

Mucormycosis in COVID-19 pandemic: Study involving tertiary hospitals in Aurangabad District, India

Abstract

Introduction- An abrupt increase in the mucormycosis patients in India during the COVID-19 pandemic was observed. A collective study was conducted in tertiary care hospitals in Aurangabad.

Materials and methods - A retrospective descriptive study was conducted in Aurangabad (Maharashtra), in association with the Aurangabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), oralcare.co.in and SNDH Hospital, Aurangabad. Data was collected by AMC from 3 major tertiary hospitals present in Aurangabad where treatment of Mucormycosis was done from May 2021 to July 2021. The data of total 135 patients with Mucormycosis was received by the AMC were included in the study. It included demographics of the patients, medical and clinical history, history of COVID-19, treatment of COVID-19, type of Mucormycosis, treatment and outcomes of Mucormycosis.

Results- In the present study, 74.7% of Mucormycosis patients were males. 77.4% of Mucormycosis patients were above 50 years of age. It was seen that about 67% of patients with Mucormycosis had diabetes mellitus as the most common risk factor. About 87.4% of patients had a history of COVID-19. Majority of the patients in the study population were diagnosed with the rhino-maxillary-orbital type of Mucormycosis which is 39%, followed by the rhino-cerebral type-25%. Only 1% patients showed rhino-nasal-orbital type of Mucormycosis. 30% patients were not categorised into any type. All the patients in the study population received amphotericin B and surgical treatment. About 84.4% patients were discharged after the Mucormycosis treatment. 15.6% patients died during or after the treatment.

Conclusion- Mucormycosis was predominantly seen in male above the age of 50 years, COVID-19 infection and diabetes mellitus was common risk factor for Mucormycosis.

Keywords- COVID-19 · Mucormycosis · Rhino-cerebroorbital · Diabetes, health care systems

Introduction

“The pandemic caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS COV 2) has created mayhem all over the world” [1]. “The association of SARS COV 2 with a gamut of opportunistic of fungal and bacterial infections made it more overwhelming for the health care systems globally, especially in the developing countries” [2]. During the second wave of SARS COV2 the surge of covid 19 associated Mucormycosis in India was unanticipated and devastating due to its rapid spread, high morbidity and mortality rates and the limitation of antifungal drugs [3]. In the peak months of Mucormycosis in India (May to July 2021), more than 47,000 cases were reported and the actual figures certainly will be higher [2].

The term ‘Mucormycosis’ was coined by Dr. R. D. Baker, an American pathologist [4]. Mucormycosis is also known as zygomycosis and amongst the lay people it is popular as black fungus. Mucormycosis is an opportunistic fungal infection caused by the organisms, Mucorales, who are active in instigation and speeding the decay of organic materials [5]. It was an infection which was once very rare and affected the immunocompromised individuals. The incidence Mucormycosis varies in the range of 0.003 – 0.005– 1.7 million of the population [4,6,7] “But the picture changed spontaneously during the second wave of COVID 19 in India. In India, Mucormycosis was seen in 0.14 per 1000 population, which was about 80 times higher as compared to developed countries” [8].

“Mucormycosis can be classified based on the anatomical site of involvement. It can be classified into rhino-orbito-cerebral (ROCM), pulmonary, gastrointestinal, cutaneous, renal, disseminated and other miscellaneous forms, which include infection of bones, heart, ear, parotid gland, uterus, urinary bladder and lymph” [9,10]. It was perceived that rhino-orbital cerebral Mucormycosis was the most common disease seen in the post COVID Mucormycosis patients in India, also accounting for the highest mortality [11]. The hallmark of Mucormycosis is tissue necrosis resulting from angioinvasion and thrombosis [4]. “The common symptoms seen in the post COVID Mucormycosis patients were headache, fever, facial swelling(unilateral), orbital cellulitis, palpebral edema, ptosis, chemosis and ophthalmoplegia” [12].

It has been noted that in the developing countries, especially in India the most common predisposing factors were Diabetes mellitus which is contrasting the haematological malignancies and history of transplants in the developing countries[13,14]. Diabetes as a risk factor over 50% cases with Mucormycosis was seen in three different case series in India [15]. Even though mucormycosis was treated with aggressive surgery, still the mortality rate was high.

