abstracts, we selected 74 articles; finally, 8 articles were depicted to be investigated and read in full text. The obtained results showed an increase in the width and volume of the olfactory cleft (OC), complete or partial destruction of OC, and complete occlusion of OC in COVID-19 patients. Deformation and degeneration as well as a subtle asymmetry were evident in the OBs. Computed tomography (CT), magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and positron emission tomography (PET) were used to detect the outcomes of anosmia in these studies.

Conclusions The changes in OC are greater than those in OB in patients with COVID-19, mainly due to the inflammatory and immune responses in OC. However, fewer changes in OB are due to neurological or vascular disorders. Topical steroid therapy and topical saline can be helpful.

Key words: magnetic resonance imaging; olfactory bulb; COVID-19; anosmia

INTRODUCTION

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), was first detected in Wuhan, China, and then worldwide^[1]. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic^[2]. The typical clinical manifestations of COVID-19 include fever, muscle or joint pain, loss of smell (anosmia) and taste^[3], and respiratory symptoms^[1]. An early report in the Republic of Korea showed that about two-thirds of COVID-19 patients experienced

anosmia^[4]; in addition, an increasing number of patients with anosmia but without other symptoms were infected with SARS-CoV-2^[5]. Many studies have demonstrated an association between olfactory dysfunction (OD) and COVID-19^[4]. The prevalence of olfactory disorders varied between 14.8% and 52.73% in different patient populations^[6-8]. On March 22, 2020, the American Academy of Otolaryngology proposed that anosmia be added to the list of COVID-19-related symptoms^[9], and WHO recently added anosmia to its list of official symptoms^[10]. Anosmia may occur 2 to 14 days after

being exposed to SARS-CoV-2 or its variants^[11].

Generally, angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2) is abundant in the epithelium of the oral and nasal mucosae^[12, 13]. Covered by olfactory neuroepithelium, the olfactory cleft (OC) is located between the middle turbinate and the nasal septum^[14]. ACE2 and transmembrane protease serine 2 (TMPRSS2) work in stem cells residing in the olfactory epithelium and in vascular cells in the nose and olfactory bulb (OB)^[15]. SARS-CoV-2 can enter the host body through respiratory mucosa or other mucosal surfaces^[1]. Using its spike proteins (protein S), the virus enters human cells and binds to ACE2 in the target cells^[16]. Therefore, due to the high concentrations of ACE2 and TMPRSS2 in OC and the tendency of SARS-CoV-2 to bind to these receptors, the virus is transmitted through the nose to the brain^[17-21]. Damage to the olfactory system can be the result of a local infection in the supporting cells that causes a temporary alteration in the signaling process in olfactory neurons and OBs, or the damage can hurt the entire structure of the olfactory epithelium and cause permanent disorder in the olfactory pathway^[15]. These disorders impair the ability of patients to smell food and the environment and lower the quality of life associated with social interactions, eating, and well-being^[22]. The extent to which the loss of smell and taste after SARS-CoV-2 infection is due to OC edema, structural deformation of the olfactory neuroepithelium, or direct invasion of the olfactory nerve pathways remains controversial^[10, 23].

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of OB is useful for evaluating patients with anosmia/hyposmia^[24]. In patients with severe COVID-19, MRI may reveal the damaged OB structure that leads to local inflammatory response^[25]. Brain MRI performed on anosmic COVID-19 patients shows that the anosmia may be due to central olfactory system abnormalities^[26]. Furthermore, in a study in which patients underwent neuroimaging, 7 out of 37 patients were found to have OB abnormalities^[27]. In this systematic review, to address the question of "what are the imaging findings of OB on magnetic resonance imaging in patients with COVID-19?", we evaluated the results of OB MRI in patients with SARS-CoV-2 infection as have been reported in literature.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Literature searching and selection

We conducted literature searching in databases of

PubMed, ProQuest, Scopus, and Web of Science for research article published in the time period till November 11, 2020. Google Scholar was also explored within the year of 2020. The keywords and the search strategy we used are [(MRI) AND (olfactory bulb) AND (COVID-19)]. All articles were collected in EndNote X8 software. Titles and abstracts of all the obtained articles were screened. The references of the eligible articles were scanned as well. Studies that focus simultaneously on anosmia and olfactory loss, OB, MRI, COVID-19, and SARS-CoV-2 were included in the study. Duplicate studies and irrelevant ones were excluded. Qualitative articles, editorials, notes, reviews, case reports, and letters were excluded.

