Imaging features of primary tumors of the spine: A pictorial essay

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Abstract
Primary tumors of the spine are rare accounting for less than 5% of new bone tumors diagnosed every year. These tumors may exhibit characteristic imaging features that can help in early diagnosis and improved prognosis. Plasmacytoma/multiple myeloma and lymphoproliferative tumors are the most common malignant primary spinal tumors. Hemangioma is the most common benign tumor of the spine. Computed tomography is useful to assess tumor matrix and osseous change. Magnetic resonance is useful to study associated soft tissue extension, marrow infiltration, and intraspinal extension. Confusing one tumor with the other based on only imaging findings is not uncommon. However, radiologic manifestations of these tumors need to be correlated with the age, sex, location, and presentation to arrive at a close clinical diagnosis.

Key words: Hemangioma; lymphoproliferative disorders; multiple myeloma; osteoblastoma; plasmacytoma; spinal tumors

Introduction
Primary tumors of the spine are rare with a reported incidence of 2.5 to 8.5 per 100,000 people per year. They account for less than 5% of new bone tumors diagnosed every year in the United States. These tumors exhibit characteristic imaging features that can help in early diagnosis and improved prognosis. It is important to realize that imaging features have to be correlated with the age, sex, and the site of presentation to reach a diagnosis or differential diagnosis [Table 1]. The imaging features and clues to diagnosis of all important tumors have been reviewed in this article.

Imaging Workup
Conventional radiography has a limited role because of the complex anatomy of spine, and usually it is used as a complementary study to computed tomography (CT) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). CT scan is best suited to evaluate the extent of lesion, delineate cortical outline, and to know matrix calcification/ossification. It is unique for performing guided biopsy. However, MRI is the method of choice. The extent of lesion both osseous, extra-osseous, marrow infiltration, epidural, nerve, and cord involvement can be better depicted in MRI. Contrast-enhanced Scan is useful to know the treatment response and diffusion weighted images (DWI) can depict the tumor necrosis both before and after treatment. Radionuclide scans are useful to detect multiple lesions and lesions as small as 2 mm, and are helpful for a precise diagnosis and staging. Approximately 5–15% bone turnover can be detected by radionuclide scan. Positron emission tomography (PET)-CT is useful for surveillance. Angiography is reserved for highly vascular tumors, especially where preoperative embolization is
essential. Preoperative biopsy is reserved for cases where diagnosis is doubtful and surgery is not contemplated. As most malignant tumors undergo surgery and excision biopsy is done. If preoperative biopsy is done, the track is to be planned such that the mass along with tracks has to be removed en bloc to reduce the tumor spillage. Cervical spinal tumors require CT/MR angiography to depict their relationship to supraaortic trunks. In thoracic tumors, it is essential to know the exact relationship of tumors with pleura, mediastinal structures and ribs, whereas in lumbar spinal tumors, the relationship with retroperitoneum is important. In sacral tumors, lesion extension to SI joint and pelvis has to be defined. The World Health Organisation has classified the primary tumors of spine as osteogenic, chondrogenic, vascular, hematopoietic, notochordal, giant cell type, and miscellaneous [Table 2].

### Table 1: Various primary spinal tumors, the sites of common occurrence, and time-window of presentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tumor type</th>
<th>Usual site of presentation</th>
<th>Common age of presentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Osteoid osteoma</td>
<td>Posterior element</td>
<td>2-3rd Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteoblastoma</td>
<td>Posterior element</td>
<td>2-3rd Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteosarcoma</td>
<td>Posterior element</td>
<td>4th Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osteochondroma</td>
<td>Any site/common</td>
<td>3rd Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chondromyxoid fibroma</td>
<td>Posterior element</td>
<td>3rd Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chondrosarcoma</td>
<td>Vertebral body/posterior</td>
<td>3rd Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemangioma</td>
<td>Vertebral body</td>
<td>4th Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymphangioma/Hemangioendothelioma</td>
<td>Vertebral body</td>
<td>2-8th Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plasmacytoma/multiple myeloma</td>
<td>Vertebral body</td>
<td>60 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leukemia</td>
<td>Diffuse</td>
<td>Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lymphoma</td>
<td>Vertebral body/paraspinal</td>
<td>5-7th Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aneurysmal bone cyst</td>
<td>Posterior element</td>
<td>5-20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giant cell tumor</td>
<td>Vertebral body</td>
<td>3-5th Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewing’s sarcoma</td>
<td>Posterior element</td>
<td>2nd Decade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chordroma</td>
<td>Sacrococcygeal and Sphenooccipital areas</td>
<td>5-6th Decade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Classification of bone tumors involving bony spine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of tumor</th>
<th>Benign</th>
<th>Malignant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Osteogenic</td>
<td>Osteoid osteoma</td>
<td>Osteosarcoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Osteoblastoma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chondrogenic</td>
<td>Osteochondroma</td>
<td>Chondrosarcoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Me</td>
<td>Chondroblastoma, CMF</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vascular</td>
<td>Hemangioma, Lymphangioma</td>
<td>Hemangioendothelioma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hematopoietic</td>
<td>Plasmacytoma, Multiple myeloma, lymphoma, leukemia</td>
<td>Hemangiopericytoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notochord</td>
<td>Chordoma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giant cell</td>
<td>Giant cell tumor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewing’s sarcoma</td>
<td>EWS, PNET</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Benign Tumors**

