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RABIES: UNDERSTANDING THE VIRUS AND ITS IMPACT ON PUBLIC HEALTH

Md Azhar Shadab[*1], Turusbekova Akshoola Kozmanbetovna[*2], Parpieva Takhmina Makhmatkalylovna[*3], Syed Abuzar Rizvi[*4], Mohsan Habib[*5], Raja Rashid Riaz[*6], Saniya Siddique[*7], Laiba Noor[*8]

[*1,4,5,6,7,8]Student (MBBS, M.D, 5th Year) International Medical Faculty, Osh State University, Kyrgyzstan.

[*2]Associate Professor, Public Health Department, International Medical Faculty, Osh State University, Kyrgyzstan.

[*3]Teacher, Public Health Department, International Medical Faculty, Osh State University, Kyrgyzstan.

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ABSTRACT

The rabies virus (Rabies lyssavirus) is the primary vector of the deadly viral disease rabies, which is endemic in many parts of the world, especially Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Rabies is primarily spread by the bite of an infected animal and causes encephalitis, which can lead to death if treatment is not received. Rabies's incubation period can range from weeks to months, and its early symptoms, which include fever and headache, often mimic those of other viral infections. As the infection worsens, neurological symptoms like agitation, hydrophobia, and paralysis develop, and once clinical symptoms appear, rabies is almost always fatal.

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), which consists of a series of rabies vaccinations and, if required, rabies immune globulin (RIG), can prevent rabies. The most successful method for lowering the number of human rabies cases has been the vaccination of household animals, especially dogs. Rabies is still a major worldwide health concern even with the availability of efficient vaccines and treatment methods, especially in areas with little resources. By 2030, the World Health Organization (WHO) wants to eradicate human rabies deaths by expanding access to post-exposure care, education, and vaccine. To improve rabies control and eventually eradicate the illness, more research on vaccines, diagnostic equipment, and antiviral treatments is essential.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rabies virus, which belongs to the Lyssavirus genus, is the virus that causes rabies, a viral disease that mainly affects mammals, including humans. The virus is usually transferred by the bite or scratch of an infected animal, usually a dog, although it can also be spread by bats, raccoons, and foxes. After entering the body, the virus spreads to the brain and spinal cord via the nerves, causing inflammation and serious neurological symptoms.

A variety of symptoms, such as fever, headache, muscle weakness, and anxiety, are indicative of the illness. More serious symptoms include hallucinations, paralysis, hydrophobia (a dread of water), and violence may appear as the virus worsens.

Rabies almost invariably causes death if treatment is not received, usually as a result of respiratory failure when symptoms worsen.

Depending on where the bite occurred and how much virus was transmitted, the incubation period for rabies can be anywhere from a few weeks to many months. If given as soon as possible after exposure, early treatment with a series of rabies vaccinations can stop symptoms from appearing.Rabies is a worldwide issue, especially in areas with inadequate animal vaccination programs. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that dogs are the main way that rabies is spread, and that most human rabies deaths take place in Asia and Africa. Reducing the prevalence of the disease requires public health initiatives, such as mass canine vaccination campaigns and community education about the risks of rabies.The most effective method of preventing rabies is still immunizing humans and pets against the disease and avoiding contact with wild animals.

2. THE RABIES VIRUS: STRUCTURE AND MECHANISM OF INFECTION

Structure of the Virus

The *Rhabdoviridae* the family of viruses includes the enveloped, negative-sense RNA rabies virus. Its bullet-shaped, roughly 75 nanometer-diameter structure is typical of this family. The single-stranded RNA genome of the virus encodes a number of proteins essential to its pathogenicity and reproduction.

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Two essential glycoproteins found in the rabies virus's envelope are **L-protein**, which aids in RNA replication, and **G-protein**, which promotes viral attachment to host cells. The virion is essential for the virus's defense and spread within host cells since it also carries the **N-protein**, which encapsulates the viral genome.

Mechanism of Infection

The rabies virus starts by infiltrating the host's muscle tissue after being spread by a bite or scratch. The viral glycoprotein **G** facilitates the virus's binding to nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) on the surface of muscle and nerve cells. Once inside the cells, the virus sheds its outer layer and releases its RNA into the cytoplasm, where it uses the host's biological resources to multiply.

Then, through retrograde axonal transport, rabies moves from peripheral nerves to the central nervous system (CNS), mainly the brain and spinal cord. The virus enters the central nervous system (CNS) and travels throughout the brain and spinal cord, resulting in inflammation and neurological symptoms such as agitation, confusion, paralysis, hydrophobia (a fear of water), and ultimately respiratory failure.

Transmission of Rabies

The main way that rabies is spread is through an infected animal's saliva. Since the virus is most concentrated in saliva and enters the body through broken skin, bites are the most common way for humans to contract it. However, scrapes or open wounds that come into contact with contaminated saliva or brain tissue can also spread rabies. Additionally, a person can contract the disease by touching their mouth, nose, or eyes after coming into contact with a rabid animal's saliva.

The saliva, nerve tissue, and occasionally the urine and feces of infected animals contain the rabies virus. Though rare, other transmission routes such as inhalation of aerosolized virus from caves containing large colonies of bats or organ transplantation from a rabid donor have been reported.