The present study aimed to study the association between COVID 19 and Mucormycosis, risk factors associated with Mucormycosis and the outcomes of the treatment of Mucormycosis.

Materials and methods

A retrospective descriptive study was carried out in Aurangabad (Maharashtra), in association with the Aurangabad Municipal Corporation, oralcare.co.in and SNDH Hospital, Aurangabad. Data was collected by AMC from all the tertiary hospitals present in Aurangabad where treatment of Mucormycosis was done from May 2021 to July 2021. The data of total 135 patients with Mucormycosis was received by the AMC were included in the study. All patients included in the present study were microbiology and or histopathology confirmed cases of Mucormycosis. All Mucormycosis patients regardless of COVID-19 status were included in the study. The data provided by the hospital was sent in a predefined format provided by AMC for uniform data entry. It included demographics of the patients, medical and clinical history, history of COVID 19, use of steroids in COVID-19 treatment, use of immunosuppressant drugs, oxygen therapy, type of Mucormycosis, treatment of Mucormycosis. Diagnostic endoscopy was done in all patients and KOH testing was done and an RT-PCR for COVID 19 infection confirmation. All patients had a CT, CBCT or MRI of PNS and brain depending on the presentation of the patient. All patients were done all routine blood investigations.

The data of all the patients was not completely filled in all the areas, for such patients the missing data was directly taken from the records of the respective hospitals after the list was received.