**Osteoid osteomas**

These accounts for 1% of all spinal tumors and 10% of osteoid osteomas of bones.[5] They commonly occur in the 2nd decade with male predominance. Posterior element is more often involved than anterior elements. Pedicle, lamina, facet joint are affected in 75% and spinous and transverse processes in 18% cases. Lumbar spine is the most common site (59%), followed by cervical spine (27%), dorsal spine (12%), and sacrum (2%). Radiograph shows the central lucent area with varying degree of mineralization and surrounding sclerosis. Central lucency represents the nidus and is less than 1.5 cm. Sometimes nidus may be obscured by sclerosis. CT is the modality of choice for accurate localization and to appreciate the mineralization of nidus [Figure 1]. On MRI, nidus is hypo on T1W image and variable signal on T2W images. On contrast administration, there is enhancement. MR shows nonspecific changes such as edema in bone marrow and adjacent soft tissue mimicking infective etiology. However, spared intervertebral disk confirms the diagnosis of osteoid osteoma rather than infective spondylitis. Bone scintigraphy is advocated to localize the level of vertebral involvement in strongly clinically suspected osteoid osteoma prior to CT and to decide the number of niduses preoperatively. It shows double density sign. Close differential is osteomyelitis where the sequestrum is irregular; whereas the nidus in osteoid osteomas is rounded and smooth.

**Osteoblastomas**

Spinal osteoblastomas account for 30–40% of all osteoblastomas. They most commonly occur in 2nd to 3rd decade (slightly later age than osteoid osteomas). Males are more commonly affected than female with a ratio of 2:1.[6] Osteoblastoma originates in the neural arch and often extends to vertebral body. Thoracic, cervical, and lumbar segments are equally affected. Only vertebral body involvement is seen in 3% of cases. Radiograph demonstrates expansile lytic lesion of more than 1.5 cm with matrix mineralization. Variable amount of sclerosis is

**Figure 1 (A and B):** 14M presented with night pain, a case of osteoid osteoma. (A) Plain radiographs AP of L5 spine reveals sclerosis along the left pedicle of L5 vertebra. (B) Axial noncontrast CT through L5 vertebral body reveals round lucent nidi surrounded by sclerosis in the left posterior element.
noted surrounding the lesion. CT shows expansion of bone and lytic lesion with little evidence of nidus calcification [Figure 2]. Sometimes, multiple foci of matrix mineralization or extensive sclerosis may be observed. Cortical expansion is sometimes demarcated by thin shell of bone [Figure 3]. On T1W, lesion is hypointense and mixed signal on T2W due to variable matrix mineralization. All tumors enhance on intravenous Gadolinium administration. Rarely, tumor may be aggressive with bone destruction, breaking the cortex, wide zone of transition, characteristic perilesional edema in bone and soft tissue extending beyond the lesion resulting in flare phenomenon. Bone edema also enhances on contrast injection resulting in overestimation of size of lesion and leading to sampling error. Osteoid osteoma, osteosarcoma, either chondroblastic or telangiectatic, varieties are close differential diagnoses.

