

Optic Nerve

Optic Neuritis and Multiple Sclerosis

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Core Messages

- Idiopathic optic neuritis, an isolated inflammatory optic neuropathy secondary to demyelination, is the most common cause of optic neuropathy in the young and is often the first sign of multiple sclerosis (MS).
- It is now possible to predict the risk of subsequent MS in selected patients with optic neuritis, allowing the anticipatory use of immunomodulatory agents to reduce the risk and severity of MS in those patients.
- A number of recent studies have clarified the natural history of optic neuritis, the largest being the Optic Neuritis Treatment Trial (ONTT).
- The ONTT confirmed that spontaneous visual recovery begins rapidly (within 3 weeks) in about 80% of patients and continues for up to 1 year; if at least some improvement does not occur within 5 weeks, the diagnosis of idiopathic optic neuritis should be reconsidered.
- The initial magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) helps to stratify the risk of MS. In the ONTT, the 10-year risk of MS in patients with at least one MRI T2 lesion was 56%, as compared to 22% in those with a normal baseline MRI. A normal MRI in combination with painless optic neuritis, severe optic nerve head edema, peripapillary hemorrhages, or a macular star defines a very low MS risk subgroup.
- In the ONTT, treatment with a lower dose of oral corticosteroids (1 mg/kg per day) was associated with an increased risk of recurrent optic neuritis, with a 41% chance of recurrence at 5 years among patients who received oral prednisone, versus 25% for those who received high-dose intravenous methylprednisolone (1000 mg/day) or placebo.
- High-dose steroids hasten the rate, but not the final extent, of visual recovery in optic neuritis, and the decision to use this therapy should be individualized.
- Interferon beta-1a or beta-1b therapy should be considered in selected high-risk patients.

1.1 Idiopathic Optic Neuritis

1.1.1 Clinically Isolated Syndrome

Idiopathic optic neuritis is the most common cause of optic neuropathy in the young. It is an isolated inflammatory optic neuropathy secondary to demyelination, and is considered one of the clinically isolated syndromes suggestive of multiple sclerosis (MS) [28, 57]. Indeed, isolated acute optic neuritis is often the first sign of MS, and many patients with MS develop optic neuritis during the course of their disease [41, 42]. For many patients, carrying the diagnosis of “optic neuritis” is equivalent to having a “high risk of MS” [2]. It is therefore essential that the correct diagnosis be made in a young patient presenting with visual loss [59].

1.1.2 Clinical Features of Acute Idiopathic Optic Neuritis

Idiopathic optic neuritis is typically characterized by the following clinical characteristics [28, 57]:

- Young women (3-to-1 female-to-male ratio)
- Unilateral (rarely bilateral)
- Acute to subacute onset (usually rapidly progressive over a few days)
- Decreased visual acuity (variable)
- Decreased color vision (usually pronounced)
- Pain with eye movements (in >90% of cases)
- Exacerbation with heat or exercise (Uhthoff phenomenon)
- Absence of any systemic or neurologic symptoms

1.1.3 Examination Findings in Acute Idiopathic Optic Neuritis

- Relative afferent pupillary defect (if unilateral or asymmetric optic neuropathy)
- Funduscopy:
 - Normal optic nerve in the acute phase (in two-thirds of cases) or swollen optic nerve (in one-third of cases)

- Normal macula and retina (no exudates, no hemorrhages)
- Optic disc pallor (at least 4-6 weeks after onset)
- Visual field test: variable, but most often central scotoma
- MRI: depending on the quality of imaging, 50%–90% of patients with optic neuritis show enhancement of the optic nerve on orbital MRI; however, this finding is nonspecific [28, 57]

Summary for the Clinician

- Familiarity with both the characteristic clinical features as well as the typical examination findings in idiopathic optic neuritis will greatly decrease the chance of misdiagnosing the cause of the visual loss, and overlooking the risk of MS.
- The optic nerve appears normal in the acute phase in about two-thirds of cases (retrobulbar optic neuritis), and is swollen in about one-third of cases (anterior optic neuritis or papillitis).
- In all cases, pallor of the disc develops only 4–6 weeks after the onset of visual loss.

