



Review Article

Congenital Disorders of the Shoulder Girdle: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The shoulder girdle, a complex anatomical structure, plays a pivotal role in upper limb mobility and function. Congenital disorders of the shoulder girdle encompass a spectrum of rare developmental anomalies that affect the structure and function of the clavicle, scapula, and surrounding musculature, ranging from mild deformities to severe structural impairments. These conditions can lead to deformities, impaired mobility, and functional limitations, often impacting patients from early childhood. This narrative review explores etiology, clinical presentation, diagnostic strategies, and treatment options for congenital disorders such as Sprengel's deformity, cleidocranial dysplasia, glenoid hypoplasia, os acromiale, humerus varus, congenital deltoid fibrosis and congenital clavicle pseudarthrosis. By providing a comprehensive overview, this review aims to improve early recognition and management of these disorders.

Keywords: Shoulder girdle, Sprengel deformity, Cleidocranial dysplasia, Os acromiale, Clavicle pseudarthrosis

Introduction

The shoulder girdle, a complex anatomical structure, plays a pivotal role in upper limb mobility and function. Congenital disorders of the shoulder girdle are a rare but important group of musculoskeletal anomalies that result in notable cosmetic deformity of the shoulder complex. These disorders can result in varying degrees of deformity, restricted mobility, and functional impairment, significantly impacting patients' quality of life. Understanding embryological development, clinical presentation, and genetic factors underlying these conditions is crucial for accurate diagnosis and effective management. This narrative review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of congenital shoulder girdle disorders, such as Sprengel's deformity, cleidocranial dysplasia, glenoid hypoplasia, os acromiale, humerus varus, congenital deltoid fibrosis and congenital clavicle pseudarthrosis highlighting their etiology, clinical manifestations, diagnostic approaches, and treatment options.

Sprengel's deformity

Sprengel's deformity or congenital high scapula is the most common congenital deformity of the shoulder girdle¹. The frequency rate of the deformity is three times higher in males than females. It is unilateral in 80% of cases or bilateral because of abnormal descend during the embryonic period². Eulenberg was the first who described this rare deformity, but in 1891 it was associated with the name of Otto Sprengel who further presented four clinical cases and proposed an etiology of this rare disorder^{1,3}.

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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Edited by: Konstantinos Stathopoulos

Accepted 30 December 2024

The origin of the word “scapulae” is Greek from the word “scaptein” which means dig. Many authors tried to “dig into” the pathogenic mechanism of Sprengel deformity. The clinical spectrum of Sprengel deformity is the result of failed ectodermal differentiation of the somites and scapula descent in relation with the neuroaxis³. The absence of signaling molecules or cellular receptors is responsible for phenotypic mutations affecting not only normal development of the scapula but also the surrounding structures¹. Disruption of cell signaling negatively affects the differentiation of mesenchymal cells to skeletal tissues and leads to malposition of the scapula^{1,4}. *EMX2*, which is the responsible gene for scapula development, also regulates somite differentiation and the development of a bone, which connects the scapula with the cervical spine⁵.

Sprengel deformity may be inherited in an autosomal dominant way or the result of subclavian artery lesions¹. The theory that has been proposed is interruption of the blood supply during the embryonic period^{6,7}. The autosomal dominant fashion characterizes the Hodgson-Chiu syndrome, which includes cervical anomalies, Sprengel deformity and cleft palate⁸. The embryological link between the neck and the shoulder region explains the associated anomalies in patients with Sprengel deformity⁸. In general, Sprengel anomaly is observed in 1 to 2% of patients with deletion of 22q11.2 chromosome. Both Sprengel deformity and deletion 22q11.2 syndrome are the genetic result of neural crest anomalies⁸. Pargas et al first reported Sprengel's deformity in 2 biological sisters, who were both treated surgically⁶.

