



Clinical study

Number of teeth is independently associated with ischemic stroke: A case-control study



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ABSTRACT

Poor oral health has been suggested as a potential risk factor for the occurrence of cardiovascular events. The present study aimed to test the hypothesis that the number of permanent natural teeth (NT) is independently associated with the occurrence of ischemic stroke (IS) or transient ischemic attack (TIA) in a southern Brazilian population. This case-control study enrolled 458 subjects, 229 hospital patients diagnosed with IS or TIA (cases) and 229 patients with no history of cardiovascular disease (controls). NT was assessed through a head and neck multidetector computed tomography angiography (MDCTA) and panoramic radiographs. The participants were matched by age and sex. Sociodemographic and medical confounding variables were obtained from the hospital charts and through a structured questionnaire. Multivariate logistic regression analysis were carried out to estimate the association between NT and the occurrence of IS or TIA. The mean age was 58.37 ± 10.75 years, with 46.7% males. Adjusted analyses showed an independent association between IS or TIA and hypertension (OR = 6.34, 95%CI = 3.93–10.24), smoking (OR = 4.70, 95%CI = 2.76–7.99) and NT (lower quartile: ≤ 7 teeth) (OR = 5.59, 95%CI = 2.88–10.86). The number of permanent natural teeth was inversely and independently associated with the occurrence of IS or TIA in this population. Present findings suggest a gradient effect on the association between oral health and IS.

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1. Introduction

Stroke is one of the main causes of death worldwide, with nearly 15 million new fatal or non-fatal events each year [1]. The incidence of stroke is expected to increase, considering the global population ageing [2]. The etiology of stroke include both genetic and environmental factors, and the main risk factors are age, high blood pressure, smoking, diabetes, dyslipidemia, and obesity [3]. Nevertheless, the traditional risk factors for cardiovascular diseases (CVD) cannot explain all the clinical and epidemiological features of the occurrence of stroke. Novel risk factors for CVD are

under investigation, especially those related to biomarkers of inflammation and oxidative stress [4].

Accumulating evidence has suggested that chronic oral inflammatory diseases (OID) may be associated with vascular events, such as atherosclerosis [5] ischemic stroke (IS) [6] and myocardial infarction [7]. The most prevalent oral disease worldwide are caries and periodontitis [8], and untreated caries may lead to endodontic infection with consequent apical periodontitis (AP) [9]. Both periodontitis and AP are chronic OID caused by a complex microbiota, especially gram-negative bacteria, which affects teeth and the supporting tissues [10]. Consistent findings suggest that chronic OID may contribute to a systemic immune response not confined to the local oral site, leading to increased systemic inflammation with a potential role in the global vascular risk [11].

Previous reviews have addressed the biologic plausibility and possible pathogenic mechanisms linking OID, atherogenesis, and CVD [5,12,13]. The potential biological plausibility relating OID and atherosclerotic CVD have been described through three main

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routes: a) the occurrence of transitory bacteremia resulting from the oral cavity; b) the vascular dissemination of toxins and byproducts from oral microorganisms; c) the low-grade systemic inflammatory response and oxidative stress resulting from the presence of chronic OID. The main pathogenic mechanisms are based on the possible role of oral microflora and their toxins in the occurrence of endothelial dysfunction, favoring the development of initial atherosclerotic lesions. It is also suggested that oral microorganisms may contribute to the increase in the thickness of atheromatous plaques, since many studies have identified the presence of oral microorganisms within vascular lesions. Finally, it has also been described that oral microflora can contribute to the modulation and maturation of atheroma, facilitating the rupture and consequent vascular thrombosis [5,12,13].

The number of permanent natural teeth (NT) has been evaluated in several epidemiologic studies as a strong surrogate of the individual's previous history of OID [14,15] since the main causes of tooth extraction are caries, AP and/or periodontitis [8,16]. Previous studies evaluated the association between NT and stroke [17,18]. However, a possible gradient effect in the association between the burden of oral diseases, NT and CVD remains unclear [19]. In addition, the previous studies on this topic were carried out in samples from developed countries [20,21] which limits the extrapolation of the results to populations with different socioeconomic and cultural aspects. Thus, the aim of this study was to test the hypothesis that NT is independently associated with the occurrence of IS or transient ischemic attack (TIA) in a southern Brazilian population.

2. Methodology

2.1. Ethical issues

The research protocol was approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (CAAE#66511417.4.1001.5336). All patients signed an informed consent form authorizing the use of the data and images for research purposes. Before the analyses, all data were de-identified to protect the patient's anonymity.

2.2. Study design and sample selection

This observational case-control study conforms to the STROBE guidelines. A previous sample size calculation was carried out based on the results of a previous study [22] considering a mean NT among cases and controls of 15.14 ± 9.43 and 19.19 ± 8.30 , respectively, with $\alpha = 5\%$ and a power of 90%, resulting in at least 114 subjects per group to identify significant differences.