1.2 Natural History of Acute Idiopathic Optic Neuritis

Some spontaneous visual recovery is a nearly universal feature of idiopathic acute optic neuritis, and the visual prognosis for these patients is usually excellent, regardless of treatment; however, the risk of subsequent development of MS after an isolated attack of idiopathic optic neuritis has been estimated as high as 74% at 15 years [22, 24, 31, 35, 43, 60].

1.2.1 Important Studies

The natural history of optic neuritis has been clarified by a number of recent studies, among which

the Optic Neuritis Treatment Trial (ONTT) [6] is the largest. Natural history data have been collected from a long-term prospective study carried out in Boston [12], from a Queens Square study in London [16], from a prospective study performed in Barcelona [71], and from several clinical trials involving immunomodulatory drugs [9, 15, 16, 18, 26, 31, 56]. Data from these studies have contributed to our understanding of the natural history of optic neuritis. The study descriptions and results are summarized in Table 1.1.

1.2.2 Visual Prognosis

The ONTT confirmed that spontaneous visual recovery begins rapidly (within 3 weeks) in about 80% of patients with idiopathic acute optic neuritis, and continues for up to 1 year [50, 52]. The ONTT also emphasized that if at least some improvement does not occur within 5 weeks, the diagnosis of idiopathic optic neuritis should be reconsidered. At 1-year follow-up almost all patients had visual acuity in the affected eye of better than 20/40, and half of patients had visual acuity of at least 20/20 (see Table 1.2). Nevertheless, a majority of patients complained of permanent visual dysfunction including [50, 52]:

- Impaired contrast sensitivity
- Decreased color vision
- Difficulty with motion perception
- Diminished intensity of light

Following optic neuritis, patients often also experience Uhthoff phenomenon, a transient visual decline following exposure to heat or exertion.

Although intravenous corticosteroids hasten visual recovery, visual outcome at 6 months was the same for all treatment groups. Indeed, a meta-analysis of 12 randomized controlled trials of steroid treatment in MS and optic neuritis confirmed that although corticosteroids were effective in improving short-term visual recovery, there was no statistically significant benefit in long-term outcome [14].

Summary for the Clinician

- Some spontaneous visual recovery is a nearly universal feature of idiopathic acute optic neuritis, and the visual prognosis of these patients is usually excellent, regardless of treatment.
- Intravenous steroids hasten visual recovery, but have no effect on final visual outcome.

1.2.3 Risk of Recurrence of Optic Neuritis

In the ONTT, the probability of recurrence of optic neuritis in either eye was 35 % at 10 years [52]. Treatment with oral corticosteroids was associated with an increased risk of recurrent optic neuritis. In fact, as shown in Table 1.2, patients who received low-dose oral prednisone had the highest rate of recurrence at 5 years compared to those who received intravenous methylprednisolone or placebo [50]. At 10 years, the recurrence risk was still higher when compared to the methylprednisolone and placebo groups [52].

Summary for the Clinician

- Oral corticosteroids in conventional doses of 1 mg/kg per day may increase the risk of recurrence, and should not be used in the treatment of acute idiopathic optic neuritis.

1.2.4 Risk of Developing Multiple Sclerosis

Even prior to the advent of MRI, several studies had emphasized the risk of developing MS following an episode of isolated optic neuritis [22, 24, 35, 40, 59]. Subsequent studies have shown that brain MRI is the most powerful predictor of MS in patients with acute idiopathic optic neuritis [8, 9, 13, 15, 16, 18, 26, 29, 31, 40, 46, 47,

Table 1.1. Summary of large studies evaluating the natural history and management of idiopathic acute optic neuritis. (*BENEFIT* Betaseron in Newly Emerging Multiple Sclerosis for Initial Treatment Study, *CHAMPS* Controlled High Risk Avonex Multiple Sclerosis Study, *ETOMS* Early Treatment of Multiple Sclerosis Study, *LONS* Longitudinal Optic Neuritis Study, *ON* optic neuritis, *ONTT* Optic Neuritis Treatment Trial)

