Marfan syndrome and aortic involvement: a narrative review

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Abstract. – Marfan syndrome (MFS) is a systemic connective tissue disease that commonly and most severely affects the ocular, skeletal, and cardiovascular systems. The aim of the manuscript is to review the aortic involvement and complications in MFS, including aortal dissection, thoracic aortic aneurysm, abdominal aortic aneurysm, and acute aortic syndrome. Dissecting thoracic aortic aneurysm and progressing aortic root enlargement are the major causes of MFS morbidity and mortality. Guidelines on aortic disease endorsed by the American College of Cardiology, and the American Heart Association recommend the measurement of the external and internal aortic diameters perpendicular to the axis of blood flow when Computed Tomography, or Magnetic Resonance Imaging, or Cardiac Echography are performed. The pathophysiology, diagnosis, prevention, and medical and surgical treatments of MFS associated with aortic complications are reported in this narrative review. Development and strengthening of centers specialized in cardiovascular diseases and MFS, together with an improvement in the knowledge of its pathogenesis through genetics and proteomics investigations, can ameliorate the prognosis of this disease.

Key Words: Marfan syndrome, Aorta aneurysm, Aorta dissection, Bicuspid aortic valve.

Introduction

Marfan syndrome (MFS) is a systemic connective tissue disease (CTD) that commonly and most severely affects the ocular, skeletal, and cardiovascular systems1. MFS is a congenital condition with a prevalence of 1 in 5,0002.

The discovery of fibrillin-1, a constituent protein of elastin fibers, quickly led to the identification of the underlying genetic abnormality in MFS. MFS is an autosomal dominant disorder caused by a mutation in FBN1 that encodes the gene for fibrillin-1 located in chromosome 15q21.1. In around 75% of cases, MFS is inherited from one parent3-5.

Notably, selected clinical diagnostic criteria improved the detection of FBN1 mutations in this autosomal dominant condition. Fibrillin-1 is a structural macromolecule that polymerizes into microfibrils which are the regulatory components of the extra-cellular matrix, contributing to the integrity and function of all connective tissues, including the aorta wall. FBN1 gene mutations cause elastin and collagen destruction. This process leads to progressive dilatation of the proximal aorta predisposing the aorta to dissection3-5 (Figure 1).

The classic MFS phenotype includes exaggerated long bone growth accompanied by scoliosis, pectus deformities, and increased joint laxity. Musculoskeletal abnormalities are often the first finding that raises suspicion for MFS. Abnormal osteogenesis and osteoclastic activity are associated with a higher fracture rate, presumably due to osteopenia1.

Besides bones, other organs are involved in MFS, including skin, lungs with tracheomalacia, eyes, and skull, as well as neurological and cardiovascular systems. Vascular injury includes aneurysmal dilatation of the aortic root, thoracic aorta, and proximal pulmonary arteries predisposing to aneurysms and dissection. Cardiac damage leads to mitral and tricuspid valve prolapse, cardiomyopathy, and supraventricular arrhythmias1 (Figure 2).

With the advent of prophylactic aortic surgery, the life expectancy of MFS patients has improved. Furthermore, pharmacologic therapy retards aortic aneurysm growth, especially when initiated at an early stage.

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Methods

A bibliographic search was performed applying the terms “Marfan syndrome”, “aorta aneurism”, “aorta dissection”, “bicuspid aortic valve” in www.pubmed.gov from 2010 to 2022.

Marfan Syndrome and Aortic Disease

About 90% of patients with MFS develop changes in their heart and blood vessels, and about 40% die due to complete aortic rupture and bleeding. Aortic complications include aortic valve insufficiency, aortic root dilatation, and aortic aneurysm rupture.

Risk factors for aortic dissection include high blood pressure, atherosclerosis, aortic aneurysm, and aortic valve disease. Aortic dissection can lead to stroke and aortic valve damage.

Aortic diseases are classified as thoracic aortic aneurysm (TAA), abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA), and acute aortic syndrome (AAS). Overall global death rates from aortic disease (including TAA, AAA, and acute aortic dissection) increased from 2.49 per 100,000 (95% CI 1.78-3.27) in 1990 to 2.78 per 100,000 (95% CI 2.04-3.62) in 2010. This increase seems to be more evident in non-developing countries, with a median death rate of 0.71 (95% CI 0.28-1.40) compared to 0.22 (95% CI 0.10-0.33) in developing countries. Overall increase in global death rates may be associated with an increasing mean age of the global population.

Aortic disease complications, such as dissecting TAA and progressing aortic root enlargement, are the major causes of MFS morbidity and mortality. Aortic involvement may be present either in neonatal life, where it is often fatal, or in adolescence and may worsen with age. TAA is more frequent in men, but women have worse outcomes.

Figure 1. Picture describing multiple factors in the pathogenesis of Marfan syndrome and their relationship with aortic involvement.

Figure 2. Flow chart showing Marfan syndrome pathophysiology associated with aorta complications.
However, decreasing levels of estrogens associated with women aging and transitioning to menopause could lead to a loss of the protective effects of estrogens on the aortic wall and to the impairment of its elastic properties.

