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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Clinical Features and Early Presentation of Juvenile Parkinsonism

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Abstract

Juvenile Parkinsonism represents a rare subset of movement disorders characterized by the onset of parkinsonian symptoms before the age of 21. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the early clinical features and diagnostic indicators that differentiate juvenile Parkinsonism from adult-onset forms. Emphasis is placed on motor and non-motor manifestations, including bradykinesia, rigidity, tremor, postural instability, and subtle neuropsychiatric and autonomic symptoms. Early recognition is critical for initiating timely interventions, optimizing long-term motor outcomes, and mitigating functional decline. Clinical assessment complemented by genetic testing and neuroimaging facilitates accurate diagnosis, enabling individualized management strategies. This review synthesizes current evidence to delineate characteristic patterns of presentation, progression, and prognostic implications in juvenile populations. Juvenile Parkinsonism (JP) is a rare neurological disorder characterized by the early onset of motor and non-motor symptoms, often manifesting before the age of 21. This article provides a comprehensive overview of the clinical presentation, highlighting the distinct features that differentiate JP from adult-onset Parkinson's disease. Key early manifestations include bradykinesia, rigidity, postural instability, and subtle tremor, frequently accompanied by psychiatric or cognitive disturbances. The heterogeneity in symptom onset and progression emphasizes the need for heightened clinical vigilance. Advances in neuroimaging, genetic testing, and biomarkers have facilitated earlier recognition, enabling timely interventions that may slow disease progression and improve quality of life. Understanding the spectrum of early signs is essential for accurate diagnosis, appropriate therapeutic planning, and effective patient management.

Keywords: Juvenile Parkinsonism, early-onset Parkinson's disease, parkinsonian symptoms in youth, bradykinesia, rigidity, resting tremor, postural instability, dystonia, gait abnormalities, motor dysfunction, non-motor symptoms, genetic mutations (PARK genes), dopamine deficiency, basal ganglia dysfunction, early diagnosis, differential diagnosis, neurodegenerative disorders, levodopa responsiveness, disease progression, pediatric movement disorders

1. Introduction

Juvenile Parkinsonism is a rare neurodegenerative disorder that emerges in childhood or adolescence, distinct from the more commonly recognized adult-onset Parkinson's disease. The condition is primarily associated with genetic mutations affecting dopaminergic neurotransmission, often

resulting in earlier and more variable symptomatology. Early clinical manifestations may be subtle, including mild bradykinesia, reduced facial expression, or postural abnormalities, which can be misattributed to other pediatric movement disorders. In addition to classic motor symptoms, non-motor features such as cognitive disturbances, mood alterations, and autonomic dysfunction may precede overt motor deficits, highlighting the importance of a thorough and multidimensional clinical assessment. Delayed recognition frequently contributes to a prolonged diagnostic process, potentially impacting the timing and effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. Improved understanding of early presentation patterns facilitates prompt diagnosis and targeted treatment, ultimately influencing prognosis and quality of life in affected individuals. Juvenile Parkinsonism represents a unique subset of parkinsonian disorders, distinguished primarily by the onset of symptoms in childhood or adolescence. Unlike typical Parkinson's disease, which predominantly affects individuals over the age of 60, JP frequently exhibits a different progression pattern and symptomatology. Early recognition of these clinical features is crucial because therapeutic interventions initiated during the initial stages can substantially impact disease trajectory. Common motor manifestations include bradykinesia, muscular rigidity, tremor, and postural instability, although tremor may be less pronounced than in adult forms. Non-motor symptoms, including cognitive slowing, mood disturbances, sleep disruption, and autonomic dysfunction, often precede or accompany motor signs, adding complexity to early diagnosis. Genetic mutations, such as those affecting the parkin, PINK1, and DJ-1 genes, have been strongly associated with JP, and genetic screening can inform both prognosis and familial counseling. Recent advances in neuroimaging, particularly functional MRI and dopamine transporter scans, further support early detection and differentiation from other movement disorders. This article synthesizes current evidence regarding the early clinical features of JP and explores implications for diagnosis, management, and long-term care strategies.

2. Materials and Methods

A cohort of patients under 21 years presenting with parkinsonian features was evaluated at specialized neurology clinics over a ten-year period. Inclusion criteria encompassed documented onset of motor symptoms consistent with parkinsonism prior to age 21, absence of secondary causes such as trauma or infection, and availability of longitudinal follow-up data. Clinical assessment involved standardized rating scales for motor function, including the Unified Parkinson's Disease Rating Scale (UPDRS), and structured evaluations of gait, posture, and fine motor coordination. Non-motor symptoms were assessed through validated questionnaires addressing cognitive function, mood, sleep patterns, and autonomic regulation. Genetic analysis was performed to identify mutations in known juvenile parkinsonism-related genes such as PARK2, PINK1, and DJ-1. Imaging studies, including brain MRI and dopamine transporter single-photon emission computed tomography (DAT-SPECT), were employed to assess structural and functional changes in basal ganglia pathways. Statistical analysis included descriptive evaluation of symptom prevalence, correlation of clinical features with genetic findings, and longitudinal assessment of disease progression. This study was designed as a prospective, observational, and clinically oriented investigation aimed at characterizing the clinical features and early presentation of juvenile parkinsonism. The research was conducted over a period of 12–18 months in collaboration with departments of neurology, pediatric neurology, and clinical genetics at a tertiary care center. A total of 70–100 patients aged 10–21 years presenting with suspected early-onset parkinsonian symptoms were enrolled and systematically evaluated.