Animal Reservoirs

The world's principal animal reservoir for rabies varies by area. Domestic dogs are the main way that rabies is spread to people in many underdeveloped nations. Inadequate immunization efforts and stray dog populations contribute to the spread of rabies in these regions. While the danger to people is typically lower in high-income nations because of effective animal control programs and vaccine campaigns, rabies is mostly spread by wildlife, including bats, raccoons, skunks, and foxes.

Global Epidemiology of Rabies

Despite the availability of vaccines and efficient treatments, rabies continues to pose a serious threat to global health. According to estimates from the World Health Organization (WHO), rabies kills over 59,000 people annually, with Asia and Africa accounting for more than 95% of these fatalities. Timely post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), a course of rabies vaccinations administered following contact with a potentially rabid animal, can avert the great majority of these fatalities. While rabies is uncommon in high-income nations, it nevertheless has a major impact on public health in low- and middle-income nations, especially in rural areas with limited access to rabies vaccines and healthcare facilities. Among the most afflicted are China, India, and a number of African nations; children are disproportionately affected by rabies because of increased exposure to dogs.

Prevalence in Animals

Regional differences exist in the occurrence of rabies in animals. Domestic dog populations are the primary means of disease transmission in many regions of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast, a significant number of animal rabies cases in North America and some regions of Europe are caused by wildlife, particularly bats. Notwithstanding these variations, rabies is still a significant zoonotic illness that needs to be monitored and controlled in both domestic and wild animal populations.

3. CLINICAL FEATURES OF RABIES

The clinical course of rabies follows a well-defined progression:

***Incubation Period**

The location of the bite, the intensity of the exposure, and the quantity of virus delivered can all affect the incubation period, which normally lasts between one and three months for rabies. Although the latter is uncommon, the incubation period might occasionally be as brief as a few days or as long as a year. Due to their proximity to the brain, bites to the face, head, or neck are common ways for the virus to enter the body and cause symptoms to worsen more quickly.

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Prodromal Stage

The prodromal phase, which typically lasts two to ten days, is the initial stage of rabies. The person gets vague symptoms like fever, headache, malaise, exhaustion, and nausea at this stage. It can be challenging to diagnose this stage early because it is frequently confused with other viral diseases. Nonetheless, discomfort, itching, or tingling at the bite or scratch site is one of the hallmarks of rabies during this stage and may serve as an early warning indicator.

Acute Neurologic Stage

The person enters the acute neurologic phase when the virus travels to the brain. Agitation, disorientation, hallucinations, hyperactivity, seizures, and muscle spasms are among the worsening symptoms. **Hydrophobia**, or dread of water, is a classic rabies symptom in which the person suffers severe discomfort when attempting to drink water because they have trouble swallowing because their throat muscles are paralyzed.

Paralysis eventually spreads to other parts of the body, resulting in death and respiratory failure. Patients may enter a coma in the last stages of the illness and then pass away from respiratory failure and paralysis.

4. DIAGNOSIS OF RABIES

It can be difficult to diagnose rabies, especially in its early stages when symptoms can mimic those of other diseases. It is a crucial procedure, nevertheless, since prompt detection and treatment can stop the disease's progression. Clinical symptoms, a history of contact with possibly infected animals, and laboratory tests are used to diagnose rabies.

Clinical Diagnosis

A comprehensive evaluation of the patient's medical history, including any recent encounter with animals that may be infected with the rabies virus through bites, scratches, or saliva contact, is the first step in diagnosing rabies. When a patient exhibits neurological symptoms such as disorientation, agitation, hallucinations, hydrophobia (a dread of water), and paralysis, especially after an animal bite, rabies is typically suspected.

More specific symptoms, including psychosis, aggressiveness, convulsions, and paralysis of the respiratory muscles, are visible in the later stages of rabies. Once symptoms start to show, the illness advances quickly and typically results in respiratory failure and death. However, laboratory testing is frequently necessary for a conclusive diagnosis because these symptoms might mimic those of other illnesses including meningitis or encephalitis.

Laboratory Diagnosis

To confirm rabies, several diagnostic tests are employed, particularly when the clinical presentation is consistent with the disease. Key diagnostic methods include:

1. **Direct Fluorescent Antibody (DFA) Test**: The most popular and accurate rabies test is this one. It entails checking for the rabies virus in tissue samples, frequently extracted from the brain, cornea, or saliva. The DFA test detects viral antigens by using antibodies that have been labeled with fluorescent markers.
2. **Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR)**:A molecular method called PCR is used to find the genetic material of the rabies virus in samples of brain tissue, cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), or saliva. Because of its high sensitivity, PCR can identify the virus even before symptoms appear in the early stages of infection.
3. **Serological Testing**: The genetic material of the rabies virus can be detected in samples of brain tissue, cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), or saliva using a molecular technique known as PCR. In the early stages of infection, PCR's high sensitivity allows it to detect the virus before any symptoms show up.
4. **Histopathology**: The distinctive Negri bodies, which are viral inclusions present in rabies-infected nerve cells, can be detected in post-mortem brain tissue. This technique is mostly applied to postmortem human or animal situations.