A total of 458 adult individuals of any age and sex were enrolled in this study (229 cases and 229 age and sex matched controls), in the period between March 2015 to February 2018. All consecutive patients from the Neurological Department of the São Lucas Hospital (SLH) of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), Brazil, diagnosed with IS or TIA, and who had a head and neck multidetector computed tomography angiography (MDCTA) and a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the brain, were included in the study as cases. Control individuals were recruited from the Dental Clinics of the School of Health and Life Sciences (SHS) of the same institution, PUCRS, Brazil, and who had recent panoramic radiographs, with no previous history of CVD, IS or TIA Fig. 1.

2.3. Main exposure

The number of permanent natural teeth (NT) was evaluated by a trained dentist, who was blinded to all the other variables. In case patients, NT was assessed using the MDCTA images, with bone filter application [15]; in the control group NT was measured using panoramic radiographs. Impacted teeth and deciduous teeth were not assessed. After the data collection, NT was classified in four categories: $NT \geq 24$; $NT \leq 23$ & $NT \geq 18$; $NT \leq 17$ & $NT \geq 8$; $NT \leq 7$. These cutoffs were established according to a balanced distribution of NT (quartiles) in this sample.

2.4. Assessment of covariates

Potential sociodemographic (age and sex) and medical (hypertension, diabetes, dyslipidemia, smoking, and body mass index (BMI)) confounders were assessed in both groups. In the case group, the data were collected from the hospital patients' charts. Hypertension was defined as systolic blood pressure (SBP) ≥ 130 mm Hg or diastolic blood pressure (DBP) ≥ 80 mm Hg, and/or anti-hypertensive drug therapy [23]. The BMI was calculated by the nutrition department, dividing the weight by the height squared [24]. Diabetes Mellitus was defined as the use of insulin or hypoglycemic medication, or fasting plasma glucose ≥ 100 mg/dl, or a history of diagnosed diabetes [25]. Dyslipidemia was defined as a total cholesterol >200 and/or LDL > 130 and/or triglycerides >200 . Smoking was assessed as current, former, or never smoker. For the control group, trained interviewers used a structured questionnaire proposed by Brazilian Cardiology Society [26] to screen the history of previous cardiovascular disease and associated risk factors, assessing the same socio-demographic and medical variables.

2.5. Main outcome

Cerebral ischemia was defined according to the World Health Organization criteria [27]. The diagnosis of IS was performed in patients with an acute ischemic lesion in the brain and/or neurological deficits lasting >24 h ($n = 174$). The TIA was attributed for patients with neurological deficit <24 h without new ischemic lesions ($n = 55$). The ischemic nature was confirmed by a brain image and confirmed by a neurologist specialized in the stroke field.

2.6. Statistical analysis

Descriptive statistics (mean, N and %) related to case and control groups was performed. The normality of the distribution of variables was determined by using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The numerical variables with non-normal distribution were compared by using the Mann-Witney *U* test. Chi-square (χ^2) test was performed to analyze the qualitative variables. Bivariate and multivariate logistic regression analyses were carried out to estimate the association (odds ratio (OR)) between NT and IS or TIA. All covariates associated with IS or TIA in the bivariate analysis with a p -value <0.25 were considered potential confounders and were included in the multivariate model, where the value for rejection of the null hypothesis was set at 5%. The statistical analyses were carried out using SPSS v.26 (IBM, Chicago, USA).

3. Results

The characteristics of the sample (N/%) in relation to the case and control groups are expressed in Table 1. The mean age in the case and control groups were 58.38 ± 10.73 and 58.36 ± 10.78

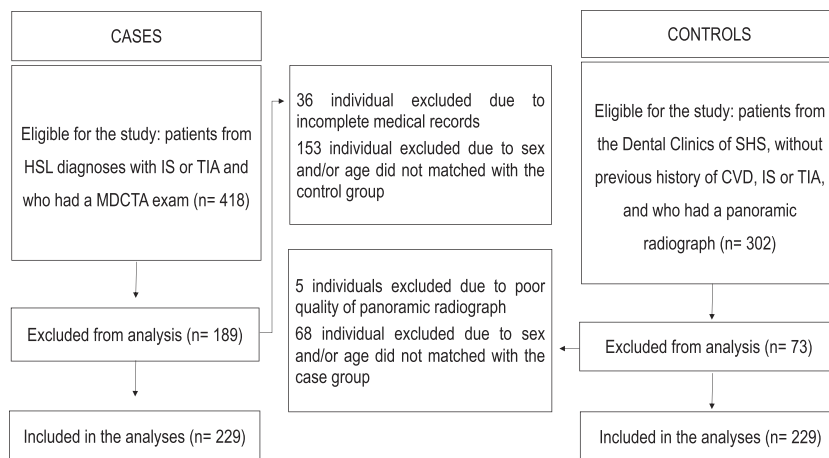


Fig. 1. Flowchart of the study sample.