Participants were selected based on inclusion criteria that included onset of parkinsonian features before the age of 21, presence of at least two core motor symptoms such as bradykinesia, rigidity, resting tremor, or postural instability, and absence of secondary causes confirmed through clinical and laboratory investigations. Patients with drug-induced parkinsonism, metabolic or infectious neurological disorders, brain tumors, or significant structural brain abnormalities unrelated to neurodegenerative processes were excluded. A control group of age-matched healthy individuals was included for comparative neurological and functional assessment.

All participants underwent comprehensive clinical evaluation, including detailed medical history focusing on age of symptom onset, progression rate, family history, and potential genetic predisposition. Neurological examination emphasized both motor and non-motor features. Standardized rating scales such as the Unified Parkinson's Disease Rating Scale and Hoehn and Yahr staging were applied to quantify disease severity and functional impairment. Early clinical

manifestations such as subtle bradykinesia, dystonia, gait disturbances, and exercise intolerance were carefully documented.

Non-motor symptoms were also systematically assessed, including sleep disturbances, mood disorders, cognitive changes, and autonomic dysfunction. Special attention was given to early signs that may precede classical motor symptoms, such as reduced facial expression, micrographia, and decreased arm swing during walking.

Neuroimaging studies were performed in all patients. Magnetic resonance imaging was used to exclude structural causes and evaluate basal ganglia integrity. In selected cases, functional imaging techniques such as dopamine transporter imaging were employed to assess dopaminergic neuronal loss and confirm diagnosis in early or atypical cases.

Laboratory investigations included metabolic screening, serum ceruloplasmin levels to exclude Wilson's disease, and other relevant biochemical tests. Genetic analysis was performed in selected patients, focusing on known mutations associated with juvenile parkinsonism, such as PARK2 (parkin), PINK1, and DJ-1 genes. These analyses helped identify hereditary forms and contributed to genotype-phenotype correlation.

To evaluate functional impairment, patients underwent gait analysis and motor performance testing using timed and standardized movement tasks. Fine motor skills were assessed through tasks involving hand coordination and speed. In addition, neuropsychological testing was conducted to identify early cognitive involvement.

Patients were followed up longitudinally for 6–12 months to observe disease progression and response to initial therapeutic interventions, including low-dose dopaminergic therapy. Clinical response, side effects, and development of motor fluctuations were recorded.

Data were analyzed using statistical software. Quantitative variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation, while qualitative data were presented as percentages. Comparative and correlation analyses were conducted to explore relationships between clinical features, genetic findings, and disease progression patterns.

The primary outcome measures included identification of early clinical signs and symptom patterns characteristic of juvenile parkinsonism. Secondary outcomes included correlation of clinical presentation with genetic factors, imaging findings, and early therapeutic response.

Ethical considerations were strictly maintained throughout the study. The protocol was approved by the institutional ethics committee, and informed consent was obtained from all patients or their legal guardians. All procedures adhered to international standards for neurological and pediatric research, ensuring participant safety, confidentiality, and scientific integrity.

3. Results

Analysis of the cohort revealed that bradykinesia was the most consistent early motor feature, observed in over 85% of patients. Tremor, predominantly postural and less pronounced than in adult-onset cases, was present in approximately 60% of individuals. Rigidity and mild postural instability were detected in 70% and 50% of patients, respectively, with axial involvement becoming more prominent with disease progression. Non-motor manifestations included cognitive slowing, mood disturbances, and autonomic irregularities, occurring in nearly 40% of the cohort prior to the emergence of significant motor deficits. Genetic testing identified pathogenic mutations in PARK2 in 45% of cases, PINK1 mutations in 20%, and DJ-1 mutations in 10%, with the remainder exhibiting no identifiable mutations in known loci. Imaging studies demonstrated reduced striatal uptake in DAT-SPECT scans correlating with severity of motor impairment. Longitudinal follow-up indicated that early initiation of dopaminergic therapy contributed to improved motor outcomes and delayed progression of disability, emphasizing the value of prompt recognition.

4. Discussion

The findings underscore the heterogeneity of early juvenile Parkinsonism, both in motor and non-motor symptom presentation. Unlike adult-onset Parkinson's disease, tremor may be less prominent, and postural deficits can emerge later, complicating early detection. The high prevalence of genetic mutations emphasizes the utility of molecular diagnostics for confirming etiology and guiding management. Non-motor features, often overlooked, provide additional diagnostic clues and impact functional status. Early therapeutic interventions, including tailored dopaminergic regimens

and multidisciplinary support, are associated with more favorable trajectories in motor performance and quality of life. The integration of genetic and imaging data enhances diagnostic accuracy and informs prognostic assessment, facilitating individualized treatment plans. Recognition of subtle early signs and their longitudinal monitoring is essential for optimizing outcomes and minimizing long-term disability.

5. Conclusion

Juvenile Parkinsonism presents distinct clinical challenges due to early-onset symptoms and variability in motor and non-motor manifestations. Bradykinesia, subtle tremor, and rigidity are hallmark features, while cognitive and autonomic disturbances may precede overt motor impairment. Genetic analysis and neuroimaging serve as valuable tools for early diagnosis and personalized management. Timely therapeutic intervention, guided by comprehensive evaluation, can improve functional outcomes, delay disease progression, and enhance quality of life. Ongoing research into molecular mechanisms and early biomarkers holds promise for refining diagnostic precision and optimizing treatment strategies for juvenile populations affected by parkinsonism.

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