Results

1. Gender distribution

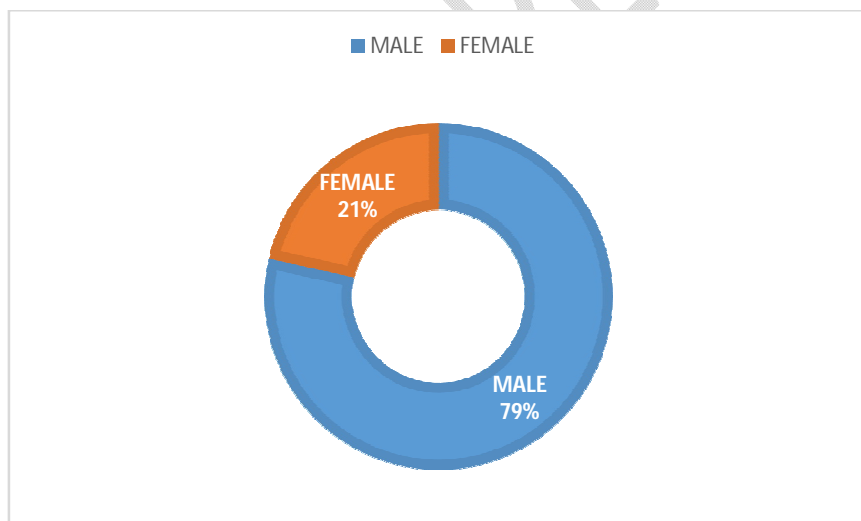


Fig 1. Sex distribution in study population

2. Age distribution in the study population

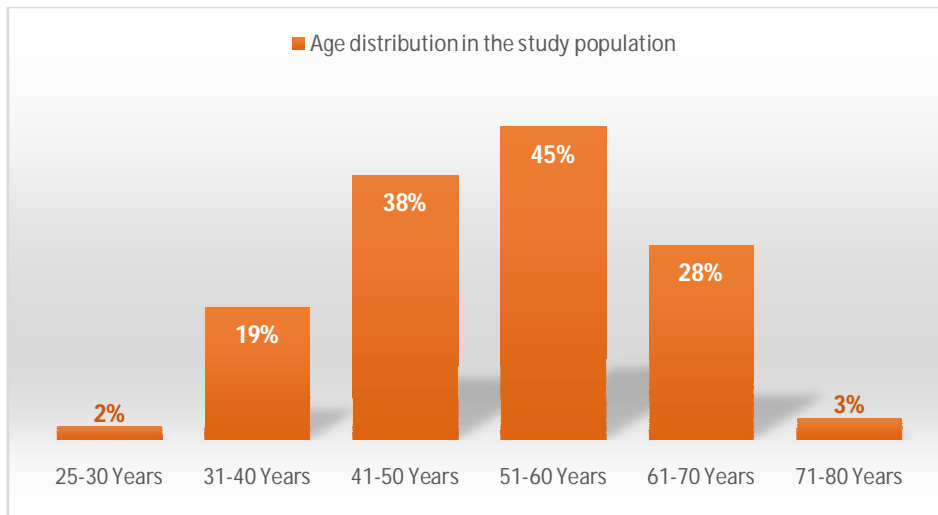


Fig 2. Age distribution in the study population

3. Comorbidities in the study population

Table 1. Comorbidities in the study population

COMORBIDITY	No of patients	Percentage (%)
N= 135		
<i>DM</i>	72	53
<i>HTN</i>	16	12
<i>DM AND HTN</i>	19	14
<i>MORE THAN 2</i>	7	5
<i>OTHER</i>	8	6
<i>NONE</i>	13	10

Table 2. COVID-19 status in Mucormycosis patient

Mucormycosis patients	No. of patients (N= 135)	Percentage (%)
<i>H/o COVID-19-positive</i>	118	87.4%
<i>No H/O COVID-19-positive</i>	17	12.6%

Table 3. COVID-19 vaccination status in Mucormycosis patient

<i>Mucormycosis patients</i>	No. of patients (N= 135)	Percentage (%)
<i>Vaccinated</i>	6	4.4%
<i>Non vaccinated</i>	129	85.6%

Table 4. COVID-19 treatment history

<i>COVID treatment</i>	No of patients N= 118	Percentage (%)
<i>O2 AND STEROID</i>	76	64.4
<i>ONLY O2 and ICU</i>	14	11.8
<i>ONLY STEROID</i>	12	10.2
<i>NOT KNOWN</i>	16	13.6

