Stagnant Loop Syndrome: A Rare Cause of Severe Malabsorption

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**Keywords**
Stagnant loop syndrome · Small bowel overgrowth · Malnutrition · Anaemia

**Summary**
**Background:** Intestinal bacterial overgrowth as a consequence of postsurgical anatomical abnormalities as well as other small bowel diseases can lead to malabsorption. **Case Report:** A female patient had several abdominal operations due to recurrent intestinal obstructions. Initially, she presented with severe megaloblastic anaemia. Subsequently, she suffered from weight loss, diarrhoea, oedema, recurrent anaemia (despite vitamin B12 substitution), and severe malabsorption of proteins, lipids, iron, and vitamins. Vague information about the performed surgeries, an anatomy of the bowel that was difficult to interpret, and an unusual cholestasis made it difficult to reach the diagnosis of bacterial overgrowth due to a stagnant loop syndrome. Treatment with antibiotics only temporarily improved the condition of the patient. After restoring bowel continuity and after the resection of an enterocoeletic fistula as well as of a bowel conglomerate, the patient did not show any further symptoms. **Conclusion:** The history of this patient indicates that the diagnosis of a stagnant loop syndrome may be difficult. The primary goal regarding surgically created small intestinal bacterial overgrowth should be the correction of the underlying small intestinal abnormality, whenever possible.

**Schlüsselwörter**
Syndrom der blinden Schlinge · Bakterielle Überbesiedlung des Dünndarms · Mangelernährung · Anämie

**Zusammenfassung**
Introduction

Several diseases of the small bowel can lead to malabsorption, such as coeliac disease, inflammatory bowel diseases, and small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO). SIBO can be a consequence of reduced intestinal clearance due to impaired peristalsis and/or anatomical abnormalities altering the luminal flow [1–7]. The main reasons for anatomical abnormalities are postoperative syndromes such as short bowel syndrome, blind loop syndrome, or stagnant loop syndrome. SIBO is characterised by one or more of the following symptoms: chronic diarrhoea, diffuse abdominal pain, flatulence, meteorism, malabsorption, and weight loss. In the following case, the clinical symptoms of the patient were unusual. Therefore, it took several years until the diagnosis was finally established and the patient could be cured by surgical correction of the stasis caused by a stagnant loop syndrome.

Case Report

The patient, a woman born in 1950, had an appendectomy in 1958. Between 1959 and 1988 she suffered from recurrent obstructions of the bowels and therefore underwent three stricтурoplastics surgeries and, as reported by the patient, resection of the terminal ileum. Details of the operations were not known as the surgery protocols were not available. In 1992 she developed anaemia, with a haemoglobin of 10.3 g/dl and a MCH (mean corpuscular haemoglobin) of 39.6 pg. Vitamin B12 serum level was low with <35 pmol/l (normal level 120–700 pmol/l), and vitamin B12 excretion into urine amounted to only 1.4% of the administered dose. Autoantibodies directed against intrinsic factor could not be detected. Serum folate concentration was within the normal range, and the bone marrow showed a normal iron content. Therefore, the diagnosis of megaloblastic anaemia due to vitamin B12 deficiency, presumably as a result of a short bowel syndrome, was made. A resection of the terminal ileum was described by an X-ray of the small bowel. In contrast, only a mild gastritis and duodenitis were found by gastroscopy and colonoscopy. The ileocecal valve and the terminal ileum were considered to be normal. D-xylose absorption was reduced. Subsequently, vitamin B12 was substituted intramuscularly. A myelodyplastic syndrome was suspected but could not be proven.

In May 1995, the patient was admitted for the first time to our gastrointestinal unit because of an elevated alkaline phosphatase (11/1993: 389 U/l; 1/1995: 235 U/l) and an elevated serum copper level (table 1). Body weight was 55 kg, and height was 163 cm. She felt good and had no diarrhoea. Despite continuing vitamin B12 substitution, anaemia persisted. The serum levels of iron, zinc (49 µg/dl), and ferritin were low and total serum proteins were slightly reduced (table 1). Coeruloplasmin was normal with 55 mg/dl, and CRP (C-reactive protein) was elevated. Serum calcium was normal, but vitamin D3 (25-OH) was very low. In addition to vitamin B12, she received folic acid, vitamin B6, iron, and hormonal contraception.