Data collection and analysis

The full texts of the eligible articles were examined. Two researchers extracted the data include magnetic resonance imaging results of OB separately.

RESULTS

In the initial search, a total of 434 articles were found from four databases and the Google Scholar search engine. After the exclusion of 93 duplicates with the help of EndNote X8 software, 341 articles remained. Among them 332 were excluded after their titles and abstracts were reviewed and 9 studies remained for full-text screening. After reading the texts of the articles thoroughly, 8 articles were chosen and 1 article was left out. The PRISMA flow chart of literature selection is presented in **Figure 1**.

In the articles included in the study, the MRI revealed increased width and volume of OC, complete bilateral or partial destruction of OC, complete obstruction of OC, as well as subtle deformation, degeneration, and asymmetry in OB. **Table 1** summarizes the MRI findings of OC and OB in COVID-19 patients with anosmia. OC structure changes caused by inflammatory and immune responses occurred more frequently than the changes in OB.

Use of topical steroids and saline and olfactory exercises help to improve anosmia, as shown in **Table 2**.

DISCUSSION

SARS-CoV-2 alters the sense of smell by affecting OC. Altundag *et al.* (2020) found the width of OC increased in COVID-19 patients with anosmia compared

Figure 1. Flow diagram of literature screening and study selection

to the controls. In these patients, the overall volume of OC also increased, which might be associated with the increase of the ACE2 receptors on the olfactory mucosa, which causes an increase in the adhesion of the virus^[28]. Due to the coronavirus uptake through ACE2 receptors, one cause of OD in these patients is an increase in OC volume. On the other hand, obstruction of olfactory mucosa in OC can cause anosmia^[35]. However, in a study performed by Naeini *et al.* no significant mucosal changes and abnormalities were observed in OC on CT images^[36]. Therefore, the development of a sudden anosmia and an increase in OC volume can be attributed to the rapid immune response and “nasal cytokine storm” induced by severe SARS-CoV-2 infection^[37]. This reaction can also lead to localized edema of the mucosa in the OC and prevent smells from passing into the olfactory mucosa^[38]. Niesen *et al.* revealed complete bilateral or partial destruction of OC in 50% of patients and unilateral or partial destruction in the rest of them; however, the presence of OC inflammation was not evident in their MRI images^[30]. Nonetheless, in another study the coronavirus-induced OC in-

flammation was demonstrated on MRI^[39]. Thus, edema or total or partial degeneration of OC can lead to olfactory dysfunction (OD). It has also been reported that inflammatory obstruction of OC may occur due to the interaction between SARS-CoV-2 and the expression of the ACE2 protein in the olfactory epithelium^[15]. Therefore, the loss of OC due to inflammation of the central olfactory epithelium is not the only underlying pathophysiological mechanism that can prompt SARS-CoV-2 dysosmia^[40]; rather, several factors can also change the structure and function of OC and subsequently lead to OD. Eliezer *et al.* found that 95% of patients with early symptoms of COVID-19 suffered from complete obstruction of OC; they claimed that anosmia and OD happen when the aromatic molecule could not reach the olfactory epithelium, probably due to nasopharyngeal infection caused by local inflammation. However, on MRI taken after 20 days, the symptoms of complete OC obstruction were still evident; after one month of follow-up, they observed a significant reduction in OC obstruction^[41,29]. Therefore, OD can happen due to swelling, eventual leading to obstruction of the

Table 1. The results of magnetic resonance imaging on the olfactory system in COVID-19 patients.