Sprengel deformity is generally diagnosed in children younger than 8 years. The clinical spectrum ranges from mild deformity to severe clinical dysfunction of shoulder joint and cervical spine^{1,9,10}. Patients may present with elevated rotated, dysplastic, rhomboid- shaped scapula, with anteroinferior rotation of the glenoid and medial translation of the convex side of the scapula in contact with the inferolateral portion of the omovertebral bone^{3,4,6}. The inward rotation of the scapula leads to downward facing of the glenoid cavity and limited shoulder abduction to 90° or less and is associated with cosmetic impairment combined with muscle atrophy of the trapezius, levator scapulae and the rhomboids^{1,3,4,6,11}. Progressive periscapular muscle stiffness further increases glenohumeral joint stiffness¹². Associated deformities may also be present, such as shorter clavicle, deformities of the cervical and thoracic spine and rib cage, an omovertebral bone between the cervical spine and the scapula (25-50%) and muscular atrophy leading to functional impairment of the shoulder joint^{1,2,9}.

The most widely used classification system in Sprengel deformity is the Cavendish classification system, which was first described in 1972, and it is based on severity of the deformity and the grade of scapula elevation^{1,3,4,6,11}. Rigault et al further classified patients with Sprengel deformity according to the vertebral level of protrusion of the superior

and medial aspect of the scapula in plain X-rays^{1,3,6}.

The omovertebral bone, like the cleithrum of a bony fish, consists of a rhomboid- or trapezoid- shaped, fibrocartilaginous, or osseous connection between the superomedial surface of the scapula and the lamina, spinous or transverse processes of the cervical spine, from the level of C4 to the level of C7. It was observed in 1883 by Willet and Walsham, and it is present in 16% to 65% of patients with Sprengel deformity¹³⁻¹⁵. The omovertebral bone either forms a joint with the scapula or presents an ossified bridge connecting the scapula with the lower cervical spine. It is not known if it first develops from the vertebra, the scapula or the periscapular muscles and it is usually unilateral^{13,14}. The excision of the omovertebral bone is performed at the age of 3 to 8 years for cosmetic and functional improvement with lower risk of brachial plexus injury^{13,14,16,17,18}.

The relation of Sprengel deformity to other congenital anomalies is the result of specific genetic disorders. Klippel- Feil syndrome is observed in 7% to 42% of patients with elevated scapula^{1,3,6,10,11,19}. Other associated anomalies and syndromes include congenital scoliosis (35-55%), spina bifida occulta, cervical spine deformity, syringomyelia, posterior congenital fusion of the thoracic spine, spinal dysraphism, absent or fused ribs (16-48%), malformation of the cardiopulmonary system (4-14%) and the genitourinary system (35%), colon abnormalities, cleft palate, facial anomalies, Poland syndrome (15.9%), Arnold-Chiari malformation, myelomeningocele, Mobius syndrome, X-linked hydrocephalus, diastematomyelia and mental disturbance syndrome^{1,6,8,20}.

Non operative treatment of Sprengel deformity is indicated in patients with grade 1 or 2 cosmetic deformity according to Cavendish classification and mild restriction of shoulder motion^{1,10,11}. Conservative treatment includes rehabilitation programs and participation in sports¹¹. Evaluation of the patients' shoulder range of motion, cosmetic appearance and psychological development should be performed every year until they are skeletally mature^{1,11}.

Surgical treatment is performed in children, 3 to 8 years old with higher grades of aesthetic deformity (Cavendish grades 3 and 4)^{1,3,10,11,17}. In case of concomitant spinal abnormalities, surgical treatment is suggested at 2 years of age followed by Sprengel deformity surgery²¹. Surgical options include partial scapulotomy or resection of the elevated scapula and the omovertebral bone and caudal translocation of the scapula in reference to the contralateral scapula after muscle detachment and reinsertion¹⁷. Brachial plexus and first rib decompression is performed before scapula mobilization with resection osteotomy of the mid-clavicle¹.