**Osteochondromas**

Spinal Osteochondromas account for 1–4% of solitary and 9% of all multiple Osteochondromas. Solitary lesions are more common in males than females and are common in the 2nd decade. Single lesion is more common in the cervical spine whereas multiple lesions in the thoracolumbar region. The tip of spinous process and transverse process are more preferred sites than body and pedicles. Radiation induced osteochondromas occur within or at the periphery of radiation field. Osteochondromas are developmental lesions rather than tumors. This lesion is caused by the separation of a fragment of growth plate cartilage, which grows, and as a result of this, progressive enchondral ossification leading to subperiosteal osseous excrescence with a cartilage cap that projects from bone surface develops.[7] Osteochondromas enlarge as a result of growth at the cartilage cap, similar to growth plate. Enchondral ossification leads to medullary bone with fatty/hematopoietic marrow. Malignant change may occur in 1% of solitary and 5–15% of multiple hereditary exostosis [Figure 4].[8]

**Chondroblastoma and chondromyxoid fibroma**

Spinal chondroblastomas are very rare, accounting for 1–4% of all chondroblastomas. Most patients present during the 3rd decade with male predominance. They preferentially involve vertebral body and posterior elements. Radiographically the tumor presents as expansile lytic (geographic) lesion with sclerotic border. CT demonstrates matrix calcification. T2 hypointensity within matrix represents immature chondroid, hypercellularity, hemosiderin and calcification on histologic analysis.

Approximately 5% chondromyxoid fibromas occur in the spine. Occurrence is common in cervical region but can be seen dorsal, lumbar spine with predilection for spinous process. They present as lobulated mass having mixed chondroid, fibrous, myxoid areas. Extensive erosion, cortical break, and soft tissue component suggest malignancy.

**Hemangiomas**

Hemangiomas are the most common benign vertebral tumors and are considered to be hamartomatous lesions. These may be solitary or multiple, and are commonly seen in the thoracic, lumbar spine. Prevalence is greater after...
middle age with a female predominance. Hemangioma consists of thin walled vessels and sinuses lined by endothelium interspersed among longitudinal trabeculae of bone. Accumulation of lipid material is a secondary phenomenon. These lesions are generally asymptomatic and symptoms may occur when there is expansion, epidural extension, pathological fracture, or hematoma formation. Hemangioma is usually confined to vertebral body and presents with rarefaction of bone, vertical striation, or coarse honeycomb appearance. CT shows polka dot and corduroy appearance [Figure 6]. MR demonstrates T1 and T2 hyperintensity interspersed with thick low signal intensity vertical bony struts [Figure 6]. Lesion shows avid enhancement. Aggressive hemangiomas show the involvement of the entire vertebral body with extension to neural arch, cortical expansion, irregular honeycombing, and soft-tissue mass and avid enhancement [Figure 7]. Bone scan may show no uptake/increased uptake/decreased uptake. Angiography reveals the vascularity and arterial embolization may be helpful preoperatively [Figure 7].

Lymphangioma
Extremely rare and presents with coarse trabeculation of vertebral with preservation of the shape of vertebra. MRI shows inhomogenously hyperintense on T2WI and heterogenous enhancement on contrast administration.

Giant-cell tumor
Approximately 7% of giant-cell tumors (GCTs) occurs in the spine. They are more common in mature skeleton, that is, in the 3rd to 5th decade of life with female predominance. Primary.
site is vertebral body. Sacrum is more commonly involved than dorsal, cervical, or lumbar spine. Upper sacrum is the most preferred site. During pregnancy, the size may increase. Sometimes GCT may be associated with aneurysmal bone cyst, osteoid osteoma or osteoblastoma. Spinal GCTs are unique because they are more aggressive with high recurrence rate, unpredictable outcome, and can cause cord compression.

Radiographically, the lesions are well defined lytic without matrix calcification and sclerotic rim. Sacral lesions are at midline extending to either side and can cross the SI joint [Figure 8]. In thoracic spine, the GCT may simulate posterior mediastinal mass. Intervertebral disk and adjacent vertebral involvement may be seen. Extra-osseous involvement of soft tissue is seen in 79% of cases. Lesions are hypointense on T1W images. Areas of T1 hyperintensity may be seen which representing haemorrhages. Low to intermediate signal intensity on T2W images due to hemosiderin, high collagen content on MRI [Figure 9]. Cystic areas, foci of hemorrhage, and fluid-fluid levels may be observed [Figure 8]. Enhancement on contrast scan reflects the vascularity. At times there may be collapse of vertebra [Figure 10].