References	Study type	Number of patients	Cause of OD	Assessment		MRI manifestations	
				Odor assessment	Imaging modality	Olfactory cleft (OC)	Olfactory bulb (OB)
Klironomos S, et al ^[27]	Retrospective cohort study	185	SARS-CoV-2 infection	RT-PCR	CT and MRI	None	Abnormal OB signals
Altundag A, et al ^[28]	Prospective	91	SARS-CoV-2 infection; Non-SARS-CoV-2 infection	RT-PCR; Sniffin' sticks test	CT and MRI	Increased widths and volume of OC	No significant difference in OB volumes and olfactory sulcus depths on MRI among anosmic patients
Eliezer M, et al ^[29]	Prospective case-controlled	20	SARS-CoV-2 infection	PCR; Visual Olfactory Score (VOS)	MRI	Complete obstruction of the OC occurred in 95% of patients at the early stage; no obstruction was seen during the 1-month follow-up	On the first MRI session, no significant difference in OB volume. At the 1-month follow-up visit, no significant difference in OB volume. Normal morphology of the OB
Niesen M, et al ^[30]	Prospective	12	SARS-CoV-2 infection	RT-PCR	PET; MRI with fluorodeoxyglucose	Bilateral obliteration of the OC in 50% of patients	Subtle asymmetry in OB
Kandemirli SG, et al ^[31]	Prospective	23	COVID-19	PCR; Sniffin' sticks test	CT; MRI	High rate of OC opacification	Reduction in OB volume; altered OB shape; signal abnormalities
Aragão MFV, et al ^[32]	Retrospective	5	SARS-CoV-2 infection	Not performed	MRI with contrast enhancement	None	Abnormal OB intensities in all patients
Brookes N, et al ^[33]	Case series	4	COVID-19	University of Pennsylvania Smell Identification Test (UPSIT)	MRI	None	In two cases, MRI showed normal OB and cribriform plates, along with minimal mucosal thickening in the ethmoid sinuses.
Coolen T, et al ^[34]	Prospective, case series	19	SARS-CoV-2 infection	PCR; chest CT	MRI and PET	Asymmetric olfactory bulb was observed, with or without obliteration of OC. Obliteration of OC and ipsilateral inflammation of OB	Asymmetric OB, inflation of OB

OD: olfactory dysfunction; RT-PCR: reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction; MRI: magnetic resonance imaging; PET: positron emission tomography; CT: computed tomography

Table 2 Treatments and outcomes of patients treated with topical steroids or saline

Medicines in treatment	Route of administration	Recovery time		Duration of effectiveness	Result of G immunoglobulin
		Partial	Total		
Steroids	Oral	1 week (40% - 85%)	2 - 3 weeks	7 days	Positive
Steroid drops	Local	1 week (40% - 85%)	2 - 3 weeks	7 days	Positive
Ephedrine	Local	1 week (85%)	2 weeks	3 days	Positive
Betnesol	Local	1 week (85%)	2 weeks	3 days	Positive
Prednisolone	Oral	6 days	2 weeks	3 days	Positive
Nasal saline irrigations	Local	8 days	2 weeks	8 days	None

olfactory pathway, which may or may not be seen on MRI.

Structural changes of OB in patients with COVID-19 are evident on MRI. Kandemirli *et al.* (2020) showed deformation and degeneration of OB and emphasized that the high rate of OB degeneration was due to direct/indirect damage to the pathway of olfactory neurons. It is also particularly one of the reasons that can be attributed to patients with prolonged anosmia^[31]. In general, the causes of anosmia can be classified into two groups: a) loss of conductive or sensorineural olfactory, which is a conduction disorder associated with the destruction of the airway in the nose; and b) damage of the sensorineural pathway, which is related to olfactory epithelium with longer lasting effects until it heals^[42].

In another study, OB enlargement was shown in the second stage of MRI, although there was no change in OB during the one-month follow-up. Eventually, the OB change was considered to be due to the invasion of SARS-COV-2 into the brain by the cribriform plate, which is close to OB and the olfactory epithelium^[29]. Based on the available evidence, the virus mainly affects the cerebral cortex and hypothalamus^[43].

On the other hand, there were studies that did not show significant changes in OB. Niesen *et al.* (2020) found only three out of 12 COVID-19 patients showed subtle asymmetry in OB, so they considered that the development of severe anosmia in these patients was not due to the changes in OB and OB disorder was not involved in olfactory loss^[30]. OB changes on MRI can be attributed to infection of vascular pericytes in OB, as ACE2 is expressed there^[15]. On the other hand, Cao *et al.* (2019) showed that the receptor of ACE2 gene polymorphism in Asian and European populations can cause disease in patients with different periods^[44]. In addition, in this regard, a study showed that there was

no significant difference in OB volume in patients with COVID-19^[28]. However, studies conducted so far have shown that OB volume decreased due to damage to olfactory receptor in post-viral anosmia^[45,46]. Laurendon *et al.* revealed the increase in OB volume was associated with COVID-19. It was also shown that the volume and the intensity of the MRI signal returned to normal on the 24th day of the disease. Notably, there was no significant change in OB and signal in COVID-19-related anosmia^[47]. According to the existing hypotheses, disruption in signaling to OB in the early days can be attributed to infection of sustentacular cells, which leads to disruption in signaling from olfactory sensory neurons to OB, and the sustentacular cells support the olfactory sensory neurons by maintaining ion balance. Thus, when these cells are destroyed by infection, CILIA of the olfactory sensory neurons is destroyed and signal transmission is disrupted^[48].