The most popular and effective surgical techniques for scapula relocation in Sprengel deformity repair are the Woodward and Green procedures followed by scapular osteotomy and partial scapulectomy^{1,17,21,22}. Muscles' origin (Woodward procedure) or insertion (Green procedure)

translocation is important for prevention of varus position of the glenohumeral articulation. Brachial plexus injury could be avoided by a single-level clavicular osteotomy through a small incision^{1,11,18,22,23}. Scapulectomy was first described by Wilkinson and Campbell¹. A similar surgical technique was later described by Mears^{1,21}. Partial scapulectomy also seems to improve shoulder abduction¹. In case of presence of the omovertebral bone, extra-periosteal removal is performed¹⁷.

Several studies demonstrated the results of the Woodward and Green procedures in patients with Sprengel deformity. Oner et al showed great improvement in shoulder abduction and flexion in 17 patients (18 shoulders) at 62.9 months postoperatively²⁴. Yamada et al also showed great increase in shoulder flexion and abduction and cosmetic improvement in 7 patients with a mean age of 50.9 months at 53.1 months after modified realignment of scapula rotation whereas Agarwal et al demonstrated the effect of rib anomalies on the clinical outcomes 4 years after vertical scapulectomy in 8 patients with Sprengel deformity with a mean age of 6.8 years^{25,26}. Clinical outcomes were better in patients with simple or no rib anomaly²⁵.

Postoperatively, the patients wear a sling for 3 weeks. At 3 to 4 weeks passive motion is allowed^{6,10}. Postoperative complications include hypertrophic scarring, deformity recurrence and winging of the scapula, asymmetry, brachial plexus injury, poor functional outcomes and infection^{1,10,11,17,23}. Wound complications and postoperative pain, infection rate and recovery time could be further decreased by performing the endoscopic Woodward procedure described by Soldado et al in 2017²⁷.

Glenoid Hypoplasia

Congenital glenoid hypoplasia is hypoplasia of the glenoid as a result of failed development of the lower part of the glenoid and the neck of the scapula²⁸⁻³⁰. Hypoplastic glenoid was reported for the first time by Giongo and Heupke in 1927-1928 and by Valentine in 1931 and is characterized by shallow glenoid cavity, rounded posteroinferior glenoid rim and hypertrophic posterior labrum^{28,31-35}. This rare anatomic deformity can be asymptomatic, so its true prevalence is not known^{29,30,32,36}. Most patients are male, and, in most cases, it is bilateral and symmetric and is an incidental finding in plain radiographs³⁶⁻³⁸. It may also be combined with hypoplastic, subluxated humeral head, hypertrophic glenoid labrum and widened glenohumeral joint space, hooked distal part of the clavicle and hyperplastic, elongated acromion and coracoid process^{28-31,35}.

Congenital glenoid hypoplasia may be associated with genetic disorders in a familial pattern as it is inherited in an autosomal dominant way and present as a clinical aspect of clinical syndromes^{28,30,33,35,38,39}. The glenoid ossifies from two of the eight ossification zones of the scapula during the embryonic period. The proximal (superior) ossification center presents under the coracoid process at the age of

ten years and fuses at the age of fifteen years, whereas the distal ossification zone presents between the 9th and 12th years as a horseshoe-like (U shaped) glenoid epiphysis that is thicker peripherally (glenoid rim) and thinner in its center (glenoid fossa)³³⁻³⁵. Both ossification centers are present between the age of 10 and 12 years^{34,37}. Glenoid hypoplasia is the result of ossification arrest. This theory was first described by Owen in 1953³⁷. According to this theory, failed development of the lower precartilaginous leads to replacement of hypoplastic bone by fibrocartilaginous tissue as a compensatory mechanism^{28,30,34,36,38}.

