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Systemic Fungal Infection Microbiology

Midhuna K. and Kiran A.

Panjab University, Chandigarh, India.

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Over the last 20 years, the prevalence of systemic fungal infections has skyrocketed. In the past, systemic infections were known to be caused by pathogenic dimorphic fungus. However, opportunistic fungi began to cause more infections, particularly in immunocompromised hosts, in the 1960s. More recently, infections in immunocompromised hosts have been linked to fungal agents that are newer and less prevalent. Infections with dimorphic fungi, including *Histoplasma capsulatum* and *Penicillium marneffei*, are becoming more common among AIDS patients in India. While *P. marneffei* is still only found in the state of Manipur, *H. capsulatum* is found throughout the nation. While there are reports of both *C. neoformans* var. *neoformans* (serotypes A & D) and *C. neoformans* var. *gattii* (serotypes B & C) in India, serotype A accounts for the majority of cases. Every facility reports a higher prevalence of cryptococcosis since AIDS first appeared. In nosocomial settings, systemic infections caused by species of *Aspergillus*, *Candida*, and *Zygomycetes* are common, and outbreaks caused by uncommon fungi are occasionally documented from tertiary care facilities. The need to establish high-quality diagnostic mycology laboratories in this nation and identify this growing number of possible fungal pathogens has been highlighted by the worldwide shift in systemic fungal infections.

Key words: *Aspergillus*, *Candida*, disseminated fungal infections, fungi, opportunistic infections, systemic fungal infections, *Zygomycetes*

INTRODUCTION

Fungi-induced systemic infections are a significant public health issue in both industrialized and developing nations worldwide. In the past, medical microbiology began with the identification of the causal role that fungus play in disease. Pasteur and Koch's precursor, Agostino Bassi, established the theory of harmful germs. *Beauveria bassiana*, a mold that caused terrible silkworm illness, was discovered by Bassi in 1835. The first findings of fungal diseases in humans, such as favus (discovered by Remark and Schoenlein in 1837 and 1842, respectively), candidiasis (discovered by Gruby in 1842), and aspergillosis (discovered by Sluyter in 1847), came shortly after.[1], [2]

The fact that fungi are so common in nature shows how well-suited they are for survival. Less than 150–200 of the estimated hundreds of thousands of fungal species were

thought to be human diseases. However, fungi have been growing in popularity among humans in recent years. Both the number of fungi that cause systemic diseases and the number of fungi that induce systemic discomfort are on the rise. Invasive aspergillosis is present in up to 7% of patients who pass away in teaching hospitals.[3], [4] *Candida* species are the fourth most prevalent isolation of patients in intensive care units and are responsible for 8–15% of nosocomial bloodstream infections.[5] Fungal infections are extremely common in certain patient groups: 15% of recipients of allogeneic hemopoietic stem-cell transplants have a fungal infection [6], 20% of lung transplant recipients are colonized and infected [7], 60% of AIDS patients have *Pneumocystis carinii* (jiroveci) pneumonia or 20% have esophageal candidiasis [8], 30% of AIDS patients in Africa and Southeast Asia have cryptococcal meningitis [9], and 30% of AIDS patients in South-east Asia have infections caused by *Penicillium marneffei*. [10]

Although India's diverse climate makes it suitable for a wide range of fungal infections, the facts on the prevalence of systemic fungal infections in this country are unclear. Nonetheless, a clear upward tendency has been identified. Table 1 lists the systemic fungal infections that have been reported in India.

The second part of the 1980s had an eleven-fold increase in candidemia from our center [11], and the first half of the 1990s saw an additional 18-fold increase.[12]

Over the course of 23 months, 379 neonates and children (4.2% of all admissions) were reported to have fungemia caused by the uncommon yeast *Pichia anomala* from the same center.[13] Between 1980 and 1993, 95 patients developed cerebral aspergillosis, demonstrating the devastating effects of systemic aspergillosis.[14] With the advent of *Apophysomyces elegans* infection in India, 129 cases of invasive zygomycosis were detected between 1990 and 1999[15], indicating an increasing tendency in the disease.[16] Compared to the pre-AIDS era, the annual incidence of cryptococcosis has grown by around 15 times.[17] All of these numbers show that many patients are currently suffering from systemic disease due to a wide variety of fungus. This significant rise in systemic fungal infections can be attributed to a number of factors, such as improved treatment of other immunosuppressive side effects, new and more aggressive immunosuppressive regimens, improved survival in critical care, a high frequency of catheterization and instrumentation, increased clinician awareness, improved diagnostic techniques, and a greater use of broad spectrum antibiotics.

The two main categories of endemic mycoses caused by genuine pathogenic fungi and opportunistic fungal infections caused by a wide variety of saprophytic fungi comprise the etiology of systemic fungal diseases.

