



Unveiling oral consequences: A comprehensive review of immunosuppressants, adverse effects on the oral cavity

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ABSTRACT

Immunosuppression refers to actions that diminish the activation or effectiveness of the immune system. Immunosuppression can be achieved through drugs called as immunosuppressants which help to control severe manifestation of allergic, autoimmune and transplant related diseases. Immunosuppressants function by preventing the allograft rejection by preventing/inhibiting cell activation, cytokine production, differentiation and proliferation. The utilization of immunosuppressants has revolutionized medical care, playing a crucial role in managing various autoimmune disorders and preventing organ rejection after transplantation. However, while these medications offer remarkable therapeutic benefits, they are not without consequences. This review article delves into a specific and often overlooked aspect of immunosuppressant therapy – its adverse effects on the oral cavity. As an integral part of the human body's defense mechanism, the oral cavity can be significantly affected by the immunosuppressive actions of these drugs. By exploring the range of adverse effects, their underlying mechanisms, and potential management strategies, this review aims to shed light on an essential dimension of patient care that warrants closer attention within the realm of immunosuppressive treatment. Through a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature, this article seeks to enhance our understanding of the complex interplay between immunosuppressants and oral health, ultimately guiding clinicians in

providing more holistic and effective care to patients undergoing immunosuppressive therapy.

Keywords: Immunosuppressants, Organ transplant, Caries, Cancer risk, Periodontal changes
Key Message

Immunosuppressants are vital for managing autoimmune disorders and preventing organ rejection, but their impact on oral health is often overlooked. This review reveals their adverse effects and strategies for care.

I. INTRODUCTION

The ability of the body to resist the pathogens like bacteria, virus & foreign substances is called as immunity. Immunity can be classified into two broad categories; NATURAL/INNATE & SPECIFIC/ADAPTIVE⁽⁵⁷⁾. The innate/natural immunity is the first line of defense not having antigen specificity whereas the adaptive immunity responds against the pathogens through antigen specificity. Immunity is governed by the immune system comprising of thymus, bonemarrow, lymph node, spleen & MALT sometimes including HLA (Human Leukocyte Antigen). HLA are complexes which are essential in matching the donor & recipient sites during organ transplantation⁽⁵⁸⁾. The immune response elicited by the body during organ transplantation is modulated by immunomodulators which consists of immunosuppressants & immunostimulants. Immunosuppressants are drugs used control severe manifestation of allergic, autoimmune, transplant related diseases and to avoid transplant rejection. Immunosuppressants while crucial for managing



various medical conditions, can also lead to a spectrum of adverse effects on the oral cavity, ranging from increased susceptibility to infections to the development of oral ulcers and gingival growth⁽⁵⁹⁾.

II. METHODOLOGY

This questionnaire based review article was conducted in accordance with Arksey & O'Malley's 2021 guidelines which proposes six steps that includes 1)Specifying the research question,2)Identifying the relevant literature,3)Selecting studies,4)Mapping out the data,5)Summarizing, synthesizing and reporting the results and 6)including the expert consultation⁽¹⁾⁽²⁾To make sure all the relevant information from each article was included, a thorough search on the google search engine was done using keywords like 'immunosuppressants', 'oral cavity', 'immune system', 'periodontal health', 'microflora', 'organ transplant', 'immunosuppression', 'corticosteroids', 'cyclosporine', 'tacrolimus', 'immunosuppressive drugs'. Two major criteria were taken into consideration for selection of the articles one being the language of the articles which was English language and its relevance to immunosuppressants with oral cavity. A team of 2 authors was selected to then review the data to rule out the irrelevant articles by screening the title and abstract of all the studies. A separate word document was created consisting of the title, authors, publication dates of all the relevant studies after segregating them from the duplicate ones. A thorough review of all the articles was done and any disagreements were discussed amongst the reviewer.

Mechanism of action

Immunosuppressants work by hampering the functioning of the immune system from damaging healthy cells and tissues by blocking the activity of T-cells (a type of white blood cell) that directly attacks and eliminates foreign molecules from the body. These drugs target intracellular signaling pathways induced by the activation of T lymphocytes or T-cells and also inhibit calcineurin (an enzyme that activates T-cells of the immune system) which in turn inhibit the function of T-cells⁽⁴⁾They suppress cell mediated response by inhibiting genes that code for cytokine IL 1 to 6, 8 and interferon C resulting in reduced T cell proliferation. There is suppression of humoral immunity resulting in B cell reduction, Ab synthesis and reduced activation of T lymphocytes.⁽⁵⁾

SIDE EFFECTS

Immunosuppressants has been a savior in the treatment of acute immune rejection & autoimmune diseases however its lifelong use and ability to non specifically suppress the entire immune system has led to increased risk of infection and cancer.

