Olfactory and Gustatory dysfunction in Pediatric Population with Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)

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This article has been accepted for publication and undergone full peer review but has not been through the copyediting, typesetting, pagination and proofreading process, which may lead to differences between this version and the Version of Record. Please cite this article as doi: 10.18176/jiaci.0677

Key words: COVID-19. Olfactory dysfunction. Gustatory dysfunction. Children. Paediatric population.

Palabras clave: COVID-19. Disfunción olfativa. Disfunción gustativa. Niños. Población pediátrica.

Olfactory and gustatory dysfunctions (OGD) have been reported as relevant symptoms that may predict presence of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in adults, associated with mild or moderate disease [1-3]. A plausible mechanism of OGD is the direct extension of the SARS-CoV-2 through the nasal mucosa with direct damage of non-neural cells of the olfactory bulb [4]. Published data on OGD in children are scant, likely due to several factors specific to the pediatric population such as a lower incidence of infection, the tendency of COVID-19 to be asymptomatic [5], and the difficulty of studying childhood OGD with objective methods. Few case reports have been published to date, among which stands out one with 3 adolescents [6]. Current data on the prevalence of OGD are based on 2 small cohorts of COVID-19–positive children [7,8] and a cross-sectional survey among Italian paediatricians [9]. In a related study, Mannheim et al.[10] describe that 19 (30%) of 64 infected children (0–17 years old) presented nasal congestion, rhinorrhea, and total loss of smell, though providing no data on the exact number of patients with olfactory dysfunction exclusively.

The present study, approved by Ethics Committee, aimed to evaluate OGD among symptomatic COVID-19 children presenting to a referral pediatric hospital for this disease in Madrid, Spain. The database of positive SARS-CoV-2–RT-PCR (reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction) cases diagnosed between March 20 and July 13, 2020 was retrospectively reviewed. Demographic information, COVID-19 symptoms, disease severity and clinical course, and comorbidities were obtained

from electronic medical records. Information on smell and taste disorders and any incomplete data on other COVID-19 symptoms was obtained by telephone interview with parents and patients, who provided oral consent. COVID-19 severity was established according to the classification by Qiu[8]. Questionnaire data on onset, duration of smell and taste disorders was used, and severity was classified according to a scale modified from Izquierdo-Dominguez et al. [1]. Based on the degree of smell or taste loss, we stratified patients as normosmic-mild (0–3 points), moderate (4–6 points), or severe loss (7–10 points).

Qualitative variables are expressed as numbers and percentages, and the Chi-square test was used for comparison. Quantitative variables appear as mean and standard deviation or median and interquartile range (IQR) according to their distribution. Normality of age distribution was confirmed by the Shapiro-Wilk test. ANOVA test and the DMS as post hoc test were used to compare normally distributed variables. Statistical significance was set at 95% ($p < 0.05$).

Ninety-two children were identified as SARS-CoV-2–RT-PCR positive; 2 declined to participate. Asymptomatic patients were excluded. Fifty patients were diagnosed with symptomatic COVID-19 (52% male; mean age: 7±7 years, IQR: 6 months–12 years). Patients under 6 years of age (n=20) were excluded for potential poor reliability on self-reported smell function. Thirty patients were finally enrolled (Supplementary Figure). Seven (23.3%) patients presented mild COVID-19, 11 (36%) were moderate cases, and 12 (40%) had severe disease. Nineteen (63.33%) required hospitalization, and 11(36.6%) were discharged after emergency department evaluation.

A total of 8 (26.6%) (range 9–17 years of age) of 30 symptomatic children presented OGD; they were older than the children without OGD (12.6 ± 2.7 years vs. 10.6 ± 3.1 years, respectively; p=0.045). Five (16.6%) of 30 COVID-19–positive children presented both smell and taste disorders and 3 (10%) had gustatory dysfunction only (Supplementary Figure). OGD was severe in all patients (7–10 points) (Table 1 and Supplementary Table).

OGD onset was sudden in all patients; 6 developed symptoms simultaneously with the other COVID-19 symptoms, and 2 (25%) before other disease manifestations. Of the latter, one developed both symptoms, and the other only gustatory dysfunction (Supplementary Table). In no case did OGD appear as the only symptom. OGD was transient in all patients, [median olfactory dysfunction duration, 45 days (range 15–120 days), and median gustatory dysfunction of 10 days (5–120 days)] (Table 1).