Table 1 Socio-demographic, medical and dental characteristic of the sample in relation to the case (IS or TIA) and control groups. N = 458.

Variables	Control (n = 229) N (%)	Case (n = 229) N (%)	p-value
<i>Socio-demographic</i>			
Age (mean ± sd)	58.36 ± 10.78	58.38 ± 10.73	0.99 ^a
Age (≥60 y)	113 (50.4)	111 (49.6)	0.85 ^b
Male	107 (50)	107 (50)	1.00 ^b
<i>Medical</i>			
BMI > 25	136 (47.7)	149 (52.3)	0.13 ^b
Hypertension	78 (30.8)	175 (69.2)	<0.01 ^b
Diabetes Mellitus	35 (44.3)	44 (55.7)	0.73 ^b
Smoking (current or former)	37 (27.6)	97 (72.4)	<0.01 ^b
Dyslipidemia	5 (55.6)	4 (44.4)	0.73 ^b
<i>Dental</i>			
Number of teeth (mean ± sd)	18.53 ± 8.02	11.78 ± 10.06	<0.01 ^a

a = Mann-Witney U test; b = Chi-square test; BMI = body mass index; NT = number of teeth.

respectively, and both groups had 50% of male participants. There was no difference in age and sex between study groups (p > 0.05). The case group presented higher levels of hypertension and smoking (p < 0.01). The mean number of teeth among participants in the control group was higher than the case group (18.53 ± 8.02 versus 11.78 ± 10.06).

The univariate regression analyses revealed a significant association between the occurrence of IS or TIA and hypertension (OR = 6.27, 95%CI = 4.16–9.45), smoking (current or former) (OR = 3.81, 95%CI = 2.45–5.91), NT ≤ 17 & NT ≥ 8 (OR = 2.04,

95%CI = 1.17–3.54) and NT ≤ 7 (OR = 7.98, 95%CI = 4.45–14.29) (Table 2). The final multivariate regression model, adjusted for BMI, hypertension, smoking and NT, revealed a significant and independent association between hypertension (OR = 6.34, 95%CI = 3.93–10.24), smoking (current or former) (OR = 4.70, 95%CI = 2.76–7.99) and the lower quartile of NT ≤ 7 (OR = 5.59, 95%CI = 2.88–10.86) and the occurrence of IS or TIA (Table 2).

4. Discussion

Present findings support the hypothesis that the number of permanent natural teeth is inversely and independently associated with the occurrence of IS or TIA. This study is novel in confirming the relation between poor oral health and adverse cerebrovascular events in a southern Brazilian population. Noteworthy, a gradient effect was clearly detected on the association between NT and IS or TIA. Thus, present results reinforce that oral health may be an additional risk indicator for stroke, parallel to the major known risk factors which include older age, smoking, ethnicity, hypertension, diabetes, and obesity [3].

The worldwide main causes of tooth extraction are dental caries with pulpal involvement and periodontitis [16] making NT a strong surrogate of previous history of OID. The biologic plausibility that launches NT as an emerging risk factor for the occurrence of atherosclerotic and ischemic events is related to the entry of oral pathogens in the bloodstream during transient bacteremia, which may play a role in the development and maturation of atheroma plaques [28]. Oral bacteria have been identified in atheroma plaques, suggesting that periodontopathic micro-organisms might be metabolically active within the wall of arteries, under the atherosclerotic lesions [29–31]. In addition, OID has the potential

Table 2 Unadjusted and adjusted regression analyses on the association between socio-demographic, medical and dental variables and IS or TIA. N = 458.

Variables	Unadjusted Model 95% CI		Adjusted Model* 95% CI	
	OR	p-value	OR	p-value
BMI (>25)	1.34 (0.91–1.96)	0.13	1.32 (0.81–2.16)	0.25
Hypertension	6.27 (4.16–9.45)	<0.001	6.34 (3.93–10.24)	<0.001
Diabetes Mellitus	1.31 (0.81–2.14)	0.26	–	–
Smoking (current or former)	3.81 (2.45–5.91)	<0.001	4.70 (2.76–7.99)	<0.001
Number of teeth (NT ≤ 23 & NT ≥ 18)	1.41 (0.81–2.46)	0.22	1.05 (0.55–2.00)	0.86
(NT ≤ 17 & NT ≥ 8)	2.04 (1.17–3.54)	0.01	1.51 (0.80–2.87)	0.20
(NT ≤ 7)	7.98 (4.45–14.29)	<0.001	5.59 (2.88–10.86)	<0.001

BMI = body mass index; NT = number of teeth; * The adjusted model was adjusted for BMI, hypertension, smoking, and NT. # Dyslipidemia was not included in the OR analysis due to the low number of participants.

to elevate different pro-inflammatory mediators, which may contribute to endothelial dysfunction [32].