Patients with glenoid hypoplasia may have no symptoms or complain about painful, restricted function, increased glenoid retroversion or shoulder instability leading to degenerative changes and posterior labral tears, probably in adolescence, at second decade of life or later as glenohumeral arthritis, at fifth decade of life^{28,30,34,37}. Glenoid hypoplasia has also been associated with a skin web in the axilla and hypoplastic pectoralis muscles^{29,36}. Hypoplastic glenoid may appear as the only, primary lesion or be present in patients with multiple deformities such as Erb's palsy, muscular dystrophy, spina bifida, Apert syndrome, Holt-Oram syndrome and mucopolysaccharidoses-related conditions^{31,35,37,40}.

Hypoplastic glenoid is usually an incidental finding in plain chest radiographs^{28,29,32}. Hypoplastic glenoid can be further evaluated by CT^{28,29,37}. The most reliable modality for the evaluation of the characteristics of glenoid hypoplasia is Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI)^{28,30}. Shoulder arthroscopy reveals the absence of the inferior osseous element of the glenoid, thickening of the glenoid cartilage, labral tears and perilabral cysts^{34,36,38}.

The method of treatment depends on various factors, such as the age of the patient, pain, grade of degeneration and level of restriction in everyday activities²⁸. Conservative treatment includes daily shoulder exercises for stabilization of the periscapular muscles and mobilization for releasing soft-tissue adhesions^{28,29,34,35}. Surgical treatment is indicated in patients with persistent symptoms after six months of physical therapy and symptomatic labral tears with significant shoulder instability and painful restriction of range of motion^{28,30,36}.

Surgical options include labral tears repair combined with a bone graft and shoulder arthroplasty in patients with advanced degenerative disease with persistent symptoms^{28,30,32,35}. Postoperative complications include non-union, resorption of graft and shoulder instability^{28,34}. Postoperative rehabilitation includes passive motion at 4 weeks after surgery, active motion at 8 weeks postoperatively and recreational activities at 24 weeks after surgery²⁸.

Humerus Varus

Humerus varus is defined as the disruption of ossification of the growing ends of the humeral bone, which results in the medial migration of the humerus with relation to its

longitudinal axis. A physeal bar may be present in the inferomedial plate as the result of the growth disruption and it is combined with metaphyseal narrowing. Humerus varus is one of the two most common varus deformities in long bones. Isolated congenital varus deformity of the humerus is extremely rare, and it may be caused by genetic and metabolic disorders. Bilateral, symmetrical varus deformity is also suggestive of intra- uterine injury of the plate of the epiphysis at the upper part of the humeral bone leading to congenital humerus varus⁴¹⁻⁴³.

Patients usually present for cosmetic reasons because of the shortening of the humerus. The shortened humerus is the result of the partial arrest of the proximal epiphyseal plate. The reduced acromiohumeral distance leads to subacromial impingement and decreased forward flexion and abduction⁴¹⁻⁴³.

The radiographic characteristics of humerus varus were first defined in 1935 by Kohler et al⁴². In 1991 Herschkovitz et al also demonstrated the varus humeral head, the shortened humerus, and the lytic defects of the shaft cortex as the main characteristics of the growth plate arrest in congenital humerus varus deformity⁴³. CT and MRI are also important tools in preoperative planning for detecting any additional components to varus deformity⁴². Surgical treatment of humerus varus should avoid disruption of the epiphyseal plate and soft tissue injury while minimizing the risk of postoperative nonunion or prolonged immobilization⁴².

Congenital Deltoid Fibrosis

Congenital deltoid fibrosis or contracture is an infrequent congenital deformity with bilateral, symmetric presentation and delayed diagnosis because of symptomatic presentation at children aged between eight and twelve years⁴⁴⁻⁴⁷. Fibrosis is more common in the middle deltoid fibers. As the contracture becomes more extensive and the length of the band does not increase, patients present with painful restriction of shoulder abduction^{44,46,47}. Contracture for a long time creates a fibrous cord- like band in the skin and as it becomes more extensive it may lead to anterior migration of the humerus with relation to the glenoid^{44,45,47}. Clinical examination and radiographic evaluation reveal scapular winging, laterally rotated scapula and beading of the acromion⁴⁵⁻⁴⁷. The characteristic skin dimpling in the middle portion of the deltoid also excludes brachial plexus palsy, long thoracic nerves paresis and scapula tumors from the differential diagnosis^{44,47}.