True pathogenic fungi

Unlike mycelial forms in culture, which are produced at 25–30°C, true pathogenic fungi generate a distinct form in tissue or at 37°C. Known as dimorphic fungi, they include *Histoplasma duboisii*, *Blastomyces dermatitidis*, *Coccidioides immitis*, *Paracoccidioides brasiliensis*, *Penicillium marneffei*, *Sporothrix schenckii*, and *Histoplasma capsulatum*. These fungi are typically limited by geography. The geophilic mold *C. immitis* is unique to the New World and has evolved to thrive in the arid regions of North, Central, and South America.[18] *P. marneffei* is only found in southeast Asia, where it may still coexist with bamboo rats.[10], [19] Both *B. dermatitidis* and *H. capsulatum* are found all over the world. While penicilliosis *marneffei* is only found in Manipur state, histoplasmosis and blastomycosis have been recorded from various states in India. Systemic

sporotrichosis caused by *S. schenckii* var. *luriei* has only been reported once, and it is the only record from an Asian country.[20] In India, reports of histoplasmosis are rising in tandem with the rise of AIDS.

Opportunistic fungi

Species belonging to the genera *Candida*, *Aspergillus*, *Cryptococcus*, and *Zygomycetes* started to be often linked to patients undergoing therapy for organ transplants, diabetes, sarcoidosis, and cancer in the 1960s. At that time, the "big four" opportunists were responsible for more pathology and researchers' attention than all other fungi put together. But things have changed during the past 30 to 40 years, and fresh infections are being identified, particularly with the rise of AIDS. A variety of fungi, including species under the genera *Pneumocystis*, *Candida*, *Cryptococcus*, *Histoplasma*, *Coccidioides*, *Aspergillus*, and *zygomycetes*, can occasionally cause concurrent and/or consecutive opportunistic systemic fungal infections. In addition, a variety of less common fungal infections are routinely isolated from clinical specimens. This makes it challenging to categorize and research this class of fungal illnesses. The term "phaeohyphomycosis" was proposed by Ajello et al. to address this issue, as it encompasses all "infections of a cutaneous, subcutaneous, and systemic nature caused by hyphomycetous fungi that develop in host tissues in the form of dark-walled dematiaceous septate mycelial elements" [21]. Ajello and McGinnis proposed the term "hyalohyphomycosis" to include mycotic infections where the tissue form of the etiological agents is septate hyphae.[22]

Candida spp

The rise of non-*C. albicans* *Candida* (NAC) species as colonizers and pathogens that cause nosocomial fungal blood stream infections (BSI) has contributed to the overall rise in candidemia in recent years. In a thorough analysis of all studies published between 1952 and 1992, Wingard discovered that 12 of them contained a proportionately larger (>50%) isolation of NAC species.[23] *C. glabrata*, *C. krusei*, *C. tropicalis*, and *C. parapsilosis* were the NAC species that were isolated. Occasionally, other species were isolated, including *C. guilliermondii*, *C. lusitanae*, *C. dubliniensis*, *C. kefyr*, *C. lipolytica*, and *C. pelliculosa*. According to the CDC's 1992–1993 population-based surveillance research, *Candida albicans* was the most prevalent species, followed by *Candida parapsilosis*, *Candida tropicalis*, and *Candida glabrata*. The percentage of *Candida* BSI caused by NAC species increased, and in particular, the frequency of BSI caused by *C. glabrata* increased, according to subsequent surveillance programs.[5] On the other hand, surveillance data from other nations still show that *C. parapsilosis* is more significant than *C. glabrata*. [24]

It has also been shown that patient age has a significant role

in defining the rank order of the *Candida* species that cause BSI.[23] In newborn age groups, it has been noted that *Candida albicans* and *Candida parapsilosis* predominate whereas *C. glabrata* and other NAC species are absent. In contrast, as people age, *C. glabrata* becomes a more significant disease. Individual NAC species' contributions also differ according to the patient and diagnostic category. *Candida* caused by *C. parapsilosis* is typically linked to prosthetic devices, hyperalimentation, or catheters.[25] Additionally, the most frequent species of *Candida* found on the hands of medical personnel in intensive care units, particularly those using gloves, is *C. parapsilosis*. [26] Therefore, it is likely that healthcare personnel's hands are the source of the organism's contamination of prosthetic devices. Patients with solid tumors in oncology are often affected by *C. glabrata*. [27]

Because *C. krusei* is inherently resistant to fluconazole, fluconazole prophylaxis has been shown to promote infection with this organism in certain bone marrow transplant facilities.[28] Regardless of antifungal prophylaxis, *C. krusei* infections are more common in patients with hematological malignancies, while they are less common in patients with solid tumors and intensive care unit patients.[29]

Like in the west, tertiary care facilities in India have also seen an increase in the frequency of NAC species, with isolation rates ranging from 52 to 96%. It is peculiar in this setting, nonetheless, as *C. tropicalis* is isolated more frequently in all age groups in India than *C. glabrata* or *C. parapsilosis*. [12], [30]–[32] The information compiled in Table 2 demonstrates the global isolation of *Candida* species from candidemia patients.

