Tarsal Tunnel Syndrome: A Clinical Review

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Tarsal tunnel syndrome (TTS) is elicited by compression of the tibial nerve in the tarsal tunnel. TTS in the absence of a lesion tends to be idiopathic, and most TTS is idiopathic. Patients complain of several plantar symptoms, and TTS affects their quality of life. The symptoms tend to worsen with walking, and ankle joint movement and arterial distortion may also be involved. Because TTS symptoms are similar to those of diabetic neuropathy and lumbar disease, clinical symptoms are diagnostically important. While magnetic resonance imaging reveals nerve compression, it is difficult to identify causative factors, and false-positive results are a concern. Wound-related complications after TTS surgery may be reduced by a zigzag skin incision. Surgery for carpal tunnel syndrome yields better outcomes and greater patient satisfaction than TTS surgery. (J Nippon Med Sch 2025; 92: 132–137)

Key words: tarsal tunnel syndrome, diagnosis, entrapment neuropathy, neurolysis, surgical outcome

Introduction

Compression of the tibial nerve in the tarsal tunnel leads to tarsal tunnel syndrome (TTS). TTS affects patient quality of life but can be treated by less invasive surgery^{1,2}. TTS may be underdiagnosed and its true incidence is unknown. Opinions on its diagnosis and surgical treatment vary³.

Epidemiology and Etiology

TTS appears to be slightly more common in women^{4,5}. Suspected causes include space-occupying lesions such as ganglia and schwannomas, post-traumatic adhesions, compression due to dilated vessels, hypertrophy of the flexor retinaculum, and accessory muscles. Pulsation due to tortuous arteries may contribute to TTS pathogenesis, as pulsatile compression may occur in a closed space^{4,6-9}.

Kim et al.⁸ reported MRI findings for 28 feet treated by TTS surgery and found a tortuous artery in 22 feet, a varix in 3 feet, and a ganglion, connective tissue, and a small vascular branch in 1 foot each. Vascular dilation and distortion within the tarsal tunnel and hypertrophy of the flexor retinaculum are age-related physiological changes. Because adhesions may be present in the tarsal tunnel in the absence of trauma, TTS in the absence of a lesion tends to be considered idiopathic^{4,5,10}, and the incidence of idiopathic TTS was reported to be 18-96% of all TTS cases^{3,8,11}. According to Reichert et al.¹¹, among 31 TTS patients, 11 (35.5%) were diagnosed with idiopathic or trauma-related TTS and 9 with space-occupying lesions. Samarawickrama et al.¹² reported that 3 of 6 TTS patients had flat feet. An ultrasound study by Doneddu et al.¹³ to identify the primary compression site in patients with idiopathic TTS suggested that it was located where the nerve had become larger at the middle of the tarsal tunnel. Tajiri et al.9 reported MRI findings indicating that in 14 of 15 sides the most severe compression point was in the proximal half of the tarsal tunnel.

Clinical Anatomy

The medial and lateral plantar nerves (MPN, LPN) branch off the tibial nerve (TN) near the tarsal tunnel. Although the branching sites vary, they most commonly

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branch at the proximal tarsal tunnel¹⁴⁻¹⁶. The MPN provides sensation from the medial side of the sole and the first 3.5 digits^{3,16}. It also supplies muscles on the medial side of the sole, e.g., the abductor hallucis, flexor digitorum brevis, and flexor hallucis brevis. The LPN provides sensation from the lateral side of the sole to the lateral side of the fourth and little toe and mainly supplies plantar muscles such as the adductor hallucis, flexor digiti minimi brevis, and quadratus plantaris.

There are 2 main nerve branches in the tarsal tunnel: the medial and inferior calcaneal nerves (MCN, ICN). The MCN, which provides sensation to the heel, mainly branches from the LPN but may also branch from the TN¹⁶. There are 1-3 MCNs, and branching has been reported proximal to^{14,16,17} and within the tarsal tunnel¹⁴⁻¹⁸. The ICN, which provides sensation to the anterior surface of the calcaneus, may also arise as a branch of the TN or LPN^{16,18}.