Diagnostic tools for the aortic involvement in MFS include family history, genetic testing, transthoracic echocardiogram (TTE), computed tomography (CT), and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the entire aorta (Figure 3). Genetic testing is an essential diagnostic tool for the disease, with a 97% effectiveness in detecting \( FBN1 \) mutations. Guidelines on aortic disease endorsed by the American College of Cardiology (ACC) and the American Heart Association (AHA) recommend the measurement of the external and internal aortic diameter perpendicular to the axis of blood flow when CT, MRI, or trans thoracic cardiac echography (TTE) are performed. TTE is performed to screen, diagnose, or follow up on specific medical conditions, including aortic aneurysm or aorta dissection.

Multidisciplinary care of patients with MFS with more frequent surveillance and earlier prevention surgery led to increased longevity and decreased emergent operations. For patients with familial thoracic aortic aneurysms, monitoring every 5 years is prudent to prevent premature death. The life expectancy of patients suffering from MFS increased from 47 to 75 years thanks to the improvement of medical and surgical therapies for aortic dilation. Of note, the most common abnormality associated with MFS is aortic root/valve dilatation, which over time may lead to dissection and rupture. In the last years, improvement in prophylactic surgical care of diseased aortic root/valve has led to an increased life expectancy among these patients. Recently, Van Andel et al proposed that aorta distensibility could be a predictor of aortic complications in MSF.

Aortic distensibility can be calculated according to the formula:

\[
D = \left[ \frac{(A_{\text{max}} - A_{\text{min}})}{A_{\text{min}}} \right] / \text{pulse pressure}
\]

**Abbreviations:**
- \( D \) = distensibility (mm Hg),
- \( A_{\text{max}} \) = maximal (systolic) aorta area (mm\(^2\)),
- \( A_{\text{min}} \) = minimal (diastolic) aorta area (mm\(^2\)),
- Pulse pressure = systolic blood – diastolic blood pressure (mm Hg).

However, aorta distensibility was not confirmed to be a predictor of aortic events.

**Bicuspid Aortic Valve**

Bicuspid aortic valve (BAV) is the most common congenital aortic disease with a prevalence of 1-2% and a high incidence of adverse outcomes including aortic stenosis and aortic regurgitation.

Currently, the relation between BAV, aortic dilatation, and dissection risk among MFS patients with \( FBN1 \) gene mutations is yet unknown. However, the prevalence of BAV is similar in subjects with MFS and \( FBN1 \) gene mutation and the general population. Furthermore, the finding of BAV in association with the \( FBN1 \) gene does not imply the need to lower the aortic diameter thresholds as a preventive measure of aortic root surgery.

**Acute Aortic Syndrome**

Acute aortic syndromes (AAS) are a group of interrelated, life-threatening conditions that include classic aortic dissection, intramural hematoma, aortic pseudo-aneurysm, and other aorta alterations. AAS are characterized by similar clinical manifestations and have shared diagnostic and management pathways.

AAS are characterized by classic aortic dissection leading to disruption of the medial layer.
that results in the separation of the aortic wall layers and a subsequent formation of true and false lumens divided by an intimal flap. Intramural hematoma can develop in the media of the aortic wall in the absence of a false lumen and intimal tear, penetrating aortic ulcer (i.e., ulceration of an aortic atherosclerotic plaque, penetrating through the internal elastic lamina into the media), pseudo-aneurysm (i.e. dilatation of the aorta owing to disruption of all the aortic wall layers contained only by the periaortic connective tissue), and traumatic aortic injury (i.e. rupture of all aortic wall layers caused by trauma)5-7.

The DeBakey classification evaluates the origin of intimal tear and extension of dissection. The Stanford classification divides AAS into two groups based on the site of origin: type A involving the ascending aorta and type B not involving the ascending aorta5-7.

**Acute Aortic Dissection**

Classic acute aortic dissection (AAD) comprises 80-90% of all AAS and is typically characterized by the presence of an intimal flap separating the true lumen from the false lumen. Population-based studies14 suggest an incidence of 2.6 to 3.5 cases per 100,000 subjects-years, including out- and in-hospital deaths.

**Prevention**

**Primary Prevention**

Primary prevention to reduce the risk of developing aortic disease in MFS includes healthy lifestyle measures from childhood, such as a healthy diet, ideal body mass index (BMI), regular physical activity, moderate alcohol consumption, and no tobacco use. Control of blood pressure, low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol levels and blood glucose are also considered essential prevention measures11.

Furthermore, the search for optimal aortic diameter to avoid dissection risk and for diameter-independent markers of dissection risk continues5-7.

**Secondary Prevention**

AAS and aneurysms are conditions that constitute a long-term high risk of severe complications such as aneurysm rupture, dissection, and hemorrhage. TTE, CT and MRI are necessary measures to guarantee a correct patient follow-up. Periodical evaluation by a multidisciplinary team, including clinical and imaging surveillance, is an important addition to medical or surgical therapy51,12.

