Retropharyngeal abscess in children: An uncommon presentation of a central skull base osteomyelitis secondary to a subclinical tonsillitis

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Abstract

Central skull-base osteomyelitis (CSBO) is a life-threatening condition that requires emergent intervention. As well, retropharyngeal abscesses should be addressed as early as possible since mortality increases in the setting of airway compromise and oropharyngeal narrowing. Retropharyngeal abscesses clinical symptoms are generally non-specific, including fever, neck swelling/pain, drooling, swallowing difficulties and the most common presentation is bulging of the posterior aspect of the oropharyngeal wall with 37% of the cases. Headache is a very common chief complaint of the adult population in the emergency department, whereas when it comes to children less than 10 years of age it is rarely reported, yet should be aggressively addressed. We describe a reported case of retropharyngeal abscess with central skull base osteomyelitis in a girl of 7 years of age who presented with progressive headache and neck pain. We underline the importance of pushing for imaging in a child of 7 years of age able to exhibit the symptom of headache. Children are usually very difficult to understand especially for their limited ability to explain symptoms. So when a child is able to describe a complex symptom such as headache he should be really taken seriously especially in the emergency care set and certainly ask for further imaging. CT scan with IV contrast is the ultimate modality to diagnose and adequately manage an abscess especially in the emergency department.