Clinical Symptoms

Patients complain of sensory plantar symptoms such as numbness, pain, burning, or cold or foreign-body sensations. When the MCN branches proximal to the tarsal tunnel, TTS symptoms are absent or weak in the heel area^{6,10}. The MCN can branch within the tarsal tunnel and be entrapped¹⁴⁻¹⁸.

Unlike carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS), TTS is usually not primarily caused by a pressure increase inside the tunnel, but rather by direct compression of the nerve, so even if the MCN runs through the tarsal tunnel, there are no symptoms in that area unless there is compression. The symptoms are similar to those of diabetic neuropathy, and this should be considered in the differential diagnosis. According to the prospective Rotterdam Diabetic Foot Study¹⁹, TTS is common in diabetic patients and bilateral in 61% of this group. Therefore, TTS symptoms must be differentiated from diabetic neuropathy¹⁹. The rate of diabetic foot ulceration due to sensory impairment associated with diabetic neuropathy is significantly higher than in non-diabetic persons¹⁹. In patients with TTS, atrophy of innervated muscles, e.g., the abductor hallucis muscle, may not elicit subjective symptoms.

The symptoms elicited by idiopathic TTS tend to worsen with prolonged standing or walking, suggesting that ankle movement may play an etiologic role^{4,9,11,13,20,21}. The tarsal tunnel narrows in forefoot pronation and in the presence of hindfoot varus. Flexor retinaculum tension in the tarsal tunnel increases because of ankle valgus^{22,23}. Tajiri et al.⁹ reported that nerve compression is

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worsened by the significantly increased distortion of the posterior tibial artery upon plantar flexion. TTS symptoms may be misdiagnosed as lumbar disease. Other studies^{20,21} found that 4.8% of lumbar spine diseases are associated with TTS and that 5% of cases of failed back surgery syndrome involve TTS. Consequently, when plantar symptoms persist after spinal surgery, it is necessary to rule out TTS^{4,11,13,20,21}.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis of TTS is primarily based on clinical symptoms^{5,12,13}, although electrophysiological and imaging studies may be useful. Elicitation of a positive Tinel sign is the most straightforward clinical test and is useful for predicting surgical outcome, although it is difficult to reproduce and of low specificity. Therefore, the possibility of false-positive results must be considered^{4,5,10,11}.

Diagnostic imaging may be more helpful for diagnosing TTS than other nerve entrapments, e.g., CTS, which can be evaluated by both electrophysiological and diagnostic imaging studies¹³. In ultrasound examination, the cross-sectional area of the posterior TN in the central region of the tarsal tunnel was notably larger in TTS patients than in those without TTS. Furthermore, the ratio of the cross-sectional area of the posterior TN at the proximal and central regions of the tarsal tunnel yielded a sensitivity of 74% and a specificity of 100%^{13,24}. MRI is useful for detecting trauma, space-occupying lesions, and foot deformities in symptomatic TTS; no imaging abnormalities were observed in 40% of patients with idiopathic TTS²⁵. Kim et al.⁸ documented results from 1.5-T MRI and intraoperative findings for 28 idiopathic TTS patients: although 1 patient presented with a ganglion, nerve compression was found in the other 27 patients. To visualize nerves in the tarsal tunnel, axial T2* fat-suppression images were useful. Although the nerve compression site could be visualized on MRI scans, other details responsible for nerve entrapment, e.g. varices, small vessel branches, and connective tissue, were not. Because the rate of false-positive finding on such scans is not known, a diagnosis of TTS should not be based on MRI findings alone. Rather, the consistency of MRI and neurological findings should be ascertained and evaluated.