Study name	Period of enrolment	Patient number	Type of study	Methods	Follow-up (years)	Risk of clinically definite MS
Boston (Rizzo and Lessell 1988) [60]	1973–1988	60 (all ON)	Observational study; long-term prospective; natural history	Follow-up of a group of patients with isolated optic neuritis. No MRI data	15	74% of women; 34% of men
Sweden (Söderström et al. 1998) [68]	1990–1995	116 (all ON)	Observational study; short-term prospective; natural history	Follow-up of a group of patients with isolated optic neuritis. A baseline MRI was obtained	2.1	Normal MRI: 6%; abnormal MRI: 34.5%; (≥ 3 lesions)
Milan (Ghezzi et al. 1999) [29]	1982–1993	102 (all ON)	Observational study; long-term prospective; natural history	Follow-up of a group of patients with isolated optic neuritis in a serial MRI study	8–10	Normal MRI: 0%; abnormal MRI: 52.1%; (≥ 1 lesion)
Queens Square (Brex et al. 2002) [13]	1988–2002	71 (36 ON)	Observational study; long-term prospective; natural history	Follow-up of a group of patients with clinically isolated syndromes in a serial MRI study	14	Normal MRI: 19%; abnormal MRI: 88%; (≥ 1 lesion)
Barcelona (Tintoré et al. 2005) [71]	1995–2004	320 (123 ON)	Observational study; short-term prospective; natural history	Follow-up of a group of patients with clinically isolated syndromes in a serial MRI study (using MRI component of McDonald criteria)	2–3	Normal MRI: 5.9%; abnormal MRI: 55%
ONTT/LHONS [6, 51, 52, 53, 54]	1988–1991	388 (all ON)	Randomized double-blind	Randomization in 3 arms: (1) IV methylprednisolone (250 mg q 6 h for 3 days), followed by oral prednisone (1 mg/kg per day for 11 days); (2) oral prednisone alone (1 mg/kg per day for 14 days); (3) oral placebo	10	Normal MRI: 22%; abnormal MRI: 56%; (≥ 1 lesion); no difference between treatment groups

Adapted from Atkins EJ, Bioussé V, Newman NJ (2006) The natural history of optic neuritis. *Rev Neurol Dis* 3:45–55 [3].

Table 1.1. (*continued*) Summary of large studies evaluating the natural history and management of idiopathic acute optic neuritis. (*BENEFIT* Betaseron in Newly Emerging Multiple Sclerosis for Initial Treatment Study, *CHAMPS* Controlled High Risk Avonex Multiple Sclerosis Study, *ETOMS* Early Treatment of Multiple Sclerosis Study, *LONS* Longitudinal Optic Neuritis Study, *ON* optic neuritis, *ONTT* Optic Neuritis Treatment Trial)

Study name	Period of enrolment	Patient number	Type of study	Methods	Follow-up (years)	Risk of clinically definite MS
CHAMPS/CHAMPIONS [15, 16]	1996–1998	383 (192 ON)	Randomized double-blind	Randomization of high-risk patients with a clinically isolated syndrome (≥ 2 MRI lesions) to (1) interferon beta-la (Avonex*) (30 µg IM) or (2) placebo	3	All with abnormal MRI (≥ 2 lesions); 35% in interferon group; 50% in placebo group
ETOMS (Comi et al. 2001) [18]	1995–1997	309 (98 ON)	Randomized double-blind	Randomization of high-risk patients with a clinically isolated syndrome (≥ 2 MRI lesions) to (1) interferon beta-la (Rebif®) (22 µg SC weekly for 2 years) or (2) placebo	2	All with abnormal MRI (≥ 4 lesions); 34% in interferon group; 45% in placebo group
BENEFIT (Freedman and colleagues 2006) [26, 56]	2004–2006	487 (80 ON)	Randomized double-blind	Randomization of high-risk patients with a clinically isolated syndrome (≥ 2 MRI lesions) to (1) interferon beta-lb (Betaseron*) (250 µg SC every other day for 2 years) or (2) placebo	2	All with abnormal MRI (≥ 2 lesions); 28% in interferon group; 45% in placebo group

Adapted from Atkins EJ, Bioussé V, Newman NJ (2006) The natural history of optic neuritis. *Rev Neurol Dis* 3:45–55 [3].