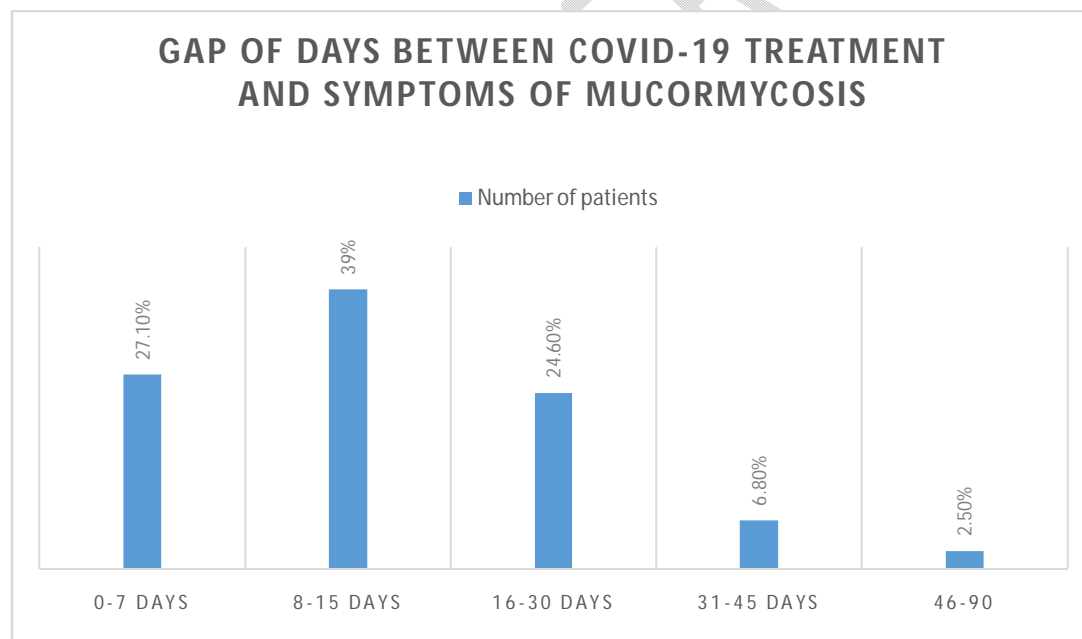


Fig 3. Gap between COVID-19 treatment and symptoms of Mucormycosis

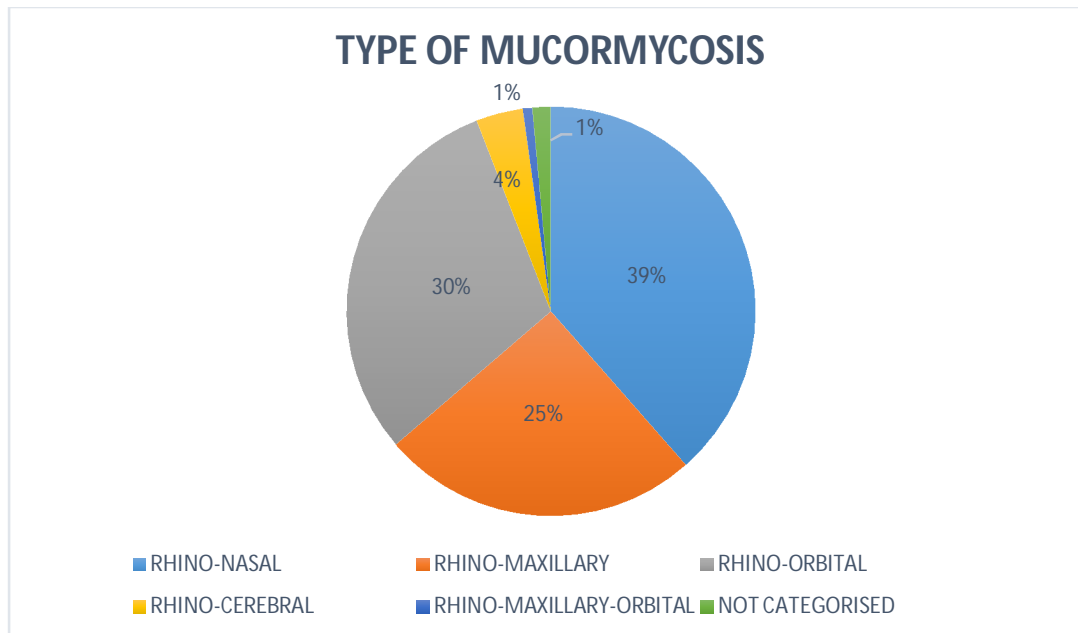


Fig 4. Type of Mucormycosis seen in the study population

Table 5. OUTCOMES OF MUCORMYCOSIS PATIENTS

Outcomes of Mucormycosis N= 135 **Percentage**
treatment

<i>Discharged</i>	114	84.4
<i>Death</i>	21	15.6

Table 6. Prognosis of Mucormycosis patients

<i>Mucormycosis patients</i>	No of patients recovered	No of patients dead	Total
<i>Diabetic patients</i>	76	21	97
<i>Vaccinated patients</i>	5	1	6
<i>Recurrence</i>	1	0	1
<i>Discharged against medical advice</i>	5	0	5

Age and sex distribution in the study population

In the present study, 74.7% of Mucormycosis patients were males and 66% of Mucormycosis patients were females (Fig. 1). 77.4% of Mucormycosis patients were above 50 years of age and no patient was under 25 years of age. The youngest patient was 27 years old while the oldest was 73 years of age.(Fig. 2).

Risk factors associated with Mucormycosis

In the present study, diabetes mellitus was the most common risk factor seen in 67% of patients with Mucormycosis. 53% were having only diabetes mellitus, 12% were having only hypertension and in 14% both diabetes and hypertension was seen. Patients with more than 2 comorbidities contributed to 5 % of total population. While 6 % patients reported other comorbidities like chronic kidney disease, hypothyroidism, CVSD. About 24% patients reported to have no any co morbidity.

COVID 19 infection and Mucormycosis

In the present study, 87.4% of patients with Mucormycosis had a COVID-19 infection while 12.6% patients had no any record of COVID 19 infection. Looking at the treatment of COVID 19, 64.4% patients received oxygen therapy as well as steroids. 13.6% patients had no record of the type of COVID 19 treatment.

In the present study, 80% of patients were present during COVID-19 treatment and within 15 days of COVID-19 infection. No patient with Mucormycosis was presented after 3 months of COVID-19 infection.