Malignant Tumors of the Spine

Osteosarcoma

Spinal osteosarcomas account for 4% of all osteosarcomas and 4–14% of all primary malignant tumors of spine.[6] Peak incidence is slightly at a later age as compared to conventional appendicular osteosarcoma and equal incidence in male and female. Thoracic and lumbar vertebrae are commonly involved. Posterior elements are the preferred sites [Figure 11]. Extension to adjacent vertebrae is seen in 17% cases.[7] Radiologically, these tumors show osteoblastic lesions with varying amount of osteoid production, cartilage, and fibrous tissue. CT demonstrates the matrix mineralisation and it is the modality of choice. Rarely, sclerosing osteoblastic osteosarcoma may present as ivory vertebra [Figure 12]. Talangiectatic osteosarcoma presents as lytic lesion and on MRI fluid-fluid levels can be appreciated. The thick enhancing septa and nodular solid components differentiate it from aneurysmal bone cyst. Prognosis is poor in spinal osteosarcoma as compared to peripheral variety. Secondary osteosarcoma can occur after radiation therapy or in Paget’s disease.

Chondrosarcoma

Spinal chondrosarcoma accounts for 7–12% of all chondrosarcomas; commonly occurring in 3rd to 7th decade with male to female ratio of 4:1.[5] Thoracic and lumbar regions are common and sacrum is a rare site.[3,4] Tumor arises from posterior elements (40% of cases) and both posterior elements and vertebral body (in 45% cases) and only vertebral body (15% of cases) at presentation [Figure 13]. Imaging reveals lytic destruction with chondroid matrix. This matrix calcification may look like ring and arc [Figure 14]. Chondroid matrix mineralization is better demonstrated by CT [Figure 15] and appears as signal void on MRI. Non-mineralized portion of tumor characteristically appears with very high signal due to water content of hyaline cartilage. Enhancement may be lobular, nodular, septal, or diffuse reflecting lobulated growth pattern [Figures 13 and 16]. When cartilaginous cap is more than 1 cm sarcomatous change is indicated. Adjacent vertebrae through disk and adjacent ribs may be involved in 35% of cases.
Hemangioendothelioma and hemangiopericytoma

Hemangioendothelioma is the proliferation of blood vessels endothelial cells forming thin-walled blood vessels and sheets of neoplastic cells. It commonly occurs in the 2nd to 8th decade with male predominance. They have variable malignant behaviour. Thoracic and lumbar spines are the preferred sites. Most lesions involve vertebral body and rarely posterior elements. Imaging reveals lytic lesion with honeycomb appearance. CT scan reveals soft tissue component in addition. Rarely, they may present as sclerotic vertebra. Serpentine signal void in background of heterogeneously enhancing soft tissue is highly characteristic.

Hemangiopericytoma arises from the cells of Zimmermann which surrounds blood vessels. Both benign and malignant forms are encountered. Mostly, it occurs at 4th to 6th decade. Radiological features are similar to hemangioendothelioma presenting as lytic lesion with soft tissue enhancing lesion [Figure 17].

Plasmacytoma

Spinal involvement occurs in 25–60% of patients of plasmacytoma and is seen in patients older than 60 years. Dorsal spine followed by lumbar followed by cervical and sacral vertebrae is involved. Tumor involves vertebral body extending to pedicles. Radiographs reveals lytic lesion having soap-bubble appearance [Figure 18]. Variable degrees of collapse may be observed. T1 hypo T2 hyperintense lesion with T1, T2 hypointense thick bony struts representing residual trabeculae and peripheral
Lymphoma
Primary lymphoma of the spine accounts for 1–3% of all lymphomas. It occurs in 5–7th decade with male: female ratio of 8:1.[8] Involvement of the spine can occur due to paraspinal tumor extending to the spine or tumor originating in the vertebra [Figure 20]. Spinal involvement may manifest as paraspinal, vertebral, or epidural lesions either in isolation or combination [Figure 20]. Radiologically, the lesions are lytic, mixed, or rarely sclerotic causing ivory vertebra [Figure 21]. Pathological fracture and large soft tissue component appearing T1 hypo, T2 variable signal intensity, and variable enhancement on MRI. A focus of marrow replacement and a large surrounding soft tissue mass without large area of cortical destruction is highly suggestive of lymphoma.[13] Sometimes cortical destruction may not be appreciable on radiograph or CT scan [Figure 20]. Contiguous vertebral involvement can occur.