Table 1.2. Summary of results from the Optic Neuritis Treatment Trial

Visual prognosis [50, 52]		
Visual acuity (affected eye)	1-year results (% , n=454)	10-year results (% , n=319)
20/40 or better	95	91
20/20 or better	50	69
Risk of recurrence of optic neuritis in either eye [50, 52]		
Treatment group	5-year follow-up (%)	10-year follow-up (%)
Oral prednisone (1 mg/kg)	41	44
IV methylprednisolone	25	29
Placebo	25	31
Development of multiple sclerosis [49, 51]		
Treatment group	5-year follow-up (%)	
Oral prednisone (1 mg/kg)	32	
IV methylprednisolone	27	
Placebo	31	
Overall	30	
Brain MRI at baseline	10-year follow-up (%)	
No lesion	22	
One lesion	52	
> one lesion	56	
Overall	38	

49, 51, 54, 56, 68]. This is in accordance with the recent modification of MS diagnostic criteria, which now include MRI changes (Table 1.3) [5, 19, 34, 39, 55]. Several important studies have defined the risk of developing MS, and the results are shown in Tables 1.1 and 1.2.

The ONTT did not show any demographic or clinical features of optic neuritis predictive of MS development among patients with an abnormal baseline MRI. However, in patients with a normal baseline MRI, the risk of developing MS was 3 times lower for men than for women. The risk was also lower for those who had optic nerve head edema (anterior optic neuritis) (Table 1.4).

It has been suggested that patients with MS who initially present with acute optic neuroi-

tis have a better long-term prognosis regarding conversion to MS than those who present with another clinically isolated syndrome [41, 42, 71]. Tintoré et al. [71] propose that the reason why isolated optic neuritis patients may have a smaller risk for conversion to MS is because they more often have a normal baseline MRI than patients with other clinically isolated syndromes. They emphasized that if a patient with optic neuritis has abnormal baseline MRI results, his or her prognosis for MS conversion does not differ from that of other patients with different clinically isolated syndromes. Similarly, the CHAMPS [16] and ETOMS [18] trials found no differences in clinical or MRI behavior between their clinically isolated syndrome groups and their placebo groups.

Table 1.3. The 2005 revised McDonald criteria for the diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. (CSF cerebrospinal fluid, MRI magnetic resonance imaging, MS multiple sclerosis)

Clinical presentation	Additional data needed for MS diagnosis
Two or more attacks with objective evidence of two or more lesions	None
Two or more attacks with objective evidence of one lesion	Dissemination in space demonstrated by MRI ^a , <i>or</i> two or more lesions characteristic of MS on MRI <i>with</i> positive CSF (oligoclonal bands or raised IgG index)
One attack with objective clinical evidence of two or more lesions	Dissemination in time demonstrated by MRI ^b , <i>or</i> await a second clinical attack
One attack with objective clinical evidence of one lesion (clinically isolated syndrome)	Dissemination in space demonstrated by MRI, <i>or</i> two or more lesions characteristic of MS <i>with</i> positive CSF
Insidious neurological progression suggestive of MS	Positive CSF <i>and</i> dissemination in space <i>and</i> time demonstrated by MRI, <i>and</i> continued progression for at least 1 year

^aMRI lesions disseminated in space: at least three of the following:

1. One gadolinium-enhancing lesion or nine T2-hyperintense lesions (see Fig. 1.2).
2. At least one infratentorial lesion (includes brainstem and spinal cord).
3. At least one juxtacortical lesion.
4. At least three periventricular lesions.

^bMRI lesions disseminated in time: at least one of the following:

1. If MRI is obtained more than 3 months after the clinical event, then a gadolinium-enhancing lesion at a site different from the original clinical event is sufficient. If there is no gadolinium enhancement, then a follow-up scan must be done more than 3 months later. A new T2 or gadolinium-enhancing lesion on the subsequent MRI fulfills the requirement.
2. If MRI is obtained less than 3 months after the onset of the clinical event, then a second scan more than 3 months later showing a new gadolinium-enhancing lesion fulfills the requirement. If no gadolinium-enhancing lesion is seen on the second scan, a further scan obtained more than 3 months after the first scan that shows a new gadolinium-enhancing lesion, or a new T2 hyperintense lesion, fulfills the requirement.

Data from Barkhof et al. [5], McDonald et al. [39], Polman et al. [55], and Tintoré et al. [70].