Other yeasts

Since AIDS first appeared, reports of cryptococcosis have increased.[17] Because the expensive medications are not as affordable in poorer nations, there is no change in incidence following a tri-drug regimen, despite a decrease in incidence being noted in developed nations. In recent years, a number of other saprophytic yeasts have been implicated in systemic infections. Table 3 contains those.

Aspergillus spp. and other moniliaceous fungi

The second most prevalent invasive fungal infection is systemic aspergillosis. Up to 30% of patients in postmortem series[34] and 36% of patients with pneumonia in bone-marrow transplant units have been documented to have the illness in specific patient groupings, such as hematological malignancies.[35] According to data collected in a cross-section of hospitals across the United States between 1980 and 1990, *Aspergillus* species were responsible for 1.3% of all nosocomial infections.[36]

The most frequent cause of invasive aspergillosis is *A. fumigatus*. The second most prevalent species, *A. flavus*, is isolated from nasal sinus lesions and systemic aspergillosis in immunocompromised patients. Nonetheless, *A. flavus* is the most frequent cause of all types of aspergillosis in South Africa, Sudan, and India. The third most frequent cause of invasive aspergillosis is *A. niger*. *A. nidulans*, *A. versicolor*, *A. candidus*, *A. oryzae*, *A. sydowii*, *A. terreus*, *A. clavatus*, and more species are hardly documented.

Human systemic infection can be caused by the worldwide soil saprobe *Fusarium* species. Neutropenic patients with hematological malignancies, as well as those undergoing bone-marrow and solid-organ transplantation, have been observed to have an increased incidence, frequently with a fatal prognosis.[37] Fungi from the genus *Scedosporium*, *Pseudallescheria*, *Acremonium*, *Lecytophora*, *Phialemonium*, *Phaeoacremonium*, *Paecilomyces*, and *Emmonsia* have been linked to further uncommon systemic illnesses.

Zygomycetes

Zygomycetes are prevalent nosocomial pathogens that cause systemic zygomycosis, much like *Aspergillus* species. However, because antemortem diagnosis is challenging, it is hard to determine the precise incidence. Additionally, systemic zygomycosis can be acquired in the community, particularly in patients with burns, malignant hematological diseases, uncontrolled diabetes mellitus, and other types of metabolic acidosis.

Rhizopus arrhizus and *Rhizopus microsporus* var. *rhizopodiformis* are the most frequent causes of systemic zygomycosis, ranked in order of apparent incidence despite the involvement of numerous other zygomycetes. Other less common etiological agents that have been shown to play a significant pathogenic role in humans include *Saksenaia vasiformis*, *Absidia corymbifera*, *Apophysomyces elegans*, *Cunninghamella bertholletiae*, *Mucor* species, and *Rhizomucor pusillus*. These molds may be isolated in great quantities from soil or decomposing organic waste, including bread and fruit, and they are common and thermotolerant. Hospitals and outdoor air frequently contain the spores.

Dematiaceous fungi

Although some ascomycetes, basidiomycetes, and zygomycetes are also considered dematiaceous due to the presence of a brown or black hue in their cell wall, dematiaceous fungi are frequently assumed to be solely hyphomycetes. Some have argued that the term "dematiaceous" is misleading and that "phaeoid" should be used instead.[38]

The term "phaeohyphomycosis" encompasses all fungi that

have dematiaceous cells in infected tissue, regardless of the taxonomic classification of the etiological agent, even though Ajello et al. [21] proposed it to cover all infections caused by hyphomycetous fungi having dark-walled dematiaceous separate mycelial elements in tissue. Although systemic infections can be caused by more than 100 fungal species, the condition is still uncommon.

Pneumocystis sp.