Type of Mucormycosis

The majority of the patients in the study population were diagnosed with the rhino-maxillary-orbital type -39%, followed by the rhino-cerebral type-25%. Only 1% patients showed only rhiono-nasal and only rhino-orbital type. 30% patients were not categorised into any type.

Outcomes of Mucormycosis treatment

All the patients in the study population received amphotericin B and surgical treatment. Multiple surgeries were done to remove all necrotic areas from nose, sinuses, palate, maxilla, pterygopalatine fossa, infratemporal fossa and mandible including orbital extermination and in case of cerebral involvement, extensive areas were involved.

About 84.4% patients were discharged after the Mucormycosis treatment. 15.6% patients died during or after the treatment. About 28.8% patients underwent maxillectomy, 35.3% patients underwent orbital externation and 6% patients were treated by cerebral surgery.

Out of 15.6% deaths all the patients were diabetics and had extensive involvement including the orbits and cerebral. One patient who was vaccinated died during the treatment. One patient was re-admitted due to complications. 5 patients were discharged against medical advice.

Discussion

“Mucormycosis is an uncommon but fatal fungal infection caused by a group of molds collectively called mucormycetes. The mold fungi belong to Rhizopus, Mucor, Rhizomucor, Cunninghamella, and Absidia” [17].

“This fungus by toxic and mechanical modes, impairs the internal lamina of blood vessels. The spores in the after entering the sinus via nose of immunocompromised patients, starts germinating into various hyphae in the. The pterygopalatine fossa is seen to be the prime reservoir of the fungal hyphae” [17, 18].

“Later there is spread of the fungus, causing thrombosis and nerve dysfunction. The pathological manifestation involves blood vessels, cartilage, bone, neural and perineural areas, and often meninges. There is formation of palatine eschars and damages the nasal turbinates due to necrosis. The infection from the sinuses spreads causing osteolysis which consecutively invades the orbital structures. Subsequently the infection spreads to ethmoid sinuses causing involvement of the brain through the retro-orbital path or frontal lobes. As the infection spreads along the regions of the sphenoid sinuses to the neighbouring cavernous sinus, it may cause cranial nerve palsies. The extensive involvement and spread in juglar veins, the cavernous sinus, and the carotid artery may further cause worsening of the patient's state”. [19, 20].

There has been a sudden surge of Mucormycosis cases in India in the second wave of COVID 19. Many researchers called this as post COVID Mucormycosis [2,16,17]. In the present study a whopping number of 135 patients were operated for Mucormycosis in just one city of India, in just 3 months' duration. 84.4% had a history of COVID 19 infection.

It was observed in several reports that India was in forefront in the world for the cases of post COVID Mucormycosis [21-23]. Many studies reported that India has been accounted for by 45,435 cases of Mucormycosis till September of 2021[24]. The black fungus cases are on the higher side in Gujarat and Maharashtra with around 7109 and 10,139 cases respectively [24].

Age and Gender-According to the study conducted by Hoenigl, majority of patients were male (78%) and the median age was 55 years (range 10–86) [25]. Priya, P the most commonly affected age-group was that between 41 and 60 year in a Tertiary Care Center in South India [26].

Rao VU in 2021 reported Mucormycosis patients with a mean age of 49.1 years while 71% were aged between 41 and 60 years and most patients were male. Wasiq, Mohammed et al reported that the mean age of the covid 19 associated Mucormycosis study group was 51.16 years with males (69%) and females (31.0) [28].

According to Chavhan et al, 74.7% of Mucormycosis patients were males and 77.4% of Mucormycosis patients were above 40 years of age and male were on the higher side. [8]

Moorthy A et al, in 2021 reported that “the incidence of Mucormycosis is not age or gender dependent, and the significantly higher number of males in this study may be a reflection of higher Covid-19 prevalence of males in India”. [29]

In the present study, 79% of Mucormycosis patients were males and 77.4% of Mucormycosis patients were above 50 years of age and no patient was under 25 years of age. In the present study, age and sex distribution among Mucormycosis patients was similar to previous studies done except the upper and lower limits of ages of patients, in the present study the age range was (27-73 years).