**Medical Treatment**

Aortic aneurysm and dissection dramatically increase the risk of death in MFS. The most involved segment is the aortic root or ascending aorta which accounts for 60% of cases. Early diagnosis and management of thoracic aorta dilatation among MFS patients could prevent aortic rupture or dissection. Effective medical therapy could delay or prevent the need for surgery5-9.

β-blockers and renin-angiotensin blockers, (angiotensin receptor blockers and angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors), are the mainstay of blood pressure control in patients with thoracic aortic dilatation5-9.

The guidelines13-15 consider the use of β-blockers a cornerstone therapy for MFS patients (class I - level of evidence: B). In fact, therapy reduces heart rate and blood pressure, increasing aortic tensile strength independently of their heart rate and blood pressure lowering effects. No consensus has been reached with regard to the dosage of β-blockers in MFS because clinical trial studies in the literature include a limited number of patients.

The discovery that transforming growth factor β (TGFβ) is involved in the pathogenesis of aortic aneurysms suggests that angiotensin receptor blockade (which attenuates TGFβ activity) could slow aortic root growth in MFS.

β-blockers should be administered to patients with MFS and TAA to control the rate of aortic dilatation unless contraindicated. Although the lack of randomized controlled trials demonstrating a reduction in mortality or dissection rates with β-blockers, they reduce wall shear stress and aortic growth rate. They are also the recommended drug class for antihypertensive treatment in patients with TAA. It should be noted that, although β-blockers should classically be used carefully in the setting of chronic severe aortic regurgitation because they may increase the hemodynamic load through prolonging diastole, an observational study17 suggested that β-blockers may confer survival benefits in chronic severe aortic regurgitation patients13-17.

Currently, no clinical trial suggests the role of angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors in the medical treatment of MFS or other causes of thoracic aortic dilatation. Indeed, studies on the use of angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors in
thoracic aortic dilatation are limited. Enalapril has been found inferior to losartan in reducing aortic root growth in an animal model of MFS. This finding was speculated to be related to the inhibition of angiotensin-II type 2 receptor signaling with enalapril, where its maintenance with losartan was shown to be protective against aortic aneurysm17.

However, angiotensin-II type 2 receptor inhibition could be reasonable in MFS thoracic aortic disease patients intolerant to β-blockers to control the rate of aortic dilatation. Moreover, the combination of angiotensin-II type 2 receptor inhibitors with β-blockers may achieve a greater effect on aortic root size changes in patients with MFS17.

Whereas no specific recommendations exist for statin therapy in MFS18,19, dyslipidemia management should be performed according to the most recent guidelines.

**Drugs to Avoid**

Several investigations in literature indicate that calcium channel blockers therapy should be avoided in patients with MFS or related conditions. However, there are currently no official statements from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or European Medicines Agency (EMA) regarding this issue. Furthermore, detoxification therapy for drug abuse as fluoroquinolone antibiotics, which increase the risk of aortic aneurysm or dissection, should be performed in patients with thoracic aortic dilatation20-22. Finally, recent studies23-25 regarding the negative impact of fluoroquinolones and calcium channel blockers in patients with connective tissue diseases require clinical caution because of the limitation of patients enrolled.

**Surgical Treatment**

There are non-surgical and surgical treatments for health problems associated with MFS. Surgery is recommended when: i) Aorta diameter is ≥ 5 cm, ii) Aorta expansion rate per year ≥ 0.5 cm (rapid expansion); iii) family members have undergone aortic repair35.

Decision-making on timing and type of therapeutic intervention (thoracic endovascular aortic repair and/or open surgery) for TAA is dependent on clinical features and risk profiling, including MFS-related comorbidities, anatomy, location, size and growth rate of the aneurysm, and expertise of local aorta team6,15.

Bossone and Eagle6 showed that the high morbidity and mortality risk of AAA rupture requiring the elective repair of asymptomatic acute aneurysm aorta is associated with an aortic diameter > 5.5 cm in men or > 5 cm in women (maximum anterior-posterior aortic diameter on ultrasonography). Additionally, prompt referral to a surgeon should be considered if abdominal aneurysmal aorta growth rate is ≥ 10 mm per year. Clinical trials, large observational studies, and meta-analyses in literature have demonstrated lower peri-operative morbidity and mortality with endovascular aneurysm repair than with open surgery, with an in-hospital mortality of 1.4% and 4.2%, respectively. However, the short-term survival benefit of endovascular aneurysm repair over open surgery is counterbalanced by higher rates of long-term complications and death. Patient factors favoring open repair of abdominal aortic aneurysm (the election strategy is reported in the 2020 NICE guideline26) include younger age, long life expectancy (> 10 years), some or no medical comorbidities, connective tissue disease and anatomy not suitable for endovascular aneurysm.

**Conclusions**

Development and strengthening of centers specialized in cardiovascular diseases and in the study of Marfan’s syndrome complications, together with an improvement in the knowledge of its pathogenesis through genetics and proteomics investigations, can ameliorate the prognosis of this disease.


Conflict of Interest
The authors declare they have no potential conflicts of interest.

Authors’ Contributions
All authors contributed to the study’s conception. The literature search was performed by RGC, who also wrote the first draft of the manuscript. AM and FP revised subsequent versions of the manuscript, and all authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

References