Leukemia
Leukemia occurs in children and predominately in males. Focal or multiple lytic lesions are seen which appear T1 hypo, T2 hyperintense [Figure 22]. Sometimes there may be sclerotic lesions appearing T1, T2 hypointense. Diffuse enhancement is seen on contrast administration. Sometimes there may be large soft tissue component [Figure 23] extending to the spinal canal causing cord compression.

Chordoma
Chordoma is the second most common tumor of the spine; it occurs mostly in 5–6th decade with a male predominance. Chordoma occurs in the sacrococcygeal region (50%), sphenoccipital region (35%), and vertebrae (15%). Cervical spine is more commonly affected than...
dorsal or lumbar spine. Chordoma appears as expansile bone destruction with large soft tissue component having appearance of mushroom, collar button [Figure 24]. Amorphous calcification seen in 40% of cases. When two adjacent vertebrae are involved without disk, lesion appears as dumb-bell shaped tumor. T1 hyperintensity may represent hemorrhage, high protein content of myxoid, and mucinous collection. T2 hypointensity represents hemosiderin and fibrous tissue whereas T2 hyperintensity represents high water content. Hypointense fibrous septa divide the gelatinous component of tumor [Figure 24]. Ring/arc-like, heterogenous enhancement is seen on contrast administration. Vertebral chordomas are less expansile and 30% show calcification [Figure 25]. Recurrence is seen in 90%, lymph nodal metastasis is seen in 15%, and distant metastases to lung and bone is noted in 5%.

Ewing’s sarcoma
From 3–10% of Ewing’s sarcoma occurs in the spine. It predominantly occurs in 2nd decade with a male predominance. Sacrum is the most frequently affected (55.2%) followed by lumbar spine (25%). Cervical spine is the least commonly affected site (3.3% of cases). In nonsacral spine, lesion originates from posterior elements extending to the vertebral body [Figure 26]. Ala of the sacrum is the most preferred site involving more than one segment without involving the discs. Radiologically, aggressive lytic destruction with variable degree of collapse and large soft tissue component is characteristic [Figures 26 and 27]. Paraspinal soft tissue is usually larger than osseous lesion and homogenous due to lack of calcification, appearing T1 hypointense on MRI. Purely sclerotic lesion is rare and it may be due to necrosis and reactive bone formation. Other rare findings are vertebra plana, ivory vertebra and pseudo-hemangioma pattern [Figure 27].
Primitive neuroectodermal tumor

Primitive neuroectodermal tumor (PNET) are extremely rare. Imaging appearance of vertebral PNET is similar to Ewing’s sarcoma. They are more aggressive in behaviour. Other rare primary tumors—Leiomyoma/leiomyosarcoma and spindle cell tumor

Spindle cell tumors are a type of connective tissue cancer in which the cells are spindle shaped. These are heterogenous group of tumors; malignant fibrous histiocytoma, spindle cell sarcoma, leiomyosarcoma, fibrosarcoma and angiosarcoma and its benign counterpart leiomyoma. Leiomyosarcoma of bone arises from preexisting smooth muscle cells in the media of intraosseous blood vessels. Alternately, a close relationship may exist between fibroblast and smooth muscle cells such that an intermediate cellular form, the myofibroblast, may give rise to the leiomyosarcoma. It occurs in 4th to 7th decade with equal frequency in males and females. Metastasis needs to be ruled out before diagnosis of primary leiomyosarcoma of the spine. In regards to imaging, lesions are permeative lytic with indistinct outline and minimal to no sclerosis or periosteal reaction. They have soft tissue component better demonstrated in CT or MRI [Figures 28 and 29]. Spindle cell tumors are extremely rare with only
a few reported case reports. Imaging features are similar to leiomyosarcoma [Figure 30].

**Conclusion**

Plasmacytoma/multiple myeloma and lymphoproliferative tumors are the most common malignant primary spinal tumors. Hemangioma is the most common benign tumor of the spine. Although rare, leiomyoma/leiomyosarcoma and spindle cell tumors can occur in the spine. Imaging plays an important role in early diagnosis. CT is useful to assess tumor matrix and osseous change. MR is useful to study associated soft tissue extension, marrow infiltration, and intraspinal extension. However, radiologic manifestations of these tumors need to be correlated with the age, sex, location, and presentation to arrive at a close differential diagnosis that can help the clinician for treatment planning.

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**Conflicts of interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

**References**