PARAGANGLIOMAS: A DIAGNOSTIC CHALLENGE- A REVIEW

Donika Marku

Doctor of Medicine

Paragangliomas are rare, neuroendocrine tumors that arise from paraganglia, which are clusters of neural tissue associated with the autonomic nervous system. These tumors often secrete catecholamines, presenting a significant diagnostic challenge due to their nonspecific clinical presentation and the wide variety of anatomical locations in which they can develop. Common symptoms, such as hypertension, headaches, and palpitations, are often mistaken for more prevalent conditions, leading to delayed diagnoses and treatment. Traditional imaging techniques, including CT and MRI, are frequently insufficient for detecting small or anatomically complex paragangliomas. This review aims to evaluate current diagnostic approaches for paragangliomas, with a particular focus on advances in imaging modalities, genetic testing, and biomarkers that can aid in earlier and more accurate diagnosis. Additionally, the review explores the role of multidisciplinary approaches and emerging technologies, such as functional imaging and next-generation sequencing, in improving diagnostic accuracy. The clinical implications of delayed diagnosis, including the potential for disease progression and metastasis, are also discussed, highlighting the importance of early detection and timely management. In conclusion, while significant advances have been made in understanding and diagnosing paragangliomas, there remains a need for improved diagnostic protocols, greater awareness among healthcare providers, and the implementation of more effective strategies to ensure accurate and timely diagnoses.

Introduction

Paragangliomas (PGLs) are rare neuroendocrine tumors [1], arising from paraganglia — clusters of neuroendocrine cells closely associated with components of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems [2,3,4,5].

Sympathetic paragangliomas can develop anywhere along the sympathetic chain, from the skull base to the bladder and prostate. In contrast, paragangliomas of parasympathetic origin are usually asymptomatic and nonfunctional, typically located in the neck and skull base along the distribution of the vagal and glossopharyngeal nerves. e jugulotympanic and vagal paraganglia. Rarely, they may arise from the laryngeal paraganglia [6].

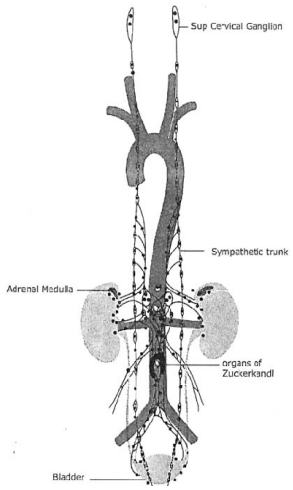

Figure 1. Places of Paraganglia in Human Body [2]

Paragangliomas are generally benign tumors [7], and malignancy or metastasis is rare. Early detection followed by complete surgical resection is often curative and associated with a favorable prognosis [8].

One of the key challenges in diagnosing paragangliomas is that many are either asymptomatic or present with nonspecific symptoms, such as headaches, episodic or sustained hypertension, sweating, palpitations, anxiety, tremor. These symptoms can easily be confused with more common conditions, such as essential hypertension or other endocrine disorders [9,10,11,12].

To improve the accuracy and timeliness of diagnosis, advanced techniques such as positron emission tomography (PET) scanning with specific radioisotopes for neuroendocrine tumors, as well as gene sequencing and molecular analyses to detect specific mutations, are being developed. These methods show great promise for more accurate and earlier diagnosis of paragangliomas [3,4,5].

This review aims to provide an in-depth examination of the complexities involved in the diagnosis of paragangliomas, with a particular focus on the clinical, imaging, and molecular aspects of diagnosis. Through a comprehensive review of the current literature, we will discuss the existing diagnostic methods and the challenges that clinicians face in daily practice. Additionally, we will explore recent advances in molecular diagnostics and imaging techniques that may improve the accuracy and speed of diagnosis, as well as opportunities for better management of these rare and difficult-to-identify tumors.

Methods

This review was conducted through a systematic analysis of the available literature concerning paragangliomas (PGLs) and their diagnostic challenges. The following steps outline the methodology used to gather and evaluate relevant studies:

Literature Search:

A comprehensive search was conducted across several electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar, to identify peer-

Correspondence::
donikamarku@proton.me

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Eurta Dida - Shporta

Endocrinologist

reviewed articles published in English.

Selection Criteria:

Inclusion Criteria: Only studies that focused on the diagnosis, imaging, clinical management, and molecular characteristics of paragangliomas were included. Both original research and review articles were considered, as long as they provided relevant information on the diagnostic challenges of PGLs.

Exclusion Criteria: Studies that did not address diagnostic issues related to paragangliomas, or that were unavailable in full-text format, were excluded. Additionally, studies involving non-human subjects or with insufficient data were omitted from the review.