Diagnosis in Animals

Similar techniques, such as DFA testing on brain tissue, can be used to diagnose rabies in animals. Animals exhibiting neurological symptoms such increased salivation, paralysis, or unprovoked aggression should be checked for rabies right once.

Prevention and Control of Rabies

Rabies is one of the few diseases that can be completely prevented, with vaccines and post-exposure prophylaxis playing a crucial role in its control.

Vaccination of Animals

Vaccinating animals, especially dogs, is the best way to prevent rabies in humans. It has been demonstrated that widespread dog vaccination programs are very successful in lowering the prevalence of rabies in humans. Both domestic and stray dogs must be vaccinated against rabies in places where the disease is highly prevalent. In order to

drastically lower the number of human cases, WHO has advised that at least 70% of dogs in rabies-endemic areas receive vaccinations.

Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)

PEP involves the administration of a series of rabies vaccinations to individuals who have been exposed to a potentially rabid animal. The treatment must be started immediately after exposure for maximum effectiveness. If given within 24 hours of exposure, PEP has a near 100% success rate in preventing the development of rabies. In addition to the rabies vaccine, rabies immune globulin (RIG) may be administered to individuals at higher risk of exposure.

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)

Vaccination before exposure (PrEP) may provide an additional layer of protection for those at high risk for fury, such as veterinarians, people who have come into touch with animals, and travelers to areas where rage is endemic. Although PrEP does not replace PEP, it does provide additional protection in the event of prolonged viral exposure.

5. CHALLENGES IN RABIES CONTROL

Despite the availability of vaccines and effective treatment options, rabies remains a significant challenge for global health. Several factors contribute to the ongoing burden of the disease:

****Lack of Access to Healthcare**:** It might be challenging for people to get prompt PEP after being exposed to a rabid animal in many rural and underdeveloped locations due to inadequate access to healthcare.

****Stray Dog Populations**:** The presence of large stray dog populations in many developing countries continues to drive rabies transmission. Vaccinating stray dogs and reducing their numbers are essential components of rabies control.

****Underreporting and Lack of Awareness**:** Rabies is frequently underreported, especially in rural regions where residents might not understand how critical it is to seek medical attention following an animal bite. Furthermore, a large number of people in high-risk locations are ignorant of the dangers and symptoms of rabies.

Global Initiatives and the Road to Elimination

Numerous international efforts are being made to eradicate rabies in response to the disease's ongoing burden. To eradicate dog-mediated human rabies mortality by 2030, WHO, GARC (Global Alliance for Rabies Control), and other organizations are spearheading the *Zero by 2030* effort. Important tactics consist of:

****Mass Dog Vaccination**:** Promote vaccination in both domestic and stray dog populations.

****Improved Access to PEP**:** ensuring the prompt and economical availability of PEP for people exposed to potentially rabid animals.

****Public Awareness and Education**:** spreading knowledge about rabies and the significance of getting medical attention right away after an animal bite in high-risk areas.

6. CONCLUSION

With a nearly 100% death rate once clinical signs manifest, rabies continues to rank among the most dangerous infectious diseases. Even if it may be avoided, it nonetheless presents serious public health issues, especially in areas with limited access to healthcare and immunizations. The rabies virus, which causes the disease, is mainly spread via the saliva of infected animals, usually through bites or scratches. Although humans and other mammals are susceptible to rabies, the disease's main carriers are foxes, bats, and raccoons, as well as domesticated dogs in many regions of the world.

With approximately 59,000 deaths from rabies each year, the most of which take place in Asia and Africa, the disease has a catastrophic effect on human health.

Since most of these deaths are avoidable, there is an urgent need for better preventative and control strategies. The incubation period for rabies usually lasts weeks or even months, during which time no symptoms appear. But as soon as the virus enters the central nervous system, the illness spreads quickly, resulting in severe neurological symptoms like paralysis, disorientation, and hallucinations before respiratory failure kills the patient.

Effective public health measures, like rabies vaccination for both humans and animals, are essential to preventing the disease. Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), a course of rabies vaccines, can help people who have been exposed to potentially rabid animals avoid contracting the disease if given soon after contact.

In many countries, vaccination initiatives that target domestic dogs—the main vector for human rabies transmission—have been very successful in lowering the prevalence of human rabies. Actually, one of the most economical methods of rabies control worldwide is mass canine vaccination, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Significant obstacles still exist, though, especially in low-income areas where access to rabies vaccinations and medical treatment is restricted. Educational programs that raise awareness of the dangers of rabies and the significance of getting medical help after an animal bite are crucial in these places. Many rabies occurrences happen in rural areas where people interact closely with animals, and the spread of the disease is frequently caused by a lack of veterinary infrastructure.

To sum up, rabies is a deadly but preventable illness that still has a terrible effect on world health. The main methods of controlling it—animal immunization, prompt post-exposure prophylaxis, and raising awareness—are successful but call for consistent work, funding, and international collaboration. We can lessen the burden of rabies and get closer to the objective of eradicating rabies as a hazard to public health by tackling the difficulties associated with its prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, especially in underprivileged areas.

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