Phylogenetic investigations based on nuclear small-subunit rRNA sequence alignments demonstrated definitively in the late 1980s that *P. carinii* belongs to the fungal kingdom.[39] It was previously believed that *P. carinii* represented a single zoonotic species. It is now evident, therefore, that the organism first recognized as "*P. carinii*" is actually a family of similar species that are host-specific for mammals. The original species of *Pneumocystis* for organisms derived from humans, *P. carinii* f. sp. *hominis*, has been replaced by *P. jiroveci*.[40]

One of the main causes of pneumonia in people with AIDS and other immunocompromised conditions is *P. jiroveci*. But it can also result in systemic infection. Postmortem studies of patients with pulmonary pneumocystis infection have shown a 1–3% occurrence of pneumocystis infection in non-lung locations.[41], [42] Because extra-pulmonary pneumocystosis is not suspected, this is probably an underestimate. In that cohort of 52 patients, the lymph nodes had the highest rate of extra-pulmonary infection (44%) followed by the liver, spleen, and bone marrow (33%). Additionally, it is found in the thyroid, ear, pancreas, eyes, skin, gastrointestinal tract, genitourinary tract, adrenal glands, and other places.[41]

Conclusion

The clinical mycology laboratory needs to be able to identify this growing number of possible infections, as this review highlights. Previously believed to be contaminants, these organisms are now known to be pathogens that cause systemic infection in patients with impaired immune systems. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that, despite the fact that a particular isolate might not be listed in textbooks as a fungal pathogen, it must be regarded as a potential pathogen due to its isolation from a typically sterile region and its capacity to develop at 37°C.

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Table 1: Systemic fungal infection in India

Endemic mycoses	Opportunistic fungal infections
Histoplasmosis	Invasive candidiasis
Blastomycosis	Invasive aspergillosis
Penicilliosis marneffei	Cryptococcosis
Sporotrichosis	Invasive zygomycosis
	<i>Pneumocystis carinii</i> (jiroveci) infection
	Phaeohyphomycosis
	Infection due to miscellaneous fungi

Table 2: *Candida* species causing blood stream infection worldwide

Species	USA 1997	Canada 1997	Europe 1997	Hungary 1996–2000	Latin America 1997	The Netherlands 1995	Northern Ireland 1996–2000	India 1991–2000
<i>C. albicans</i>	56	53	53	77	41	60	53	14
<i>C. parapsilosis</i>	9	23	21	7	38	2	11	2
<i>C. glabrata</i>	19	11	12	3	2	17	27	3
<i>C. tropicalis</i>	7	8	6	4	12	4	6	38
<i>C. guilliermondii</i>	1	—	4	—	2	2	—	12
<i>C. krusei</i>	2	2	1	6	—	2	—	5
Other <i>Candida</i> species	6	3	3	3	5	13	3	26

Table 3: Other yeasts or yeast-like organisms causing systemic fungal infections

Genus	Species	Occurrence	Remarks
<i>Cryptococcus</i>	<i>C. neoformans</i>	Common	Increased number of cases due to emergence of AIDS
	(<i>C. neoformans</i> var. <i>neoformans</i>		
	<i>C. neoformans</i> var. <i>gattii</i>)	Rare	Habitat – <i>C. neoformans</i> var. <i>neoformans</i> in bird droppings, <i>C. neoformans</i> var. <i>gattii</i> in <i>Eucalyptus</i> trees, but recently both varieties isolated from debris in hollows of several big trees (Jamun, Pipal, etc.)
	<i>C. albidus</i> , <i>C. laurentii</i>		
<i>fielotrichum</i>	<i>fl. candidum</i>	Very rare	Only in extremely debilitated individuals
<i>Prototheca</i>	<i>P. wickerhamii</i>	Extremely rare	
<i>Blastoschizomyces</i>	<i>B. capitatus</i>	Rare	In patients with leukemia, endocarditis and other immunosuppressive conditions
<i>Pichia</i> (Hansenula)	<i>P. anomala</i>	Outbreak	Three outbreaks reported mainly in pediatric units
	<i>P. augusta</i>	Rare	From mediastinal lymphadenitis
<i>Malassezia</i>	<i>M. furfur</i> , <i>M. globosa</i> ,	Rare outbreak	Usually present on skin
	<i>M. pachydermatis</i> , <i>M. obtusa</i> ,		<i>M. furfur</i> , <i>M. pachydermatis</i> in neonatal intensive care unit
	<i>M. restricta</i> , <i>M. slooffiae</i> , <i>M. sympodialis</i>		Associated risk factor – parenteral lipid formulation
			From indwelling central venous catheters
<i>Rhodotorula</i>	<i>R. rubra</i>	Extremely rare	Associated with health food, baking
<i>Saccharomyces</i>	<i>S. cerevisiae</i>	Extremely rare	
<i>Trichosporon</i>	<i>T. asahii</i> , <i>T. asteroides</i> , <i>T. cutaneum</i> ,	Rare	<i>T. asahii</i> and less often <i>T. mucoides</i> cause disseminated infection in patients with hematological malignancies or immunosuppression
	<i>T. inkin</i> , <i>T. mucoides</i> , <i>T. ovides</i>		