

Variability of Presenting Symptoms in a Population of Patients with IHS Migraine With or Without Aura

An Analysis of Patient Charts for Self-Reported Symptoms

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Background

Migraine is frequently misdiagnosed as Tension Type Headache or Sinus Headache. Many times this prevents access to more effective treatments. Many clinicians may become led astray by the presence of symptoms they consider to be consistent with one of these misdiagnoses and overlook the prevailing features that are most consistent with migraine.

Purpose

To determine the prevalence of self-reported symptoms considered by many primary care physicians to be consistent with Tension Type Headache (TTH) or "Sinus Headache" (SH) in a cohort of patients diagnosed with Migraine with or without aura by a headache specialist using the IHS criteria.

Methods

The office charts of 412 patients seen in a tertiary headache center who had the diagnosis of either Migraine with Aura (MwA) or Migraine without Aura (MwoA) by IHS criteria were reviewed to determine the presence of symptoms and characteristics commonly attributed to TTH and SH. The features chosen as being commonly reported by patients with TTH included stiffness or tightness in the muscles of the neck and/or shoulders, occipital or cervical distribution of pain, tenderness in the muscles of the neck, and causality attributed to tension or stress by the patient. The features chosen as commonly reported by patients with SH included facial or maxillary distribution of pain, associated nasal discharge, association with weather changes, and causality attributed to sinus problems by the patient. The prevalence of each characteristic was calculated for comparison.

Figure 1.

Symptoms/Characteristics of TTH

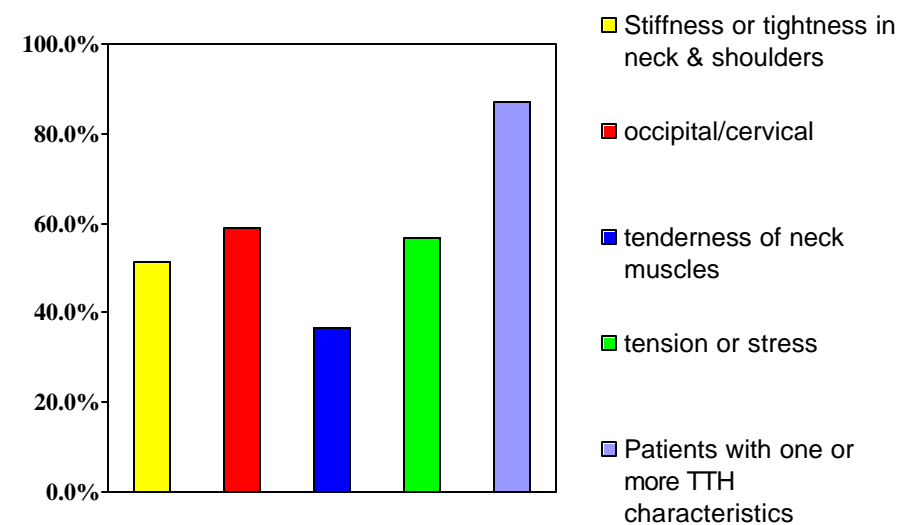
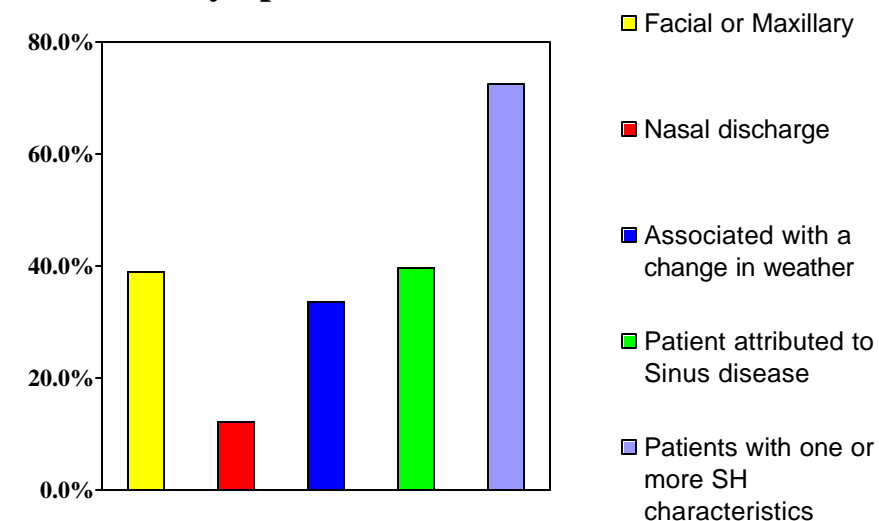


Figure 2.

Symptoms/Characteristics of SH



Results

The chart review included the medical records of 412 patients with migraine but no other headache diagnoses. They all met the IHS criteria for MwA or MwoA and did not experience more than 15 headache days per month. 375 were female and 37 were male. The symptoms/characteristics of TTH were reported as follows: stiffness or tightness in neck and shoulders, 51.2%; occipital/cervical distribution, 58.9%; tenderness of neck muscles, 36.7%; and tension or stress causality, 56.7%. The percentage of patients reporting one or more of the characteristics associated with TTH was 86.9%. (Figure 1)

The symptoms/characteristics of SH were reported with the following frequencies: facial or maxillary distribution of pain, 39.0%; nasal discharge, 12.1%; association with change in weather, 33.5%; and sinus disease causality, 39.8%. The percentage of patients with one or more of the characteristics associated with SH was 72.3%. (Figure 2)

Conclusions

Patients with migraine have variable presentations involving numerous symptoms. The results of this chart review demonstrate that even patients with clear-cut migraine by strict IHS criteria, have a high prevalence of symptoms and characteristics that many physicians associate with other types of headache. Indeed, almost all of the patients in this series had at least one symptom usually associated with TTH or SH. This may contribute, in part to the high rate of missed diagnosis of migraine. Clinicians should be aware that migraine may have musculoskeletal or sinus symptomatology as associated features of the presentation.