Data Extraction:

From the selected articles, relevant data were extracted regarding the clinical presentation, diagnostic imaging modalities, molecular/genetic markers, and advancements in diagnostic techniques for paragangliomas. Information on the prevalence, risk factors, and diagnostic challenges of PGLs was also reviewed and summarized.

Analysis and Synthesis:

The extracted data were organized into key thematic categories: Clinical presentation and symptoms, imaging techniques and advancements, molecular and genetic aspects, diagnostic challenges and management strategies. A narrative synthesis approach was employed to summarize and interpret the findings, highlighting key diagnostic difficulties and recent developments in the field.

Quality Assessment:

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed based on study design (e.g., randomized controlled trials, cohort studies, case reports), sample size, and the rigor of the diagnostic methods used. The strength of the evidence was evaluated according to the findings of high-quality studies.

Limitations:

This review is based primarily on studies published in English, and articles that were not available in full-text or those with limited sample sizes or poor methodological quality were critically evaluated. Some relevant studies may have been excluded due to access restrictions or publication bias. Therefore, the conclusions of this review should be interpreted with these limitations in mind.

Results

The review of the available literature reveals several key findings regarding the diagnostic challenges and advances in the management of paragangliomas (PGLs). The results of the included studies were categorized into four main themes: clinical presentation, diagnostic imaging, molecular and genetic markers, and challenges in diagnosis.

Clinical presentation and symptoms: Due to release catecholamine excess is hypertension, with episodes that can be continuous or intermittent and often paroxysmal. These episodes commonly present with the classic associated symptoms of headache, palpitations, and profuse sweating, known as “the classic triad”[13]. If all 3 elements of the “classic triad” are present simultaneously, a healthcare professional can diagnose a catecholamine-secreting tumor with 90% specificity. However, the likelihood of all 3 symptoms presenting simultaneously is approximately 40% and highly

Table 1. Biochemical tests for paraganglioma, significance and method

Test	*Significance*	*Method*
Plasma Free Metanephrines	High sensitivity for functional sympathetic tumors	LC-MS/MS, HPLC
Urinary catecholamines	Detects catecholamine secretion (e.g., VMA, metanephrines)	HPLC, LC-MS/MS
Plasma Chromogranin A	General marker for neuroendocrine tumors	Immunoassay
Urinary VMA	Used in diagnosing functional paragangliomas	HPLC, GC-MS
Urinary HVA	Detects dopamine secretion in rare cases of paragangliomas	HPLC, GC-MS
Urinary 5 HIAA	Rarely used for serotonin-secreting paragangliomas	HPLC

Correspondence:
eurtadida@gmail.com

unlikely if the tumor originates in the skull base or neck which contributes to diagnostic challenges[14].

Biochemical tests:

Biochemical tests for paragangliomas are crucial for identifying functional tumors and providing insights into their biological activity.

Diagnostic Imaging: Chest, abdominal, and pelvic multiphasic computed tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans are considered standard diagnostic procedures. Functional imaging is more specific and can be used for predicting radionuclide therapy. Several radiopharmaceuticals for single-photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), MIBG (Figure 2) and positron emission tomography (PET) are available for the diagnosis, staging, and follow-up of PCCs/PGLs [15, 16]. The diagnostic performance of imaging with single-photon agents (123I-MIBG, 111In-pentetreotide or 99mTc-hydrazinonicotinyl-Tyr3-octreotide) has been shown to be inferior to imaging with PET radiopharmaceuticals [17,18]. The PET imaging can be performed with a somatostatin analog (68Ga-DOTA-SSA), a dopamine and catecholamines precursor (18F-FDOPA), a glucose analog (18F-FDG), or with a norepinephrine analog (11C-HED) [19]. 68Ga-DOTA-SSA has shown excellent results among patients with PCCs/PGLs. 68Ga-DOTA-SSA PET/CT showed a significantly higher detection rate (93%) than 18F-FDOPA PET/CT (80%), 18F-FDG PET/CT (74%), or 123/131I-MIBG scan (38%). At present, 68Ga-DOTA-SSA PET/CT is the preferred imaging modality for extra-adrenal nonmetastatic PGLs and is becoming the imaging modality of choice for metastatic PCCs/PGLs regardless of genetic background. 18F-FDOPA PET/CT is more effective than 68Ga-DOTA-SSA PET/CT in the detection of PCCs. So, for confirmation and diagnosis of sporadic PCCs, 18F-FDOPA PET/CT, or 123I-MIBG may be used. 18F-FDOPA can also be used as a second choice alternative to 68Ga-DOTA for sporadic head and neck PGLs. In tumors with mutations in the genes encoding succinate dehydrogenase (SDHx—denoting any one of SDHA, SDHB, SDHC, or SDHD), 18F-FDOPA together with 18F-FDG PET/CT may be used as a second choice alternative to 68Ga-DOTA-SSA PET/CT. 18F-FDG PET/CT has a low specificity but shows a strong diagnostic potential for metastatic PCCs/PGLs, particularly those associated with SDHB mutations[15,19].