There was no significant difference in the prevalence of OGD with respect to the severity of COVID-19 (mild 4.3%, moderate 36.4%, severe 25%), nor in COVID-19 severity between patients with and without OGD (Table 1) (p=0.578). Five patients with OGD (62.5%) were hospitalized (2 in the intensive care unit). Seven subjects presented digestive symptoms, 6 had fever (>37.8ºC), 4 cutaneous manifestations, 3 pneumonia, 2 odynophagia, and 1 dyspnea. All patients recovered without sequelae except for one asthmatic patient with exercise-induced dyspnea (case 4) (Supplementary Table).

The prevalence of OGD in this cohort was 26.6%, a much lower rate than that reported in adults[1-3], including the European multicenter study by Lechien et al.[3] in which 85.6% and 88.0% of COVID-19 patients reported olfactory and gustatory dysfunctions, respectively, as well as a Spanish study in which 53.7% and 52.2% of patients presented severe smell or taste loss, respectively[1]. Furthermore, the prevalence of OGD in our study is somewhat lower than in the multicenter Qui et al. study [8], which included 27 children (6–17 years old), with 10 of 27 (37%) subjects (15–17 years of age) presenting OGD; but similar to the Italian survey among paediatricians, in which 29% and 30% of their patients with COVID-19 reported anosmia and ageusia, respectively [9]. In contrast, Erdede et al. [7] detected a lower prevalence (3.7%) than ours, reporting only 1 child with taste loss among 27 COVID-19–positive children.

In our study, 10% of patients had isolated gustatory dysfunction, an uncommon but previously reported feature in adults [3] and children [7]. The degree of OGD

doi: 10.18176/jiaci.0677

has not been previously described in the pediatric population, and according to our findings, all subjects experienced a severe symptomatic form.

Our patients with OGD were somewhat younger than in the study by Qui et al[8] (12.6 ± 2.7 years vs. 16.6 ± 0.7, respectively); in our population, however, children who developed OGD were older than those who did not. This could be explained by a lesser susceptibility to OGD among younger children or lower diagnostic accuracy. Our patients seemed to have more severe COVID-19 than in other reports in pediatric [8] and adult subjects [1,3]. However, the severity in patients with OGD was not significantly different than OGD-free individuals, nor among patients with OGD, although our limited sample size is a potential source of bias.

As described by Qiu et al. [8] and Diaferio et al [9], OGD onset coincided with other symptoms in most patients, thus preventing its use as an early sign of COVID-19 in children. The duration of OGD was between 5 and 120 days, which is longer than that reported by Mak et al. [6] (3->13 days), possibly due to a longer follow-up in our study. Interestingly, loss of smell resolved before loss of taste in our cohort.

The limitations of this study include the potential bias from selecting a population treated in a tertiary hospital, which may not reflect the entire spectrum of COVID-19 in children, particularly mild forms. Further limitations are the retrospective study design and the lack of an objective, validated method to assess OGD.

In summary, this is one of the few reports in Europe describing OGD in children with COVID-19. In the pediatric population with predominantly moderate to severe COVID-19 presented here, OGD displayed a low prevalence, was not an early sign of disease onset, and tended toward a severe and long-lasting course.

Acknowledgements

Oliver Shaw for editorial assistance.

Conflict of interest

all authors declare no conflict on interests related to this manuscript.

Dr. Rodriguez del Rio reports personal fees from ALK Abello, grants and personal fees from Aimmune Therapeutics, grants from Merck, personal fees from GSK, FAES, Novartis, Thermofisher, LETI Pharma, Allergy Therapeutics, outside the submitted work.

Dr. Bazire reports personal fees from LETI Pharma, grants from FAES and Aimmune Therapeutics, outside the submitted work.

Dr. Ibáñez reports grants from National Instituto Salud Carlos III, personal fees from Faes Farma, Merck, LETI, ROXALL, CIRCASSIA, grants from Aimmune Therapeutics, outside the submitted work.