Table 1.4. Features associated with subsequent development of MS in the ONTT patients who had a normal baseline MRI (191 patients)

	N	10-year risk of MS (%)	Hazard ratio	95% CI	p
Overall	191	22			
Gender					
Women	142	25	1.00	0.12–0.98	0.05
Men	49	10	0.35		
Optic disc appearance					
Normal	110	28	1.00	0.20–0.84	0.01
Edema	81	14	0.41		
Pain					
Yes	173	24	1.00		
No	18	0			

Data from Optic Neuritis Study Group (2003) High risk and low risk profiles for the development of multiple sclerosis within 10 years after optic neuritis: experience of the Optic Neuritis Treatment Trial. Arch Ophthalmol 121:944–949 [51].

Summary for the Clinician

- The risk of subsequent development of MS after an isolated attack of idiopathic optic neuritis has been estimated to be as high as 74% at 15 years.
- In the ONTT, the overall risk of development of clinically definite MS was 30% at 5 years, 38% at 10 years, and 40% at 12 years.
- The ONTT showed no significant difference among treatment groups (low-dose oral steroid versus high-dose intravenous steroid versus placebo) in terms of the eventual development of clinically definite MS.
- Studies comparing interferon treatment with placebo show a modest but consistent reduction in the risk of developing subsequent MS in high-risk patients with an abnormal MRI.
- Brain MRI is the most powerful predictor of MS in patients with idiopathic optic neuritis.
- MRI at baseline, not clinically isolated syndrome topography, is the crucial issue at MS presentation.

1.2.5 Severity of Multiple Sclerosis in Patients Presenting with Optic Neuritis

Studies have garnered some conflicting data regarding this issue. It has been suggested that optic neuritis patients who eventually develop MS have a better neurologic prognosis (less neurologic disability) than those presenting with another clinically isolated syndrome (such as brainstem or spinal cord syndromes) (Table 1.5) [53, 74].

Summary for the Clinician

- Optic neuritis patients who ultimately develop MS may have a better neurologic prognosis than those who present with other clinically syndromes.

1.3 Management of Acute Idiopathic Optic Neuritis

Although guidelines regarding the early management of acute optic neuritis with corticosteroids were published a few years ago [33], controversy

Table 1.5. Neurologic impairment after optic neuritis. The Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) is used for rating impairment and disability in MS. It is a 20-step ordinal scale that ranges between 0.0 (normal status) and 10.0 (death due to MS). It is graded according to the findings of a standard neurologic examination summarized into several functional systems. It has been widely used in clinical trials of MS as a measure of disease progression

Study	Years of follow-up	Percentage of patients (%)	EDSS score (Expanded Disability Status Scale)	Comments
ONTT [53]	10	65	<3	All optic neuritis patients
Boston [60]	15	83	<3	All optic neuritis patients
Queen's Square [13]	14.1	68	>3	Includes optic neuritis patients and spinal cord/brainstem syndromes
London, ON [74]	12	57	>3	Includes optic neuritis patients and spinal cord/brainstem syndromes

remains regarding the optimal long-term treatment and follow-up of patients with acute idiopathic optic neuritis [34]. Careful assessment of the risk for the subsequent development of MS should be individualized using clinical examination (including detailed ophthalmologic examination) and brain MRI (Table 1.3) [2].

1.3.1 Diagnosis

The diagnosis of optic neuritis is mostly clinical. Indeed, the ONTT showed that routine blood tests including antinuclear antibodies, angiotensin-converting enzyme, syphilis testing, and chest X-ray were of no value in typical cases [7]. Visual-evoked potentials are only useful when the diagnosis of optic neuritis is uncertain [57].

A more aggressive assessment should be considered when atypical features of optic neuritis are present. Interestingly, in the ONTT, some specific ocular findings were associated with a 0% chance of developing MS within 10 years in the patients with a normal baseline MRI, including absence of light perception in the affected eye, absence of pain, severe optic disc edema, peripapillary hemorrhage, and retinal exudates (Table 1.6; Fig. 1.1). These findings emphasize the importance of a dilated fundusoscopic examination by an ophthalmologist for all patients with

Table 1.6. Features not associated with subsequent development of MS in the ONTT patients who had a normal baseline MRI. In the group of 191 patients with optic neuritis and a normal baseline MRI, none of the patients with at least one of the following characteristics subsequently developed clinically definite MS at the 10-year follow-up

	Number of patients (n=191)
Absence of light perception in the affected eye	6
Absence of periocular pain	18
Severe optic disc edema	22
Peripapillary hemorrhage	16
Retinal exudates	8

acute optic neuritis, as these findings should help identify a group of patients with very low risk of MS [49, 51, 54].