Molecular and Genetic Markers: Advances in genetic research have identified several important mutations associated with paragangliomas, most notably mutations in the SDH (succinate dehydrogenase) gene family. PGLs or pheochromocytomas that are linked to a pseudohypoxic pathway (e.g. , SDHx, VHL, HIF2a,FH, MDH2, PHD1/EGLN2, PHD2/EGLN1) are referred to as Cluster 1 disease, whereas tumors that are linked to a cluster rich in kinase receptor signaling pathways (e.g., RET, TMEM127, MAX, NF1, KIF1Bβ) are referred to as Cluster 2 disease. Studies have shown that genetic testing can provide valuable diagnostic insights, particularly in cases where imaging and clinical symptoms are inconclusive. Furthermore, genetic analysis may help identify individuals at higher risk for developing paragangliomas, leading to early screening and intervention [19,20,21].

Challenges in Diagnosis: One of the most significant challenges in the diagnosis of paragangliomas is their asymptomatic nature or the nonspecific symptoms that overlap with other more common diseases. Misdiagnosis is common, with PGLs often being mistaken for conditions such as pheochromocytomas, primary hypertension, or anxiety disorders. Delayed diagnosis can lead to more severe complications, including metastasis and organ dysfunction. Another key challenge highlighted by the reviewed studies is the heterogeneity of paragangliomas in terms of location, histology, and clinical behavior.

Advances in Diagnostic Technologies: New diagnostic technologies, such as next-generation sequencing (NGS) and whole-exome sequencing, have shown great promise in identifying novel mutations and improving diagnostic accuracy. Molecular profiling may not only assist in diagnosing PGLs but also provide insights into their biological behavior, guiding treatment decisions.

Discussion

1.Diagnostic Challenges of Paragangliomas:

Paragangliomas are rare tumors that often present as asymptomatic or with nonspecific symptoms that can be mistaken for more common conditions, such as essential hypertension or chronic fatigue syndrome. More than 30% of patients with paragangliomas are asymptomatic, and many others may present with general symptoms like fatigue, headaches, and abdominal pain. Furthermore, symptoms of paragangliomas that secrete catecholamines, such as episodic hypertension and palpitations, are often similar to those of pheochromocytomas, complicating the diagnostic process.

A recent study demonstrated that diagnosing paragangliomas in patients with essential hypertension can be delayed by up to 7 years due to misdiagnosis as more common diseases. This delay can result in the identification of tumors at more advanced stages, potentially with metastatic spread[14,15].

2. Advances in Diagnostic Methods

Fortunately, advances in imaging techniques and genetic testing have significantly improved the ability to diagnose paragangliomas. ^68Ga-DOTATATE PET scanning, which uses a radiolabeled peptide to target neuroendocrine tumors, has proven to be a reliable method for detecting both primary tumors and metastases, even those with low metabolic activity that might not be visible on CT or MRI scans. Another advancement is the use of free metanephrine plasma testing, which has high sensitivity for catecholamine-secreting tumors. Recent studies have shown that plasma metanephrines can identify over 95% of patients with

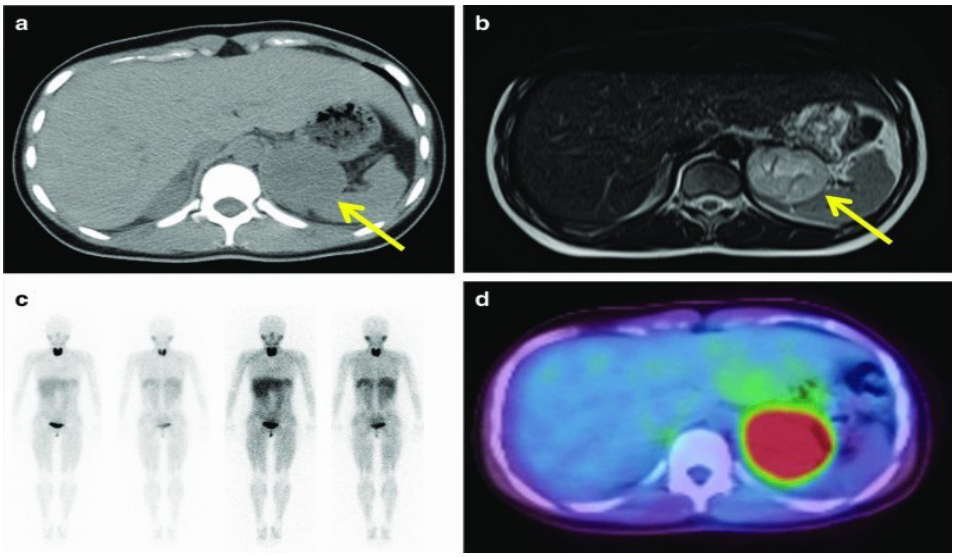

Figure 2. MIBG (metaiodobenzilganidin) procedure of diagnostic for Paraganglioma

catecholamine-secreting paragangliomas, marking a significant improvement compared to traditional tests such as 24-hour urine catecholamines and VMA[15]. However, despite these advances, diagnosing non-secretory paragangliomas remains challenging molecular biomarkers such as chromogranin A and SDH mutations may provide additional insight for patients with asymptomatic or low-secretory tumors.