Similar to the present findings, previous studies reported a significant association between NT and IS [17,33]. In addition, the longitudinal study by Wu *et al.* [34] analyzed data from the first national health and nutrition examination survey in the US, and revealed an independent association between periodontitis and IS (OR = 2.11, 95%CI = 1.30–3.42). However, this association was not present between periodontists and hemorrhagic stroke (OR = 1.22, 95%CI = 0.53–2.83).

In the present study, only patients diagnosed with IS or TIA were selected. Individuals presenting other cerebrovascular events, such as hemorrhagic stroke, were excluded. The possible pathophysiological mechanisms for the association between oral health and hemorrhagic stroke events are controversial, since it occurs mainly due to an arteriovenous malformation or rupture of an aneurysm [35] with no atherosclerotic origin. Interestingly, one previous case-control study carried out in a Korean population [36] found an independent association between periodontists and hemorrhagic stroke (OR = 2.5, 95% CI = 1.1–5.6).

Grau *et al.* [22] conducted a case-control study in a Germanic population, and found an independent association between NT and IS in the comparison between cases (patients with IS or TIA) and population control groups. When the analyses were carried out between the case and the hospital control group – which was not matched for age and sex – then the results were not significant. Taken together, it emphasizes the relevance of age and sex matching in case-control studies, especially when evaluating non-communicable diseases such as IS, where age is a strong confounding factor.

Previous *meta*-analysis evaluating the dose–response between tooth loss and risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke has highlighted that increasing tooth loss (per 2 increments) was associated with a 3% increment of stroke risk [14]. This inverse association between NT and the occurrence if IS or TIA was confirmed in the present study, since the fewer teeth the participant presented, the strengthened was the association. This biological gradient effect increases the likelihood that this association may be causal, according to the Hill's causation criteria [37]. Nevertheless, no causal inference can be raised by the present findings, considering the nature of the observational study design.

Some methodological strengths and limitations of the present study must be clarified. One strength of this study is related to the accuracy of the diagnoses of IS or TIA, performed in a university hospital which is a reference in neurological diseases. All the included cases had both a MDCTA and a MRI. The MDCTA was used for the neurologic diagnosis, as well as to determine the NT. Some previous studies [38,39] assessed the NT through self-report, which may provide some inaccurate results.

An important limitation of this study was the assessment of the confounding factors in the control group. Even though other studies used this same methodology [40,41] self-reported variables are prone to some level of error, especially the lack of information related to the history of systemic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and dyslipidemia. However, epidemiologic evidence supports the validity of self-reported health measures, especially hypertension [42] height and weight [43]. Moreover, in the present study hypertension was analysed as a dichotomic variable, defined according to recent criteria using stage 1 hypertension as SBP \geq 130 mm Hg or DBP \geq 80 mm Hg, and/or anti-hypertensive drug therapy [23]. We acknowledge the limitation of using Stage 1 hypertension as the cutoff for this variable, and we recognize that the independent association between the NT and stroke could be modified if different thresholds such as SBP 140/150 or above were used for hypertension. Finally, residual confounding by factors not

adjusted (e.g. alcohol consumption, level of education and ethnicity) may be a further inherent limitation.

Despite NT is epidemiologically accepted as a surrogate of the history of OID, future research should assess whether the burden of OID is also associated with IS. For an accurate diagnosis of periodontitis and AP, both clinical and image exams are necessary. Computer tomography presents the highest accuracy results for identifying oral diseases such as periodontal bone loss or AP [44]. However, in this study tomography examinations were available only for participants in the case group, so unfortunately no oral data other than NT was assessed in the present study.

The number of remaining teeth has a positive impact in the quality of life and self-esteem [45]. Dental health is related to food intake and diet quality, and performs a crucial role in nutrition quality [46]. In addition, poor oral health may increase the systemic inflammation, resulting in endothelial damage and favouring the occurrence of cardiovascular disease [47]. However, to date, the pathophysiological link between OID and adverse cerebrovascular events is not totally clear. Results from the present case-control study encourage future interventional studies to evaluate the possible impact of the treatment of OID on IS risk.

5. Conclusion

The number of permanent natural teeth was inversely and independently associated with the occurrence of IS or TIA in this southern Brazilian population. Present findings suggest a gradient effect on the association between oral health and IS.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors deny any conflict of interest related to this study. This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), Brazil– Finance Code 001.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jocn.2021.05.059>.

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