Brain MRI (including fluid attenuated inversion recovery or FLAIR images and administration of contrast) is essential to evaluate the risk of MS, and it may be repeated over time [55] (Fig. 1.2). Spinal cord imaging is usually not helpful in patients with clinically isolated optic neuritis [20]. Dedicated orbital views (thin sec-



Fig. 1.1. Fundusoscopic examination of a patient with acute painful visual loss related to an optic neuropathy. The optic nerve is very swollen and there are peripapillary hemorrhages. The optic neuritis was related to syphilis

tions with fat suppression, and administration of contrast) are only necessary in atypical optic neuritis, as the documentation of optic nerve enhancement, although very common, is not necessary in most cases of typical acute optic neuritis [28, 57].

Lumbar puncture for cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analysis is usually not necessary in patients with typical acute optic neuritis. Although CSF oligoclonal IgG bands, IgG index, and intrathecal IgG synthesis are included in the diagnostic criteria of MS, they are not specific for MS [25]. In the ONTT, CSF studies showed that only the presence of oligoclonal bands (in 50% of patients) correlated with later development of MS, but these patients also had abnormal baseline MRI, already predicting a higher risk of MS. There was no additional value of CSF evaluation [17, 30, 65, 66]. A recent study suggested that the presence of oligoclonal bands in the CSF of patients with a clinically isolated syndrome and abnormal MRI was highly specific and sensitive for early prediction of conversion to MS; however, very few patients had isolated optic neuritis in the study [38].

Summary for the Clinician

- Laboratory tests are usually only obtained to rule out an underlying disorder when the clinical presentation is not typical of acute idiopathic optic neuritis.
- Dilated fundusoscopic examination of all optic neuritis patients is essential to identify features that would place certain patients with a normal baseline MRI in a low-risk subgroup for development of subsequent MS (Table 1.6).
- Follow-up should demonstrate spontaneous improvement of visual function within a few weeks in >90% of cases and the absence of improvement should raise concern about another diagnosis.
- Lumbar puncture should only be performed in select atypical cases of optic neuritis, especially in bilateral cases, in childhood, or when an infectious or systemic inflammatory disorder is suspected [57].
- Brain MRI is essential for all optic neuritis patients, and this has become the standard of care to evaluate the risk of MS.

1.3.2 Acute Therapeutic Options

Acute treatment options for acute idiopathic optic neuritis include intravenous methylprednisolone or observation alone. Intravenous methylprednisolone hastens visual recovery, but has no effect on the final visual outcome. In patients with abnormal baseline MRI, treatment with intravenous steroids may delay the onset of MS within the first 2 years following an episode of optic neuritis [7]. Intravenous methylprednisolone as used in the ONTT is generally well tolerated, but mild steroid-related side-effects are common, including insomnia, weight gain, and mood alteration [7]. As emphasized by the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) practice parameter statement [33], oral prednisone in conventional doses of 1 mg/kg per day should not be used in the treatment of idiopathic acute

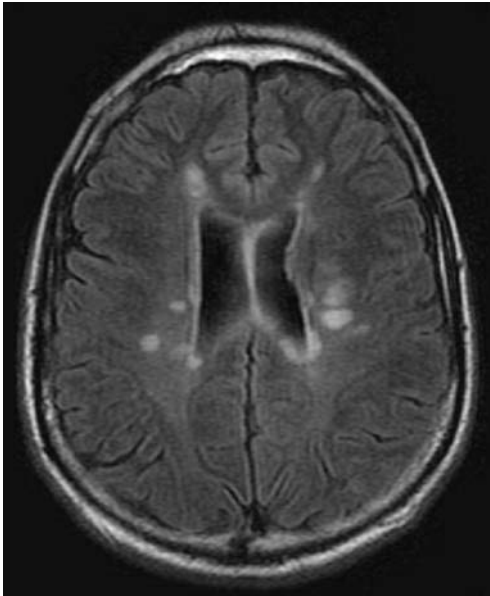


Fig. 1.2. Axial brain MRI (FLAIR sequence) demonstrating hypersignals in the periventricular white matter