Surgical treatment includes proximal deltoid release or distal in case of extensive contracture combined with excision of the fibrous band^{44,45}. Operative treatment offers pain relief and improves function Postoperative rehabilitation is necessary for deltoid muscle strengthening 2 to 3 months after surgery⁴⁶. Postoperative complications include recurrence (0-6%), intramuscular hematoma (0-5%), decreased power of the deltoid, inadequate muscle release, shoulder deformation and wound complications (0-16%)⁴⁴.

Os Acromiale

Os acromiale is caused by failed fusion of the primary acromial ossification zones and was first described by Gruber in 1863^{48,49}. It is usually an incidental finding, and it is considered as a predisposing factor for rotator cuff tears and subacromial impingement^{49,50}. Os acromiale is more common in Africans (frequency rate 18.2%) and African- Americans (11-20%) and in the male gender⁴⁸⁻⁵². The frequency rate is up to 18.2 (mean rate 7-8%) in the general population^{48,49,51}. Os acromiale is bilateral in 24% to 62% of the patients^{50,51,53}.

Several ossification centers are responsible for the formation of the acromion, which starts at the age of 12 to 14 years^{52,54}. Three of four elements, the anterior acromial element which is called the "preacromion", the middle element known as the "mesoacromion" and the posterior element, the "metaacromion" are the result of fusion of several ossification centers forming a triangle-shaped bone^{48,49}. This epiphyseal bone fuses with the fourth element, the "basiacromion" at the age of 22 to 25 years⁵¹. The final element, basiacromion, fuses with the spine of the scapula in children aged 12 years. The bridging procedure of these elements begins from posterior to anterior⁵⁵. Failed ossification of the preacromion, mesoacromion, metaacromion and basiacromion after the age of 25 leads to the anatomic deformity of os acromiale^{48,49,51,56}.

Genetic predisposition and mechanical recurrent overload or even a single traumatic event during acromion development are the main causes of os acromiale as they terminate the osseous bridging of the bony elements^{51,52}. According to Lieberson Classification, there are four types of os acromiale based on the nonunion site⁵⁴. The site of os acromiale is defined based on the element anteriorly to the nonunion site which failed to fuse^{49,51}. Meso-type os acromiale is the most common type (range 75-94.4%) followed by pre- type os acromiale (15%) whereas meta-type os acromiale acromion is the less common type (2%)^{48,49,51}.

Os acromiale can be identified as an incidental finding in plain radiographs^{48,50,51,57}. Differential diagnosis includes coracoacromial ligament ossification and acromial spur fracture^{53,57}. Ultrasound and CT could give further detail about the morphological characteristics of the bony margins^{49,57}. However, the more specific imaging modality for diagnosis and assessment of os acromiale is MRI^{48,49,51,52}.

Most patients with os acromiale are asymptomatic^{53,56}. However, young patients with overhead activity may present with superior or anterolateral acromial pain, pain at night, muscle weakness and limited range of motion^{48,49}. Os acromiale may be slightly mobile in some cases because of almost complete fusion^{51,54}. Either micromotion and inflammation at the nonunion site or dynamic outlet-based subacromial impingement of the unfused segment during arm elevation could cause painful loss of range of motion^{49,51,54,56,58}. A direct trauma to the shoulder region

or bone removal of the unfused region during subacromial decompression could also cause micro- instability at the previously stable os acromiale and pain⁴⁸. Gross motion of the anterior part of the acromion would be highly suggestive of symptomatic os acromiale⁴⁹.

Conservative management includes medicine and avoidance of repetitive trauma during overhead and throwing activities for at least 6 months^{56,59}. Physical therapy should apply to the protocol of subacromial impingement and may be helpful as deltoid attachment spreading to non- ossified sites of the acromion offers stability during non- operative treatment^{56,59}.