Risk factors and type including COVID 19 infection

“The most common type of risk factor in the Mucormycosis patients was uncontrolled diabetes mellitus along with hematologic disorders, steroid therapy and malnourishment” [30]. “Other risk factors include deferoxamine therapy, overload of iron, and in some cases of drug abuse, stem cell transplants or organ transplant” [17].

Patients who use corticosteroids, tocilizumab and iatrogenic immunosuppression [31] may also develop Mucormycosis. There are other conditions that may increase the risk of developing Mucormycosis, such as renal insufficiency, presenting with HIV or AIDS [32]. “Extreme malnutrition, the use of illegal drugs that involve needles, as well as hepatitis or cirrhosis have all been associated with Mucormycosis” [30].

“As discussed previously, there are multiple possible contributing factors for the development of Mucormycosis among patients with COVID-19 and these include diabetes mellitus, obesity, use of corticosteroid, and the development of cytokine storms” (16). “The triad of SARS-CoV-2, steroid and uncontrolled diabetes mellitus have contributed towards a significant increase in the incidence of angioinvasive maxillofacial Mucormycosis” [33]. “However, the presence of spores and other factors might play a role as well” [34].

“Pathological changes in the pancreas were observed in patients with severe COVID-19, indicating that SARS-CoV-2 can cause pancreatic injury and this could be one of the reasons why COVID-19 patients have high blood glucose levels with no history of diabetes”. [35] “The vicious cycle of hyperglycaemia and immunosuppression caused by hyperglycemia and steroids, can lead to increase in the colonisation of

Mucormycosis” [36].

The relation between “endothelialitis” and COVID-19 is found in various autopsy where severe pulmonary vascular endothelial injury and new vessel growth was seen in the patients who deceased due to COVID-19 [37,38]

According to the study by John, “T.M 98% patients had diabetes mellitus as risk factors for severe COVID-19 of the 35 patients in the study with information on glycemic status, 33 (33/35, 94%) had DM, with a mean HbA1C of 10 (in patients who had an HbA1c value available)” [38]

In a systematic review by Singh et al it was found that “hyperglycemia was the single most important risk factor observed in 83.3% of the patients with Mucormycosis and COVID-19, pre-existing Diabetes mellitus in 80% and concomitant ketoacidosis in 15%”. [39]

In the present study, 87.4% of patients with Mucormycosis had a COVID-19 infection while 12.6% patients had no any record of COVID 19 infection. Looking at the treatment of COVID 19, 64.4% patients received oxygen therapy as well as steroids. 13.6% patients had no record of the type of COVID 19 treatment.

In the present study, 80% of patients were present during COVID-19 treatment and within 15 days of COVID-19 infection. No patient with Mucormycosis was presented after 3 months of COVID-19 infection.

Type of Mucormycosis and Outcome

In the present study majority of the patients in the study population were diagnosed with the rhino-maxillary-orbital type -39%, followed by the rhino-cerebral type-25%. Only 1% patients showed only rhino-nasal and only rhino-orbital type. 30% patients were not categorised into any type.

“The survival rate for rhino-orbito-cerebral disease in patients without any systemic disease is about 75%; with other diseases is about 20%; and in pulmonary disease is considered to be fatal. Data collected by Suganya et al. (2019) according to the site of infection described the survival rate in different forms of Mucormycosis: rhino-orbito-cerebral Mucormycosis – 45%, focal cerebral Mucormycosis – 33%, pulmonary Mucormycosis – 36%, sinusitis without cerebral involvement – 87%, cutaneous isolated – 90%, disseminated disease – 16%, and involvement of gastro intestinal form – 10%” [40].

In the present study it was found that about 84.4% patients were discharged after the Mucormycosis treatment. 15.6% patients died during or after the treatment. About 28.8% patients underwent maxillectomy, 35.3% patients underwent orbital exenteration and 6% patients were treated by cerebral surgery

Conclusion

Similar to the reports in India and other countries, COVID 19 associated Mucormycosis cases reported in this study were diagnosed in individuals with diabetes, hyperglycaemic status and with history of previous use of corticosteroids. Identifying these individuals at risk can help the early identification of Mucormycosis. In addition, strict glycaemic control and avoidance of unnecessary corticosteroid in non-severe COVID-19 cases could help in preventing this complicated fungal infection.

Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Institutional Ethical Committee of SNDH.

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