optic neuritis. It is unclear whether high-dose oral corticosteroids would also increase the risk of recurrent optic neuritis [33]. A small prospective controlled clinical trial of oral methylprednisolone (500 mg every day for 5 days) showed no increased rate of demyelinating attacks [67]. Some centers now routinely use high-dose oral prednisone (1250 mg) once daily for 3–5 days; however, supportive evidence is lacking, and no trial comparing intravenous high-dose (1000 mg per day) to oral high-dose (1250 mg per day) has been done.

Intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG) may attenuate clinical and MRI-identified disease activity in patients with relapsing–remitting MS [1, 36, 69]; however, a randomized trial of IVIG treatment in acute optic neuritis concluded that there was no effect of IVIG on long-term visual function or preservation of optic nerve axonal function [64].

Summary for the Clinician

- Oral corticosteroids in conventional doses of 1 mg/kg per day may increase the risk of recurrence, and should *not* be used in the treatment of acute idiopathic optic neuritis.
- Intravenous methylprednisolone hastens visual recovery, but has no effect on the final visual outcome.
- The decision to use intravenous methylprednisolone should be individualized and should be made after discussing the risks and benefits of this therapy with the patient.
- No treatment is a reasonable alternative, as steroids do not change the long-term prognosis of patients with optic neuritis.

1.3.3 Chronic Therapeutic Options

Recent pathological and MRI studies have suggested that axonal damage occurs early during the course of MS [2, 10, 21, 23, 41, 44, 58]. It has been emphasized that, once axonal damage occurs, it may result in permanent neurological deficits. The issue of axonal damage and gray matter atrophy is at the center of the ongoing debate over whether to intervene early with immunomodulatory agents in patients with clinically isolated syndromes [4, 27], especially those predicted to be at high risk for the subsequent development of MS. Results of the CHAMPS [16] ETOMS [18], and BENEFIT [26, 56] studies suggest that patients with optic neuritis and abnormal baseline MRI (“high-risk patients”) should be considered for interferon beta therapy. The CHAMPIONS study [15] even suggested that such treatment should be initiated early after the first occurrence of optic neuritis. A trial to assess the effect of glatiramer acetate in monosymptomatic patients has been initiated.

Some authors advocate immediate treatment to avoid any further axonal injury, while others suggest delaying long-term treatment, and repeating the MRI to prove the dissemination of lesions in space and time prior to initiating such a

serious and costly treatment. This topic remains debated and recommendations vary among countries [44].

IVIG has also been suggested to facilitate recovery in chronic optic neuritis [61, 62, 63, 72, 73]; however, IVIG administration does not significantly reverse persistent visual loss [48].

Summary for the Clinician

- Evidence from recent randomized, placebo-controlled trials supports early intervention with immunomodulatory agents in high-risk patients with clinically isolated syndromes to decrease the risk of subsequent development of MS [4, 28].
- The decision to treat high-risk optic neuritis patients with immunomodulatory agents should be individualized.

1.4 Pediatric Optic Neuritis

The natural history and management of optic neuritis in children is different than in adults [11]. The data on pediatric optic neuritis are scarce and controversial, and are primarily based on small retrospective chart reviews [12, 45], and on one longitudinal study [37]. These limited studies suggest:

- Mean age of onset: around 10 years
- 2/3 female
- 2/3 have disc edema (compared to 1/3 of adults)
- 2/3 have bilateral involvement
- 2/3 have a history of a preceding febrile illness within 2 weeks of onset
- Those with unilateral involvement may have a greater tendency to develop subsequent MS, but also carry a better visual prognosis than those with bilateral involvement
- Subsequent development of MS is less than in adults, and those who do develop MS are older (mean age 12 years) at the onset of optic neuritis

Summary for the Clinician

- In children, data are lacking regarding both the effects of intravenous methylprednisolone on visual recovery and the effects of immunomodulatory agents on the subsequent development of MS.
- Based on the studies done in adults, it would seem reasonable to offer IV steroids in cases with severe visual loss (especially when bilateral), and to consider immunomodulatory agents when the brain MRI is abnormal [4].

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