3. Treatment and Management Challenges

Even with accurate diagnosis, treatment of paragangliomas remains a challenge. While surgical resection remains the gold standard for primary paragangliomas, some patients may develop metastases, necessitating additional treatments such as radiotherapy, targeted therapy, and radiation therapy for metastases. Treatment of malignant or metastatic paragangliomas is still uncertain, and the possibilities for adjuvant therapy remain in the experimental stages. This indicates that there may be new therapeutic options for treating these rare and aggressive tumors.

4. The Importance of Genetic Testing

Another important development is genetic testing, which helps identify familial forms of paragangliomas. Mutations in SDH genes, particularly SDHB, are associated with an increased risk of developing malignant tumors. In this context, genetic testing can assist in identifying at-risk individuals and enable early screening for tumors, thus improving treatment outcomes. Additionally, other inherited forms, such as von Hippel-Lindau syndrome and MEN2, require early testing to prevent the development of multiple tumors.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, paragangliomas are rare and complex tumors that present significant diagnostic and therapeutic challenges. Failure to identify these tumors early can lead to delayed diagnosis and inadequate management, which negatively impacts patient prognosis. However, recent advances in imaging techniques, such as PET/CT scanning and metanephrine testing, have significantly improved the accuracy of diagnosis, especially for functional paragangliomas that secrete catecholamines. Genetic testing has also enhanced the ability to identify individuals at high risk and may allow for personalized screening strategies for patients with familial forms of paragangliomas. Despite these improvements, challenges remain, particularly for asymptomatic paragangliomas or those with unclear secretory activity, for which the development of new biomarkers and enhanced imaging technologies is essential. Targeted therapies and radiation therapies show promise for metastatic paragangliomas, but more research is needed to optimize their use in these patients.

In the future, it is crucial for research to focus on early diagnosis, novel biomarkers, and personalized treatment strategies, which can improve the management and outcomes for patients with these rare and difficult-to-diagnose tumors.

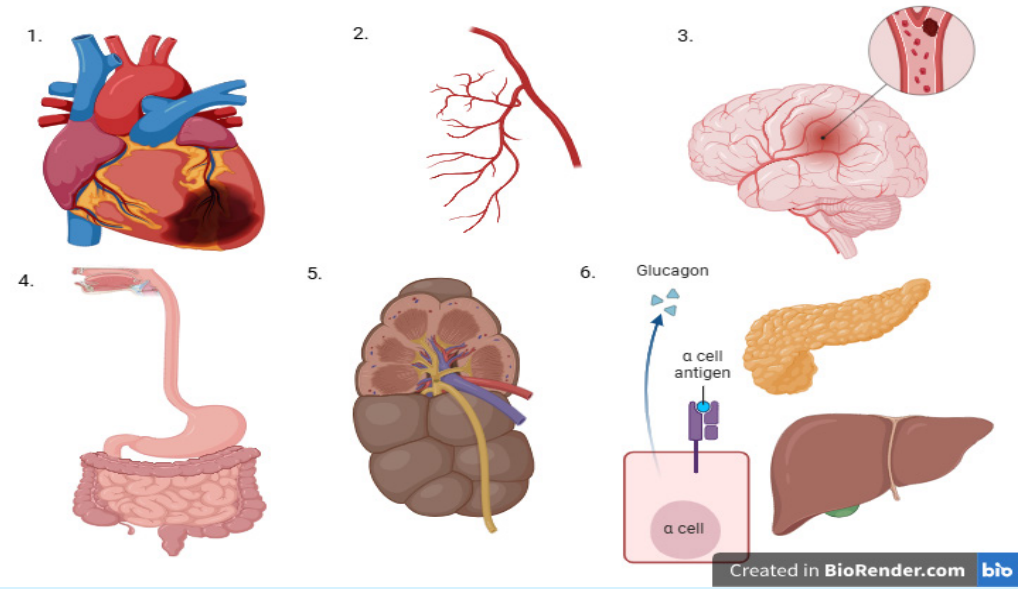

Figure 3. Multiple organ damage for long time high levels of catecholamine presence in the body1). Heart 2). Blood vessels 3). Brain 4). Gastrointestinal Tract 5). Kidney 6). Liver and Pancreas

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