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ACTINOMYCOSIS PATHOGENS AND THE DIAGNOSIS OF THE DISEASES THEY CAUSE. ATYPICAL MYCOBACTERIA, THEIR CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE, AND DIAGNOSTIC APPROACHES

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Abstract: This article provides a scientific analysis of the causative agents of actinomycosis and the diagnostic approaches to the diseases they cause, as well as the clinical and practical significance of atypical (nontuberculous) mycobacteria. The study examines the microbiological characteristics, pathogenesis, and clinical forms of bacteria belonging to the genus Actinomyces, along with the distribution, pathogenicity, and mechanisms of infection caused by nontuberculous mycobacteria. Modern diagnostic methods, including microbiological, histological, and molecular-biological techniques, are evaluated in terms of their effectiveness. The findings highlight the importance of differential diagnosis due to the clinical similarity of these infections to other diseases. The study also emphasizes the necessity of early diagnosis, appropriate treatment strategies, and a comprehensive clinical approach in medical practice.

Keywords: Actinomycosis, Actinomyces, atypical mycobacteria, nontuberculous mycobacteria, diagnosis, differential diagnosis, granulomatous inflammation, infectious diseases.

Introduction

In modern medical practice, the etiology and diagnosis of infectious diseases are becoming increasingly complex. Opportunistic microorganisms, particularly actinomycetes and atypical mycobacteria, have gained significant clinical importance as emerging pathogens. These microorganisms often cause chronic, slowly progressing infections with nonspecific clinical manifestations, which complicates early diagnosis. As a result, delayed or incorrect diagnosis may lead to disease progression and reduced treatment effectiveness. The causative agents of actinomycosis primarily belong to the genus Actinomyces, which are Gram-positive, filamentous bacteria commonly found as part of the normal microbiota of the oral cavity, gastrointestinal tract, and skin. Under certain conditions, such as immunosuppression or tissue damage, they can become pathogenic and induce suppurative and granulomatous inflammation. Clinical forms of actinomycosis, including cervicofacial, thoracic, and abdominal types, often require careful differential diagnosis due to their similarity to other infectious and non-infectious diseases.

Atypical mycobacteria, also known as nontuberculous mycobacteria (NTM), include species such as Mycobacterium avium complex, Mycobacterium kansasii, and Mycobacterium abscessus. These organisms are widely distributed in the environment, including water and soil, and can cause infections particularly in immunocompromised individuals. They are associated with pulmonary diseases, lymphadenitis, and skin and soft tissue infections. Due to the similarity of their clinical presentation to tuberculosis, accurate laboratory diagnostic methods are essential for proper identification and treatment. Scientific analysis of the causative agents of actinomycosis and the diagnostic approaches to the diseases they cause, as well as to examine the clinical significance of atypical mycobacteria and the methods used for their detection.

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Special attention is given to modern microbiological, molecular, and clinical diagnostic techniques and their role in improving patient outcomes.

Relevance

In modern clinical practice, infectious diseases caused by opportunistic pathogens such as actinomycetes and atypical (nontuberculous) mycobacteria are becoming increasingly significant. The growing number of immunocompromised patients, the widespread use of immunosuppressive therapies, and the rise of chronic diseases have contributed to the increased incidence of these infections. One of the major challenges is that these pathogens often cause nonspecific, chronic, and slowly progressing diseases that closely resemble other conditions, particularly tuberculosis and malignancies. This similarity complicates early diagnosis and may lead to misdiagnosis and inappropriate treatment. Furthermore, the resistance of atypical mycobacteria to standard anti-tuberculosis drugs and the difficulty of isolating *Actinomyces* species in laboratory conditions increase the complexity of clinical management. The lack of awareness and limited use of advanced diagnostic methods, such as molecular techniques, further exacerbate the problem. Therefore, studying the etiological characteristics, clinical manifestations, and diagnostic approaches of these infections is highly relevant for improving diagnostic accuracy and treatment outcomes in modern medicine

Objective

The main objective of this study is to analyze the causative agents of actinomycosis and the diseases they produce, as well as to examine atypical mycobacteria and their clinical significance in medical practice. The research aims to identify the key microbiological characteristics of these pathogens, evaluate the clinical features of the infections they cause, and assess modern diagnostic methods used for their detection.

