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Perspective

Shigellosis: Epidemiology, clinical insights and public health strategies

Yang Lei*

Department of Infectious Diseases, Zhejiang University, Zhejiang, China.

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DESCRIPTION

Shigellosis, also known as bacillary dysentery, is an infectious disease caused by bacteria of the genus *Shigella*. It is characterized by diarrhea, fever, and abdominal pain. Shigellosis primarily affects young children and is a significant cause of diarrheal disease worldwide, particularly in areas with poor sanitation. This article provides a comprehensive overview of shigellosis, including its epidemiology, clinical manifestations, diagnostic methods, and treatment strategies.

Epidemiology

Shigellosis is a major public health issue, especially in low-resource settings where sanitation and hygiene practices are inadequate. The disease is transmitted via the fecal-oral route, often through contaminated food, water, or direct contact with an infected person. There are four species of *Shigella* responsible for the disease: *Shigella dysenteriae*, *Shigella flexneri, Shigella boydii*, and *Shigella sonnei*, with *S. flexneri* and *S. sonnei* being the most common in different regions.

Global estimates suggest that shigellosis causes approximately 165 million cases of diarrhea each year, with the majority occurring in developing countries. In these regions, children under the age of five are particularly vulnerable, and shigellosis can contribute to malnutrition and other health complications.

Clinical manifestations

The incubation period for shigellosis typically ranges from 1 to 3 days after exposure. The severity of symptoms can vary, but the most common manifestations include.

Diarrhea: Often begins suddenly and can range from mild to severe. The stools may be frequent, watery, and may contain mucus and blood, which is a hallmark of shigellosis.

Abdominal pain: Cramping and pain in the abdomen are common, often accompanied by a sense of urgency and tenesmus (the feeling of incomplete evacuation).

Fever: Many patients experience fever, which can be high and persistent.

Nausea and vomiting: These symptoms may accompany diarrhea but are less common than in other types of gastroenteritis.

Systemic symptoms: In severe cases, symptoms such as dehydration, weight loss, and systemic illness can occur. Complications like reactive arthritis and Hemolytic Uremic Syndrome (HUS) are rare but serious.

Diagnosis

Diagnosing shigellosis involves a combination of clinical evaluation and laboratory testing.

Clinical evaluation: A detailed history of recent travel, exposure to contaminated food or water, and close contact with individuals who have diarrhea can provide clues to the diagnosis.

Laboratory tests: Laboratory tests are diagnostic tools used to analyse samples from the body, such as blood, urine, or tissue, to diagnose diseases, monitor health conditions, and guide treatment decisions.

Stool culture: The gold standard for diagnosis involves isolating *Shigella* from stool samples. This test can confirm the presence of the bacteria and determine the specific species.

Stool PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction): This molecular technique can detect *Shigella* DNA in stool samples, offering rapid and sensitive detection.

Serological tests: These are less commonly used but can be employed in certain diagnostic settings.

Treatment

The management of shigellosis focuses on alleviating symptoms, preventing complications, and addressing the infection with appropriate antibiotics.

Antibiotic therapy: Antibiotic therapy involves the use of antibiotics to treat bacterial infections. Antibiotics are drugs that specifically target and kill bacteria or inhibit their growth, thereby helping to resolve infections and reduce symptoms. It's

*Corresponding author.Yang Lei, Email: yanglei@gamail.com

important to use antibiotics appropriately to avoid resistance and ensure effectiveness.

First-line agents: Antibiotics such as ciprofloxacin, azithromycin, or ceftriaxone are typically used to treat shigellosis. The choice of antibiotic may depend on local resistance patterns and patient factors.

Resistance considerations: Increasing antibiotic resistance among Shigella strains, particularly to commonly used drugs like ampicillin and trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole, may influence treatment choices.

Supportive care: Supportive care surround a range of treatments and interventions aimed at improving the quality of life for patients with serious illnesses or conditions. It focuses on relieving symptoms, managing side effects, and providing emotional, psychological, and social support. Supportive care is often used alongside curative or primary treatments to enhance overall well-being and comfort.

Hydration: Maintaining fluid and electrolyte balance is important, particularly in cases with severe diarrhea and vomiting. Oral Rehydration Solutions (ORS) are often used to prevent dehydration.

Dietary management: Patients should continue eating a normal diet as tolerated, with emphasis on easily digestible foods and adequate hydration.

Preventive measures

Hand hygiene: Regular and thorough hand washing with soap and water can reduce the risk of transmission.

Safe food and water practices: Ensuring that food is cooked properly and drinking safe, clean water are essential preventive measures.

Sanitation: Improving sanitation and access to clean water in communities can help prevent outbreaks of shigellosis.

Shigellosis is a significant public health concern, particularly in regions with poor sanitation and hygiene. Effective management requires prompt diagnosis, appropriate antibiotic treatment, and supportive care to manage symptoms and prevent complications. Public health measures focusing on improved sanitation, hygiene, and access to clean water are important in reducing the incidence of shigellosis and its associated morbidity. Continued research and surveillance are necessary to address the challenges posed by antibiotic resistance and to improve global health outcomes related to shigellosis.