

Pain on defecation following obstetric anal sphincter injury.

Hypothesis / aims of study

For many women with obstetric anal sphincter injury (OASIS) follow up in the post natal period by specialist staff is unavailable. Research is currently limited regarding the impact for both short and long term bowel function. One of the challenges for clinicians is managing troublesome symptoms resulting from OASIS. It has been reported that women suffer pain after an OASIS but no underlying cause for this pain is identified (1). We aim to investigate the number of women complaining of pain on defecation following obstetric anal sphincter injury and whether a cause was identified.

Study design, materials and methods

Women delivering in a tertiary unit who had sustained an obstetric anal sphincter injury were reviewed in a dedicated clinic 8-10 weeks postnatal. A detailed history of bowel and bladder function was taken and a physical examination was performed. Details of the delivery, repair and subsequent symptoms were entered onto a database.

For the purpose of this review the database was searched for all women reporting pain on defecation and their case notes were reviewed.

Results

Between 2007 and 2011, 462 women with OASIS were seen in the specialist postnatal clinic. 126 women (32%) complained of pain on defecation. 22 women (17%) had anal fissures identified, 3 women (2%) were documented as having haemorrhoids and 3 (2%) had protruding sutures. However no positive or negative examination findings pertinent to pain were recorded for the remaining 98 women (78%). Treatment for the fissures involved stool softeners and GTN ointment with good results. 2 patients failed to improve and were treated with Botulinum toxin injection into the anal sphincter. Both are under colorectal review. 49% of women complaining of pain on defecation were discharged at the first clinic appointment. The reasons for discharge were primarily women declining further investigations, maternal request or discharge by the attending physician. These were predominantly women with no cause found for their pain.

Interpretation of results

The original aim of this clinic was to review continence after OASIS. It has become obvious however that a significant number of women experience pain on defecation following an obstetric anal sphincter injury but in the majority of cases the cause of pain is not identified and no treatment offered. The investigation and treatment of pain may be overlooked as emphasis is often on the assessment and investigation of incontinence symptoms.

Concluding message

Pain on defecation is a common symptom after obstetric anal sphincter injury. To date there is a paucity of data on proctalgia in postnatal women. This is to our knowledge the first report specifically looking at symptoms other than continence in women who have previously suffered OASIS. There is an urgent need to have a consistent and thorough approach to the investigation and treatment of this symptom. Patients treated for an anal fissure require follow up as symptoms do not always resolve. Further research is needed into the cause of postnatal pain on defecation and to ascertain if obstetric anal sphincter injury is a contributing factor.

References

1. Marsh F et al (2010). Obstetric anal sphincter injury in the UK and its effect on bowel, bladder and sexual function. Eur J Obstet Gynecol Reprod Biol. 154(2):223-227.

Specify source of funding or grant	None
Is this a clinical trial?	No
What were the subjects in the study?	HUMAN
Was this study approved by an ethics committee?	No
This study did not require ethics committee approval because	it is a retrospective case note review
Was the Declaration of Helsinki followed?	No
This study did not follow the Declaration of Helsinki in the sense that	patients were not taking part in research.
Was informed consent obtained from the patients?	No