The side effects of these medication include hepatotoxicity, nephrotoxicity, neurotoxicity, hyperlipidemia, hyperglycemia, immunosuppressant rejection leukopenia, PTLD(), pulmonary edema and renal dysfunction. The side effects of these medications observed in the oral cavity include Gingival hyperplasia, risk of neoplasm, poor wound healing, TMJ arthritis, altered cementum deposition, mucocutaneous pigmentation including melanosis, hairy tongue⁽³⁾⁽⁶⁾⁽⁷⁾⁽⁸⁾. Burkets textbook of oral medicine also mentions to consider mucormycosis in differential diagnosis of patients on immunosuppressants having large oral ulcers⁽⁹⁾. Geotrichosis – Disseminated infections are seen in debilitated patient or in those receiving immunosuppressants⁽⁶⁰⁾.

Patients on immunosuppressants are susceptible to local and systemic fungal infections ranging from typically mild to severe opportunistic ones⁽³⁾. These infections vary from those of Candida species to deep fungal infections by Aspergillus, Cryptococcus neoformans, Fusarium and Trichosporan.⁽³⁾⁽⁶⁾⁽⁹⁾⁽¹⁰⁾⁽³⁴⁾ Parasitic infection caused by *Taxi plasma gondii*, *Pneumocystis carinii*, *Strongyloides stercoralis* can be observed in transplant recipients on immunosuppressants⁽⁶⁰⁾. Patients on immunosuppressants may also show evidence of reactivation of certain latent infections such as hepatitis B & C, tuberculosis & human herpes virus 1-8. In such patients several oral manifestations like herpes simplex 1&2, varicella zoster, hairy leukoplakia, cytomegalovirus, mononucleosis, kaposi sarcoma, gingivostomatitis, herpes labialis can be observed.⁽³⁾⁽⁶⁾⁽¹⁰⁾

If the facial nerve is affected as in case of varicella zoster it can result in unilateral paralysis of face and oral tissues.⁽³⁾⁽¹⁰⁾

Cytomegalovirus infection occurs as medium sized ulceration on the palate and salivary gland in patients on immunosuppressants after pancreatic or renal transplant⁽³⁾. These may also cause xerostomia and enamel erosion due to nausea, vomiting & diarrhea eventually resulting in caries development.⁽³⁾⁽¹¹⁾

Liver and kidney transplant patient on immunosuppressants show a significantly higher risk of lip dysplasia, lip cancers, squamous cell



carcinomas, and progression of leukoplakia to squamous cell carcinoma⁽³⁾⁽¹²⁾

The immunosuppressive drugs prescribed during organ transplantation are classified in 4 broad categories namely :-⁽¹⁸⁾

CLASSIFICATION

CLASS OF DRUG	EXAMPLES	MECHANISM OF ACTION
Calcineurin inhibitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cyclosporine analogues • Tacrolimus 	Inhibitors of intracellular phosphatase required for interleukin 2 production in T lymphocytes.
Non calcineurin inhibitors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sirolimus 	Inhibitors of mTOR(Mammalian Target Of Rapamycin) activation of lymphocytes, resulting in cell cycle arrest.
Antimetabolites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Azathioprine • Mycophenolate mofetil 	Inhibitors of de novo purine synthesis in lymphocytes.
Corticosteroids	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prednisolone • Methyl prednisolone 	Regulators of gene expression.

CALCINEURIN INHIBITORS
CYCLOSPORINE ANALOGUES

CSA is a cyclic polypeptide medication derived from fungal metabolite Beauveria Nivea . It acts by suppressing the phosphatase activity by inhibiting calcineurin. Clinical indications for cyclosporine are kidney, liver, heart, and other organ transplantation; rheumatoid arthritis; psoriasis; and xerophthalmia⁽¹⁰⁾⁽²³⁾.Renal dysfunction,hypertension,hyperkalaemia,convulsions,hirsutism,hyperlipidemia,gum hyperplasia and cosmetic changes such as “moon face”(cushings syndrome) and buffalo hump are the frequently observed side effects of CSA⁽⁶⁾⁽¹⁵⁾⁽¹⁶⁾⁽²¹⁾.Oral mucosa is often the first site of manifestation of autoimmune diseases. If a detailed examination of oral mucosa is carried in asymptomatic patient, it may help in early diagnosis and treatment of these autoimmune diseases and would also prevent it from spreading to skin and other organs⁽⁶⁾⁽⁸⁾.According to a research published in the journal of scientific dentistry in 2016 25-30% of adults and more than 70% of children show drug induced gingival enlargement which is a hypersensitive response to cyclosporine therapy⁽⁷⁾.The increase in gingival hyperplasia may be related to plasma concentration of the drug⁽²⁵⁾.Gingival hyperplasia in anterior labial papilla commonly occurs within 6 months of treatment with cyclosporine analogues and calcium channel blockers⁽¹³⁾⁽¹⁴⁾.In comparison to other drugs such as phenytoin and calcium channel blockers CSA causes more fibrotic gingival enlargement⁽⁶⁾⁽¹³⁾⁽¹⁴⁾.Development of kaposi