An elevated copper level can be observed with hormonal contraception, in cholestasis, e.g. primary biliary cholestasis (PBC) or primary sclerosing cholangitis (PSC), and occasionally in late-onset Wilson’s disease. PBC, PSC, and Wilson’s disease could be excluded by means of endoscopic retrograde cholangiopancreatography, sonography, laboratory tests, and liver biopsy. The copper content of the liver was low with 10.6 µg/g (normal 15–45). Therefore, the most likely explanation for the elevated serum copper level was the hormonal contraception, which was therefore discontinued. Vitamin B12, vitamin D3, and zinc gluconate were prescribed. 6 months later, alkaline phosphatase and serum copper levels were normal but the patient was still anaemic with a normal MCV (mean corpuscular volume) (table 1). Serum levels of vitamin B12 and folic acid were slightly elevated, while zinc and vitamin D3 were within the normal range. Since serum ferritin was low, the anaemia was probably due to iron deficiency.

In October 1996, she developed oedema of the legs and diarrhoea. Stool sample tests for occult blood were positive on eight occasions. After gastroscopy, a mild Helicobacter-positive gastritis was found. No bleeding source could be detected either by gastroscopy or by colonoscopy. Another X-ray series of the bowels (Sellink) demonstrated extended changes of the small bowel with a thickening of the wall, fixations, and segmental elevations. Since no bleeding source could be detected by endoscopy, the occult blood in the stool was thought to be a result of an inflammation of the small bowel. Eradication therapy of the Helicobacter with omeprazole, metronidazole, and amoxicillin was carried out for 10 days. After the eradication therapy the diarrhoea ceased. At that time, suspicion of a blind loop syndrome was articulated for the first time and the patient received 3 × 400 mg metronidazole for another 10 days. 6 months after the therapy the patient felt good, had no diarrhoea, and tests for occult blood were negative; haemoglobin, total protein, and albumin had increased. Zinc and copper in the serum were normal (table 1). The success of the treatment supported the diagnosis of blind loop syndrome. Substitution therapy with vitamin D3, zinc, iron, and folic acid was continued. In December 1997, she developed diarrhoea and was treated again with metronidazole for 10 days. After therapy, diarrhoea ceased, she felt good, and the blood chemistry was normal.

In August 2000, she presented again with diarrhoea, bloating, abdominal cramping, oedema of the lower legs, and tachycardia. Her weight was 50 kg. Blood chemistry showed anaemia and malnutrition with low serum proteins, low serum iron, a cholesterol level of 100 mg/dl, triglycerides of

Table 1. Selected laboratory values of the reported case at different time points

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<tr>
<td>Erythrocytes (3.8–5.2 million/µl)</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>4.27</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haemoglobin (11.8–15.5 g/dl)</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>12.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thrombocytes (140–440/µl)</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>531</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alkaline phosphatase (40–190 U/l)</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRP (&lt;5 mg/l)</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total serum protein (6.7–8.7 g/dl)</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>6.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Albumin (3–5 g/dl)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Serum iron (49–151 µg/dl)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>nd</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serum copper (65–165 µg/dl)</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>nd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ferritin (30–150 ng/ml)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>444</td>
<td>73.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vitamin D3 (25-OH) (18.5–94 nmol/l)</td>
<td>&lt;12.5</td>
<td>50.1</td>
<td>nd</td>
<td>56.5</td>
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nd = Not determined.
Removal of the side-to-side anastomosis between the jejunum and terminal ileum. 2) A bowel conglomerate including a fistula, which was resected. 3) The anastomosis between the jejunum and ileum was removed. 4) 20 cm of the jejunum were resected.

40 mg/dl, and low serum vitamin B12. CRP was markedly elevated while serum copper was normal (table 1). Pancreolauryl test was normal at 43% (normal >30%). By means of a physical examination, a fluctuating mass sized 2 x 3 cm was seen in the lower abdomen. An abscess of the abdominal wall was diagnosed by sonography and CT scan. The abscess could be detected by colon contrast enema. Nevertheless, a short bowel syndrome may result in bacterial overgrowth in the small intestine with colon-like bacteria, particularly with anaerobic gram-negative bacilli [2]. The surgically created anastomosis between jejunum and terminal ileum and the conglomerate of 30 cm of small bowel led to a stasis due to interenteric circulation of the bowel content. In addition, the enteroenteric fistula contributed to SIBO [5]. Furthermore, exocrine pancreatic insufficiency can also contribute to SIBO [3, 8]. However, the pancreatic function of the patient was normal.