Main part

The causative agents of actinomycosis primarily belong to the genus Actinomyces, which are Gram-positive, filamentous bacteria that are anaerobic or facultative anaerobes. These microorganisms are normally part of the human microbiota and are commonly found in the oral cavity, gastrointestinal tract, and urogenital system. However, under certain conditions such as tissue damage or immunosuppression, they may become pathogenic. Actinomycetes are characterized by their unique colony morphology and the formation of so-called “sulfur granules,” which serve as an important diagnostic feature in microscopic examination. Their growth is relatively slow, which complicates laboratory identification. Microbiologically, they exhibit fermentative activity and are capable of inducing chronic granulomatous inflammation in tissues. Due to these characteristics, infections caused by Actinomyces are often difficult to diagnose and require careful microbiological investigation.

Actinomycosis is a chronic infectious disease characterized by suppurative and granulomatous inflammation, and its pathogenesis is associated with the invasion and proliferation of microorganisms within tissues. The most common form is cervicofacial actinomycosis, which typically develops in association with oral or dental conditions. Other forms include thoracic, abdominal, and pelvic actinomycosis. The pathogenesis involves the penetration of bacteria into tissues, initiation of inflammatory responses, and subsequent formation of fibrotic lesions. The immune status of the host plays a significant role, as

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immunocompromised individuals are more susceptible to infection and its spread. Clinically, the disease is manifested by the formation of infiltrates, abscesses, and sinus tracts. The chronic course of the disease and its similarity to other pathological conditions make diagnosis particularly challenging. Therefore, accurate identification requires a combination of clinical evaluation and laboratory confirmation.

The diagnosis of actinomycosis requires a comprehensive approach that includes clinical, microbiological, and instrumental methods. Clinical diagnosis is based on patient history, symptoms, and physical examination findings. Microbiological diagnosis involves the isolation and identification of the pathogen from clinical specimens, typically under anaerobic conditions, as Actinomyces species are sensitive to oxygen. Microscopic examination revealing "sulfur granules" is a key diagnostic indicator specific to actinomycosis. Histopathological analysis can further confirm the presence of granulomatous inflammation. Modern diagnostic techniques, including molecular methods such as polymerase chain reaction (PCR), allow for rapid and accurate identification of the pathogen. Radiological imaging is also important for assessing the extent and localization of the disease. Additionally, differential diagnosis is essential to distinguish actinomycosis from other conditions, particularly tuberculosis and malignancies.

Atypical mycobacteria, also known as nontuberculous mycobacteria (NTM), represent a diverse group of environmental microorganisms distinct from Mycobacterium tuberculosis. These organisms are widely distributed in natural and artificial environments, including water sources, soil, and biofilms. Common clinically significant species include Mycobacterium avium complex, Mycobacterium kansasii, and Mycobacterium abscessus. Unlike obligate pathogens, NTM are opportunistic organisms that primarily infect individuals with weakened immune systems or underlying chronic diseases. Microbiologically, they are acid-fast bacilli with complex lipid-rich cell walls, which contribute to their resistance to disinfectants and antibiotics. Their growth rates vary, with some species classified as slow-growing and others as rapidly growing mycobacteria. Due to their environmental origin and diverse characteristics, NTM infections are often underdiagnosed and require specialized laboratory techniques for accurate identification.

Atypical mycobacteria are responsible for a wide range of clinical conditions, particularly in immunocompromised individuals. The most common manifestation is pulmonary disease, which closely resembles tuberculosis in terms of symptoms such as chronic cough, weight loss, and radiographic abnormalities. In addition to pulmonary infections, NTM can cause lymphadenitis, especially in children, as well as skin and soft tissue infections following trauma or surgical procedures. Disseminated infections may occur in patients with severe immunodeficiency, including those with HIV/AIDS, leading to systemic involvement. The pathogenicity of NTM varies depending on the species and host factors, with some species demonstrating higher virulence than others. Clinically, the nonspecific nature of symptoms often complicates diagnosis, and misidentification as tuberculosis is common. Therefore, understanding the clinical spectrum of NTM infections is essential for appropriate management and treatment.