sarcoma and squamous cell carcinoma can also be observed⁽²⁰⁾.A recent experimental study done on **rats** proves that on oral administration of csa an abundant formation and alteration of cementum is observed⁽¹⁹⁾.Large and multilobulated fibrous polyps are observed on the lateral border of the tongue, lip& buccal mucosa.⁽²⁴⁾

TACROLIMUS

Streptomyces sukubaensis produces tacrolimus which is a macrolide immunosuppressant used in organ transplant patients. It inhibits calcineurin by interacting with an intracellular protein known as FK binding protein⁽¹⁰⁾⁽²⁶⁾. Hepatotoxicity , Neurotoxicity Nephrotoxicity , post transplantation diabetes mellitus, elevation of blood pressure, alteration of taste and oral fibrous growth are some of the major side effects of tacrolimus⁽³⁾⁽⁸⁾⁽²⁶⁾⁽²⁷⁾⁽⁵⁵⁾⁽⁵⁶⁾.Diabetes mellitus is observed as complication in patients on tacrolimus is a result of its negative effect on the pancreatic islet beta cells & glucose intolerance⁽⁶⁾⁽⁸⁾⁽³⁰⁾⁽²⁸⁾⁽²⁹⁾.Diabetes mellitus causes alteration of the oral microflora creating a favorable environment for fungal infections such as mucormycosis⁽³³⁾⁽³⁴⁾.In comparison to csa the gingival enlargement caused by tacrolimus is less⁽³⁾.

NON CALCINEURIN INHIBITOR
SIROLIMUS

Sirolimus (rapamycin) is a macrocyclic lactone produced by Streptomyces hygroscopicus⁽⁹⁾.



Site and MOA : mTOR ,protein kinase involved in cell cycle progression (inhibits activity) Sirolimus causes Hyperlipidemia, Hypertriglycemia , Anemia, leukopenia, thrombocytopenia, mouth ulcer, hypokalemia, neoplasm, GI effects, proteinuria and delayed wound healing⁽¹⁷⁾⁽³⁷⁾⁽³⁸⁾⁽³⁹⁾⁽⁴⁰⁾⁽⁴²⁾.

Hypogeuria is very commonly (>10%) observed in patients on sirolimus⁽⁵⁵⁾⁽⁵⁶⁾.

Xerostomia and decreased salivary secretion leading to detrimental oral health is due to the direct toxic and antiproliferative effect of drug on the parenchymal and stromal elements of submandibular salivary gland⁽³⁶⁾.

ANTIMETABOLITES AZATHIOPRINE

Azathioprine is an antimetabolite known to inhibit purine synthesis further leading to inhibition of DNA & RNA synthesis thereby limiting proliferation of B & T cells⁽⁹⁾. Triple immunosuppressive therapy regime includes the administration of AZA along with CSA& corticosteroid for reduction of the renal injury caused by csa administration and at the same time maintaining the dose of immunosuppressant required to minimize the occurrence of allograft rejection⁽⁴⁵⁾. It can cause significant increase in risk of neoplasm and infections especially varicella and herpes simplex⁽⁴⁶⁾⁽⁴⁷⁾.It increases caries susceptibility and has a significant impact on synthesis and secretion of tertiary dentin⁽⁴³⁾.

MYCOPHENOLATE MOFETIL

MMF is an antimetabolite which is an ester mycophenolic acid. It is given as a prophylaxis against graft rejection and shows positive effects in the reversal of ongoing acute rejection.MOA includes inhibition of inflammation by interfering with purine synthesis⁽⁹⁾⁽⁴⁸⁾.Mycophenolate mofetil causes severe gingival enlargement thereby increasing the extent of destruction of periodontal support thus resulting in extensive tooth loss⁽⁴⁸⁾.Mycophenolate mofetil can cause immunosuppressant rejection leukopenia⁽⁴⁹⁾. An increase in the prevalence of interstitial nephritis is observed with activation of polyoma virus such as BK virus when Mycophenolate mofetil is given in combination with tacrolimus⁽⁵¹⁾⁽⁵²⁾.MMF when used in combination with other drugs shows various side effects For eg. When mmf is used in combination with cyclosporine or sirolimus an increase in the concentration of plasma drug and levels of plasma is observed resulting in development of multiple oral ulcers⁽⁴⁹⁾.However due to neglect in

assessment of plasma levels of mmf these cases are often not reported in any of the published case series⁽⁴⁹⁾.