The most common treatments for OD include: a) Olfactory training: it includes frequent and intentional inhalation of a set of smells (usually lemon, rose, clove, and eucalyptus) for 20 seconds each time, at least twice a day for at least 3 months (or more if possible)^[49]. b) Nasal lavage with saline^[50]: medications that have shown to be effective in treating post-infectious OD also consist of intranasal vitamin A, which may enhance olfactory neurogenesis, intranasal sodium citrate, which seems to moderate olfactory receptor transduction cascades, and systemic Omega-3, which may function as anti-inflammatory or neurodegenerative^[49]. c) Nasal or oral corticosteroids^[50]: a recent study showed that oral prednisolone consumption after the course of the disease, when the PCR test is negative, can be effective in improving anosmia^[51].

Oral steroids are commonly used to treat anosmia. However, these drugs may impair the immune system and thus their use needs to be individualized^[52]. As the exact cause of anosmia in

COVID-19 patients is still unknown, there is no consensus on its definitive treatment^[51]. In some studies, corticosteroids are not recommended for people with post-infection OD. However, for patients who have been taking intravenous or intranasal steroids before COVID-19, such therapies should be continued^[49]. Plasma therapy is not effective in treating anosmia^[48].

A major limitation of our current study was that documented evidence in case reports was ruled out in this systematic review.

To sum up, as shown by MRI of the olfactory system in patients with COVID-19, the changes that happened in the OC due to COVID-19 are greater than those in the OB and can be attributed to inflammatory responses, immune responses, or the abundance of the olfactory epithelium in the OC structure, whereas small changes or no change in OB due to anosmia in these patients can be attributed to neurological or vascular disorders.

Conflict of interests

The authors disclosed no conflicting interest.

Author contributions

AB is the author of the letter structure and the second resource researcher; AM is the scientific author and owner of the idea letter; MS is the resource researcher.

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(Edited by Liangjun Gu)

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March 10, 2022

论著

嗅觉缺失的新冠肺炎患者嗅球的磁共振成像结果：系统综述

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摘要

背景 嗅觉缺失是新冠病毒（SARS-CoV-2）感染者的症状之一。在嗅觉缺失患者中，SARS-CoV-2 可暂时改变嗅觉神经细胞和嗅球（OB）的信号传导过程，最终损害嗅觉上皮的结构，导致嗅觉通道的永久性紊乱。这种受损结构可在磁共振成像（MRI）中显示。

方法 两名研究人员独立搜索了四个数据库，包括 PubMed、ProQuest、Scopus 和 Web of Science，以检索截至 2020 年 11 月 11 日的相关记录。检索不限时间、空间和语言。同时也检索了 Google Scholar，但仅限于 2020 年的数据。根据 PRISMA 流程图对所有发现的文章进行了系统综述。定性研究、病例报告、社论、读者来信和其他非原创研究被排除在本系统分析之外。

结果 初步检索出 434 条记录。在查阅了标题和摘要后，选出 74 篇文章；最后，对 8 篇文章进行了全文审阅。结果显示在新冠肺炎患者可见嗅裂（OC）宽度和体积增加、OC 完全或部分破坏以及 OC 完全阻塞。OB 存在明显的变形和退化，并有细微的不对称。在这些研究中，计算机断层扫描（CT）、MRI 和正电子发射断层扫描（PET）用于检测嗅觉缺失的结果。

结论 新冠肺炎患者 OC 的变化大于 OB，主要是由于 OC 的炎症反应和免疫反应。然而，由神经或血管疾病所致的 OB 变化较少见。局部类固醇治疗和局部生理盐水可能有益。

关键词：磁共振成像；嗅球；新冠肺炎；嗅觉缺失

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