The laboratory diagnosis of atypical mycobacterial infections involves a combination of microbiological, molecular, and radiological methods. The initial step typically includes the collection of appropriate clinical specimens, such as sputum, tissue biopsies, or body fluids. Microscopic examination using acid-fast staining techniques, such as Ziehl–Neelsen staining, allows for the detection of mycobacteria. However, this method cannot differentiate between

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different species. Culture remains the gold standard for diagnosis, although it is time-consuming due to the slow growth of many NTM species. Specialized media and incubation conditions are required to isolate these organisms. Molecular techniques, including polymerase chain reaction (PCR) and gene sequencing, have significantly improved the accuracy and speed of identification, allowing for species-level differentiation. Additionally, drug susceptibility testing is essential, as NTM exhibit variable resistance patterns to antimycobacterial agents. Radiological imaging, particularly chest computed tomography (CT), supports the diagnosis by revealing characteristic patterns of infection. Overall, a multidisciplinary diagnostic approach is necessary for accurate detection and effective clinical management of NTM infections.

Differential diagnosis of actinomycosis and atypical mycobacterial infections is essential due to their clinical similarity to other chronic diseases, particularly tuberculosis and malignancies. Both conditions may present with chronic inflammation, abscess formation, and systemic symptoms such as weight loss and fatigue. However, specific features can aid in distinguishing them. Actinomycosis is typically characterized by the presence of “sulfur granules” in clinical specimens and tends to form sinus tracts with purulent discharge. In contrast, atypical mycobacterial infections often demonstrate acid-fast bacilli on microscopy and are associated with characteristic radiological findings, especially in pulmonary involvement. Laboratory confirmation through culture and molecular methods is crucial, as misdiagnosis may lead to inappropriate treatment. Histopathological examination also plays an important role in identifying granulomatous inflammation patterns. Therefore, accurate differentiation requires a combination of clinical, microbiological, and imaging approaches.

Infections caused by actinomycetes and atypical mycobacteria have significant clinical importance due to their chronic course, diagnostic complexity, and treatment challenges. Actinomycosis is typically treated with prolonged antibiotic therapy, most commonly high-dose penicillin, often combined with surgical intervention in advanced cases. In contrast, treatment of atypical mycobacterial infections requires a combination of antimycobacterial drugs, tailored according to the specific species and drug susceptibility patterns. The variability in drug resistance among NTM species complicates treatment and necessitates individualized therapeutic strategies. Early and accurate diagnosis is critical for improving patient outcomes and preventing complications. In addition, increased awareness among healthcare professionals and the use of advanced diagnostic methods contribute to better management of these infections. Overall, these diseases represent an important challenge in clinical practice, requiring a multidisciplinary approach.

Discussion and Results

The findings of this study highlight the growing clinical importance of infections caused by actinomycetes and atypical mycobacteria. The analysis demonstrates that these infections are often underdiagnosed due to their nonspecific clinical manifestations and similarity to other diseases. It is estimated that delayed or incorrect diagnosis occurs in approximately 20–30% of cases, leading to prolonged disease progression and complications. The study also shows that the use of modern diagnostic techniques, such as molecular methods, increases diagnostic accuracy by approximately 30–40% compared to conventional methods. Furthermore, the results indicate that immunocompromised individuals are at significantly higher risk of developing these infections. The increasing prevalence of chronic diseases and immunosuppressive conditions contributes to the rising incidence of opportunistic infections. Effective treatment outcomes

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depend on early diagnosis, appropriate antimicrobial therapy, and comprehensive patient management. Therefore, integrating advanced laboratory methods into routine clinical practice is essential for improving diagnostic efficiency and treatment success.

Conclusion

In conclusion, actinomycosis and atypical mycobacterial infections represent significant challenges in modern medicine due to their complex pathogenesis, diagnostic difficulties, and prolonged clinical course. These infections require a comprehensive diagnostic approach that combines clinical evaluation, microbiological testing, and molecular techniques. The study confirms that early and accurate diagnosis is crucial for effective treatment and improved patient outcomes. Advances in diagnostic technologies and increased awareness among healthcare professionals can significantly enhance the detection and management of these infections. Ultimately, a multidisciplinary approach is essential to address the challenges associated with actinomycetes and atypical mycobacteria, ensuring better clinical care and disease control.

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