Surgical treatment is considered after 6 to 12 months of failed conservative treatment^{55,58-60}. Surgery is performed in children with persistent pain and unstable os acromiale and includes internal osteosynthesis or removal of the unfused element^{56,58-64}. Excision of the sclerotic edges of the two elements is necessary to achieve fusion^{48,49}. Acromioplasty could be avoided by the upward- tilted repair of the anterior element of os acromiale to increase the subacromial space^{49,56}. In arthroscopically assisted surgery, the use of biodegradable screws with strong polyethylene sutures is associated with better outcomes avoiding complications related to hardware. Excision of os acromiale is indicated in case of a small preacromion fragment to prevent deltoid dysfunction^{52,56,58,65,66}. Arthroscopically assisted reduction and internal fixation offers minimal deltoid injury and postoperative weakness and better cosmetic results^{49,51,58}.

Congenital Clavicle Pseudarthrosis

Congenital pseudarthrosis of the clavicle is an infrequent disorder, which is the result of disruption of the continuity of clavicular diaphysis⁶⁷. It is a genetic condition, less common in males than females⁶⁸. The ossification of the clavicle first begins in the 5th week of the embryonic period. The failure of fusion of the internal and external ossification centers of the clavicle leads to the above anomaly⁶⁹. Other etiological factors are the compressive forces exerted by vascular compression as well as the accessory ribs⁷⁰. In most cases it appears on the right clavicle, while in 10% of cases it occurs bilaterally⁷¹. Less commonly it occurs on the left side in case of situs inversus^{69,72,73}.

The first case of was reported in 1910 by Fitzwilliams in the context of clavicocranial dysostosis and twenty years later by Saint-Pierre^{69,74}. Patients present with a visible, not painful protrusion in the diaphysis of the clavicle until the age of eight years^{72,75,76}. Rarely, this abnormality is associated with the thoracic outlet syndrome⁷⁷. Regarding the radiological features, the sternal end of the clavicular bone is larger and is located anterosuperiorly, while the distal end of the clavicle is located inferiorly directed upward and medially. At the site of the pseudarthrosis, the anteroposterior view of the clavicle reveals rounded scleral bone^{71,78}. The differential diagnosis includes birth injuries of the clavicle, which are usually accompanied by rib fractures,

neurofibromatosis and cleidocranial dysostosis^{75,79}. Surgical management includes excision of the unfused bone and internal osteosynthesis using autologous bone graft (Masquelet technique). Postoperative rehabilitation includes shoulder immobilization for 3 weeks⁸⁰⁻⁸³.

Cleidocranial dysplasia

Cleidocranial dysplasia is a genetic condition named by Marie and Sinton in 1898. It is the result of autosomal dominant inheritance and includes disorders of the shoulder girdle and the viscerocranium that has the shape of an inverted pear⁸⁴⁻⁸⁶. It occurs with the same frequency in both sexes and mainly affects the skull, the distal end of the clavicle, the ribs, the teeth and the pubic symphysis^{86,87}. Patients present with a longer neck, narrowing of the space between the axillae, scoliosis, glenohumeral instability and lengthening of the proximal and distal epiphyses of the metacarpals and metatarsals^{85,88}. Surgical treatment is indicated in patients with secondary neurovascular lesions due to clavicle deformities⁸⁹.

Conclusion

Congenital disorders of the shoulder girdle, though rare, present a wide range of clinical manifestations, from mild deformities to significant functional impairments. Early diagnosis is crucial for managing these conditions effectively and improving patient outcomes. This narrative review highlights the importance of understanding the underlying pathophysiology, clinical presentations, and diagnostic challenges associated with these disorders. Treatment approaches, whether conservative or surgical, should be individualized. Ongoing studies are needed to increase diagnostic accuracy and therapeutic interventions. Further genetic investigation is the key to prevention and primary management of congenital disorders of the shoulder girdle.

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