Discussion

Our patient had two reasons for SIBO: failure of the gastric barrier due to *Helicobacter*-positive gastritis and reduced intestinal clearance. The main line of defence against bacterial colonisation of the small bowel is intestinal peristalsis [4]. Anatomical abnormalities can lead to reduced intestinal peristalsis and impaired intestinal clearance, which may result in bacterial overgrowth in the small intestine with colon-like bacteria, particularly with anaerobic gram-negative bacilli [2].

The diagnosis of stagnant loop syndrome as the underlying cause for SIBO could have been made earlier if the patient and/or the local physician had had the correct information regarding the performed operations. Unfortunately, the protocols of the previous operations, some of which had been performed long ago, were not available. In contrast to the information given by the patient, the terminal ileum had not been resected, as was shown by colonoscopy. Nevertheless, a short bowel syndrome could have been possible. The anatomy of the small bowel as seen by X-ray was confusing, probably due to the unusual operations performed in the past. Two different radiologists did not detect a side-to-side anastomosis. The final diagnosis could only be made by an operation. It remains unclear why a side-to-side anastomosis was chosen as surgical treatment for an adhesive ileus in the patient. This unusual operation and the lack of correct information, combined with a rare presentation of severe malabsorption and cholestasis, led to a delayed diagnosis and therefore to a late effective treatment.

The gold standard for detecting SIBO is a culture of intestinal content. This diagnostic tool is costly and difficult for clini-
Severe Malabsorption: Stagnant Loop Syndrome

The degree to which nutrient absorption is impaired by SIBO is usually not of clinical relevance [5]. The main features of SIBO in this patient, however, were severe malabsorption and weight loss. Malabsorption can be a consequence of mucusosal inflammation and of metabolic action of the intraluminal bacteria [1, 7]. Malabsorption and malabsorption in SIBO are responsible for impaired absorption of the components of fat, carbohydrates, and proteins as well as of vitamins and iron. The very low concentration of cholesterol and triglycerides in the serum is a result of a malabsorption of fatty acids and chylomicrons [1] and of a deconjugation of bile acids by small bowel bacteria, making them unavailable for micellar solubilisation. In addition, deconjugated bile acids inhibit the absorption and esterification of fatty acid and are toxic to the enterocytes [1, 5–7].

A low serum albumin level in blind loop syndrome has been previously described [12, 13]. Our patient had severe protein malnutrition, probably as a combined result of protein-losing enteropathy and reduced protein synthesis in the liver. A consequence of the obstruction and stasis of the small bowel is an inflammation of the epithelium, leading to increased exudation of plasma proteins. The ulcerations found in the resected small bowel led to a loss of plasma proteins and explain the observed blood loss in the stools. In addition, protein synthesis in the liver was most likely diminished due to bacterial deamination of amino acids [12, 13] as well as diminished brush border peptidases, followed by reduced amino acid uptake [1]. The consequence of hypoalbuminaemia is a diminished colloid osmotic pressure, followed by hyperaldosteronism, both leading to the observed oedema [14].

Diarrhoea, bloating, and distension of the abdomen, of which the patient complained, are a consequence of impaired monosaccharide absorption and subsequent bacterial degradation of sugars [1, 5]. D-xylose absorption is often reduced [4], as seen in this patient. Carbohydrate malabsorption and malabsorption is due to gut damage and diminished enterocyte brush border peptidases, followed by reduced amino acid uptake [1]. The presence of hydroxylated fatty acids and deconjugated bile acids may also contribute to the abdominal symptoms [5].

Each time after treatment with antibiotics directed against anaerobic bacteria (particularly with metronidazole; rifaximin was not available at that time) the condition of the patient improved, i.e. stools, laboratory tests, and body weight normalised. However, the symptoms always recurred at varying intervals. Only the elimination of the fistulas and the anastomosis, and thus of the stagnant loop, in addition to restoring the bowel continuity through surgery, finally led to permanent improvement, as was monitored by a gain in body weight and a normalisation of laboratory values such as haemoglobin, albumin, iron, and vitamin B12. This may indicate that the primary goal in surgically created SIBO should be the correction of the underlying small intestinal abnormality, whenever possible [4].

Acknowledgment

The critical review of the manuscript by Andy Laycock is gratefully acknowledged.

Disclosure Statement

The authors have nothing to disclose regarding this case report and declare that they have no competing interests.
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