In electrophysiological tests, increased terminal latencies of the MPN and LPN, along with a diminished conduction velocity and amplitude, are diagnostic markers. However, sole reliance on electrophysiological findings for a TTS diagnosis poses challenges due to the possibility of false-positive and false-negative results^{35,10-1221}. Lalevee et al.26 studied 45 surgical TTS cases, and electrophysiological studies were positive in only 13 (28.9%). Oh et al.27 observed prolonged motor latencies in 9 of 17 patients (52.9%) and abnormal sensory action potential responses in 90%. Galardi et al.28 reported that the absence of sensory action potentials was the most frequent abnormality; 92% involved the lateral plantar nerve and 77% the medial plantar nerve. Only 21% of TTS limbs had prolonged distal motor latencies to the abductor hallucis. These results indicate that sensory action potentials are more sensitive for an electrophysiological diagnosis^{10,27,28}. On the other hand, the results were false-positive for 10-43% of asymptomatic subjects, and this rate was higher in those older than 60 years^{10,29-31}. Seidel et al.³² reported that preoperative electrophysiological findings predicted postoperative symptom improvement in TTS patients. Other studies^{33,34} found that negative electrophysiological findings did not correlate with surgical outcomes and cannot be used to rule out surgical indication; rather, electrophysiological tests ought to be utilized for supplementary evaluation^{5,10,13}. Therefore, we usually measure sensory nerve conduction velocity at the tarsal tunnel and consider as a positive finding a terminal latency of the abductor hallucis muscle exceeding 5.8 ms and a difference in side-to-side amplitude of more than 50%^{1,8,19,35,36}.

Treatment

Conservative treatment options are available for patients with TTS. They include rest, physical therapy, massage, taping, stretching, and medications aimed at alleviating neuropathic pain. For TTS patients with symptoms that are exacerbated by walking, use of appropriate footwear or a sole plate may prove beneficial¹³.

Less invasive surgery can be performed under local anesthesia. Tarsal tunnel decompression by simple opening of the flexor retinaculum is inadequate for treating TTS because affected nerves within the tarsal tunnel must be decompressed. The MPN and LPN are enclosed within the same compartment as the posterior tibial artery and vein (neurovascular band). Their release is important for nerve decompression; artery transposition may be useful^{4,6,7}. Intraoperative observations indicated that the MPN was involved in 82% of cases and the LPN in 68% of cases¹¹. Abductor fascia release may be required for distal decompression of the MPN and LPN in the tarsal tunnel³⁷. Complications, mostly wound related, were reported in 6.2-12% of operated patients^{38,39}. The tarsal tunnel is located near the ankle, and walking places a dynamic load on the site. Ankle joint movement may inhibit wound healing, so stretching forces around the wound must be considered. Shirokane et al.³⁵ placed zigzag skin incisions to reduce stretching and the dynamic load on the skin. This method is simple and convenient and reduces wound complications after TTS surgery.

Treatment Outcome

The outcome of surgery for TTS after a mean postoperative follow-up of at least 3 years was favorable in 44-96% of cases, although some symptoms may persist^{4,10,11,26,28}. According to Lalevee et al.²⁶, 57.8% of operated patients who were followed for a mean of 3.6 years reported symptom improvement. The outcome was favorable in 93.3% of patients with space-occupying compressive structures and poor in patients with venous dilations (53.3%) and idiopathic (26.7%) TTS.

According to outcomes based on the numerical rating scale (NRS) after nerve decompression with posterior tibial artery transposition, the symptoms of operated patients improved from 6.6 ± 1.5 to 2.7 ± 1.5 ; the NRS for surgical satisfaction was 6.6 ± 2.1 .

Preoperative quality of life (QOL) was significantly lower for TTS patients than for CTS patients¹, and postoperative patient satisfaction was significantly greater for CTS patients than for TTS patients, although QOL was significantly improved in both groups. Postoperative outcomes were better for patients with compressive spaceoccupying lesions^{40,41}. Treatment results for patients with idiopathic TTS are affected by factors such as plantar fasciitis, age, symptom duration, Tinel sign positivity, ankle disorders, electrophysiological findings, marked hindfoot valgus/varus, bone-nerve contact, and the surgical procedure^{10,11,13,41}. The ankle joint position affects the tarsal tunnel pressure: it decreases in the neutral position, and ankle joint inversion or eversion increases pressure⁴². In patients with marked hindfoot valgus/varus, neurolysis may not achieve sufficient nerve decompression.

Recurrences and failed outcomes after TTS surgery may be due to several factors, such as inadequate decompression, lack of anatomic knowledge, nerve variations, scarring, nerve damage, persistent nerve hypersensitivity, and preexisting intrinsic nerve damage^{43,44}. In the case of insufficient decompression, adequate and thorough decompression should be completed by revision surgery⁴³⁻⁴⁵. In patients with external scarring or traction neuritis, barrier materials may be used after neurolysis⁴³⁻⁴⁵. However, because the surgical outcomes of revision surgery can be highly unsatisfactory, it is better to prevent rather than treat failed TTS surgery⁴⁵.