Financial support: none

This work has been accepted as a poster in the 32nd Congress of the Spanish Society of Allergology and Clinical Immunology 2020.

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Table. Characteristics of COVID-19 symptomatic children presenting with olfactory and/or gustatory dysfunction (OGD).

Characteristics	Children
Total no. enrolled/screened (%)	30/50 (60%)
With olfactory and/or gustatory dysfunction	8/30 (26.66%)
Age	
Mean ± SD, IQR (years/months/days)	
Total children enrolled (n=30)	11.1 ± 3.1 years (9–12.25)
Children with olfactory/gustatory dysfunction (n=8)	12.6 ± 2.7 years* (11–15.25) years
Children without olfactory/gustatory dysfunction (n=22)	10.6 ± 3.1 years* (10–12) years
Sex, no. /total OGD no. (%)	
Male	6/8 (75%)
COVID-19 severity classification †	
No. /total (%)	
With olfactory and/or gustatory dysfunction	
Mild	1/8 (12.5%)
Moderate	4 / 8 (50%)
Severe	3/8 (37.5%)
Without olfactory and/or gustatory dysfunction	
Mild	6/22 (27.3%)
Moderate	7/22 (31.8%)
Severe	9/22 (40.9%)
Olfactory and/or gustatory dysfunction	
No. /total OGD (%)	
Olfactory dysfunction only	0/8 (0%)
Gustatory dysfunction only	3/8 (37.5%)
Olfactory and gustatory dysfunction	5/8 (62.5)
Onset of olfactory dysfunction	
No. /total olfactory dysfunction (%)	
As the only symptom of COVID-19	0/5 (0%)
Before onset of other COVID-19 symptoms	1/5 (20%)
At the same time as other COVID-19 symptoms	4/5 (80%)
After other COVID-19 symptoms	0/5 (0%)
Onset of gustatory dysfunction	
No. /total gustatory dysfunction (%)	
As the only COVID-19 symptom	0/8 (0%)
Before onset of other COVID-19 symptoms	2/8 (25%)
Concurrently with other COVID-19 symptoms	6/8 (75%)
After other COVID-19 symptoms	0/8 (0%)
Severity of olfactory dysfunction (1–10 points) ‡	
No. /total olfactory dysfunction (%)	
Mild (1–3)	0/5 (0%)
Moderate (4–6)	0/5 (0%)
Severe (7–10)	5/5 (100%)

Severity of gustatory dysfunction (0–10) ‡	
No. /total gustatory dysfunction (%)	
Mild (1–3)	0/8 (0%)
Moderate (4–6)	0/8 (0%)
Severe (7–10)	8/8 (100%)
Duration of olfactory dysfunction	
No. /total olfactory dysfunction (%)	
1–2 weeks	1/5 (20%)
3–4 weeks	1/5 (20%)
4–6 weeks	0/5 (0%)
≥ 7 weeks	3/5 (60%)
→Median 45 days, IQR: 18–120 days, Range: 15–120 days.	
Duration of gustatory dysfunction	
No. /total gustatory dysfunction (%)	
1–2 weeks	5/7 (71.4%)
3–4 weeks	0/7
4–6 weeks	0/7
≥ 7 weeks	2/7 (28.6%)
→Median 10 days, IQR: 5–45 days, Range: 2–120 days.	

IQR: interquartile range; SD standard deviation, PICU: paediatric intensive care unit
* p=0.045
† From reference 8. Qiu C, et al. Qiu classification for COVID-19 grade of severity: mild (low fever, mild cough, slight fatigue, and no evidence of pneumonia on imaging), moderate (fever and respiratory symptoms, and evidence of pneumonia on imaging), severe (dyspnea, tachypnea, desaturation or radiologic worsening over 24–48 hours) and critical (respiratory failure, septic shock, and/or multiple-organ dysfunction).
‡: Modified from reference 1. Izquierdo-Domínguez A, et al. Normosmic-mild (0–3 points), moderate (4–6 points), and severe olfactory or gustatory loss (7–10 points).

Supplementary material

SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURE: Flowchart of the study.
SUPPLEMENTARY TABLE: Description of patients with COVID-19 and olfactory and /or gustatory dysfunction.