CORTICOSTEROID

These are nonspecific type of Immunosuppressants used. They are used in cases of reversal of acute organ rejection. Steroids have anti inflammatory effects and are able to suppress activated macrophages⁽⁹⁾The systemic side effects associated with corticosteroid includes increased risk of diabetes mellitus, decreased protein synthesis,hypertension,bruising,thinningofmucosa, osteoporosis,osteonecrosis,osteopenia,peptic ulcer and increased risk of opportunistic infections⁽³⁾⁽¹¹⁾⁽¹⁵⁾⁽³¹⁾⁽³²⁾⁽³³⁾⁽⁴⁴⁾.All these have secondary effects on the oral cavity⁽³¹⁾⁽³²⁾.It increases caries susceptibility and impacts the secretion and synthesis of tertiary dentin⁽⁴³⁾.Administration of corticosteroid can result in increased plaque accumulation compromising the periodontal status through inflammation, though the anti-inflammatory effects of corticosteroids is on the gingival tissues and not necessarily in the reduction of rate of periodontal breakdown⁽⁵⁾⁽⁴⁴⁾.Oral candidiasis may also be frequently encountered as side effects of corticosteroid⁽⁹⁾. Fibrous and granulation tissue masses resulting in gingival inflammation, swelling, pyogenic granuloma, or gingival hyperplasia are associated with cyclosporine and corticosteroids⁽³⁾⁽⁷⁾⁽¹²⁾⁽¹⁵⁾.

Although the consumption of immunosuppressants cannot be completely avoided however certain precautions can be taken to reduce its side effects.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHYSICIANS

- Prior to immunosuppressive therapy, communication between dental and medical professionals should be established to promote complete patient care. A comprehensive oral examination with periodontal charting, current radiographs, and intraoral photography can document the oral condition at baseline.
- Dental consultation should be considered prior to performing transplant related procedures and prescribing immunosuppressants. Also any elective dental procedures required should be performed in the stable post transplantation period.
- Patients undergoing organ transplantation should have routine dental examination and should be educated about the use of interdental aids and powered toothbrushes after assessment of patients ability of self care



- The patient and the guardian should be taught to perform oral examination at home and monitor his / her oral condition to aid health care professional in early diagnosis of pathology.
- Antifungal and antiviral medications should be prescribed along with immunosuppressants. Herpes virus infected patients can be treated with topical anesthetics and antiviral drugs along with immunosuppressants.
- Treatment success depends on the detection and management of oral changes, appropriate communication with medical professionals, and provision of referrals to dental specialists to effectively treat any complications that arise.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DENTIST.

- The dental professionals should be familiar with the interaction between various drugs and immunosuppressants such as patients on CSA must be prescribed clindamycin instead of erythromycin.
- Prescription fluoride toothpaste or fluoride varnish application can help mitigate the impact of acidity on tooth structure resulting from nausea, vomiting, or xerostomia, while mouthwashes like chlorhexidine can be recommended to uphold excellent oral hygiene.
- Drug induced gingival enlargement & severe periodontal pocket can be treated through gingivectomy, flap surgery, laser therapy & changing to drugs with lesser incidence of gingival enlargement such as tacrolimus but it is associated with oral fibrous growth.
- Oral candida infections can be treated with the use amphotericin lozenges, chewable nystatin pastilles, topical miconazole
- The dentist should keep themselves updated with the newer drugs and treatment modalities for effective treatment of the patient and should be competent to detect the various associated pathologies

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this review has provided a comprehensive understanding of the adverse effects of immunosuppressants on oral health. The evidence presented underscores the significant impact of these medications, which can lead to a range of oral health issues, including increased susceptibility to infections, oral mucosal changes, and compromised periodontal health. Recognizing these potential complications is vital for healthcare professionals, particularly dentists and physicians,

as it underscores the importance of collaboration and careful monitoring of patients on immunosuppressive therapy.

As we conclude, it is clear that a holistic approach to patient care is necessary, one that includes the close collaboration of medical and dental practitioners. This ensures that individuals on immunosuppressants receive the highest quality of care, with a focus on preventing and managing oral health complications. Additionally, educating patients about the potential risks and the importance of maintaining excellent oral hygiene while on immunosuppressive medications is imperative.

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