Skalley et al.³⁴ performed revision surgery for 12 TTS patients (13 feet) after a mean interval of 3.5 years after the initial operation. They found that TN scarring and insufficient distal release were the main problems. Adequate distal release resulted in good surgical outcomes. The patients' clinical history and physical examination findings were more helpful than electrodiagnostic studies for determining the extent and location of TN irritation.

TTS due to Ganglia

Ganglia are typical space-occupying lesions that can elicit TTS and were involved in up to 8% of TTS cases⁴⁶. The talocalcaneal joint is the most common origin of ganglia in TTS and, among ganglion-associated TTS cases, 63-75% involved the MPN area⁴⁶. According to Koketsu et al.⁴⁶, ganglia were palpable through the skin in only 1 of 8 patients; the other 7 were identified on preoperative MRI scans or intraoperatively. Because the symptoms of TTS due to ganglia are similar to those reported in idiopathic TTS, differentiation can be difficult, but ultrasound and MRI findings are helpful^{5,10,46,47}. Ganglia tend to be hypointense on T1-weighted images and hyperintense on T2-weighted and T2* fat-suppression MRI scans^{46,48}.

Ganglion aspiration may be useful. However, ganglia implicated in TTS tend to be located on the ventral side of nerves and vessels, and their aspiration raises the risk of iatrogenic nerve injury⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸. Surgical outcome is affected by, for example, patient selection, symptom severity and duration, fibrosis and adhesion around the nerve, and surgical technique^{10,13,46,48}. Nagaoka and Satou⁴⁷ recommended early surgical intervention because only 1 of 30 ganglia spontaneously resolved. To avoid incomplete ganglion excision due to bleeding and intraoperative pain, surgery under general anesthesia should be performed, especially for patients with large ganglia^{46,49}. While symptom recurrence attributable to ganglia in the tarsal tunnel is uncommon, recurrent ganglia may be less likely to elicit symptoms^{46,47,49}.

Accessory Muscle and TTS

An accessory muscle in the tarsal tunnel can lead to TTS. Between 11-16% of cases of surgically treated TTS were associated with accessory muscles, and most such cases involved the flexor digitorum accessorius longus muscle (ALM)^{26,41,50,51}. It was identified in 2-8% of legs but did not result in TTS in 14 legs. Consequently, its presence may not be a risk factor for TTS⁵⁰⁻⁵³. TTS may be attributable not only to simple nerve compression by an accessory

muscle, but also to muscle edema and hypertrophy due to trauma or strenuous exercise⁵¹. Nerve compression by an accessory muscle may be exacerbated in plantar flexion of the ankle. MRI studies performed in the rest position may reveal only slight compression but not the actual underlying pathophysiology⁵⁰.

While nerve-compressing accessory muscles are usually resected, it can be difficult to remove the flexor digitorum ALM because it originates at the proximal third of the leg^{26,41,51-53}. Even without the resection of all accessory muscles, good surgical outcomes were achieved by nerve decompression. Before muscle resection, dynamic compression by muscle contraction must be evaluated intraoperatively^{50,54}. For successful treatment of TTS, not only accessory muscles but also the presence of a concomitant tortuous artery and valgus or bone-nerve contact must be ruled out^{4,7-9,41}. Prolonged neuropathy from a congenital anomaly may result in an unsatisfactory outcome for TTS surgery^{50,51,53}.

Conclusion

Although not uncommon, TTS may be overlooked in clinical practice. Patients report plantar sensory disturbances, and a diagnosis of TTS is primarily based on clinical symptoms. While the results of electrophysiological and imaging studies may be diagnostic, such tests can yield false-positive and false-negative findings. TTS can be surgically treated by less invasive procedures with the patient under local anesthesia. However, factors involved in TTS, e.g., its natural history, long-term surgical outcomes, recurrence rates, false-positive and false-negative MRI findings, and the role of dynamic MRI studies in its diagnosis, remain to be clarified, and novel diagnostic tools are needed. Advances in treatment outcomes for TTS will require additional study.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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