



Clinical decision making for anterior and posterior lingual abscess: a systematic review

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Contributions: (I) Conception and design: Z Wilson, J Diab; (II) Administrative support: None; (III) Provision of study materials or patients: None; (IV) Collection and assembly of data: Z Wilson, J Diab; (V) Data analysis and interpretation: All authors; (VI) Manuscript writing: All authors; (VII) Final approval of manuscript: All authors.

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Background: Lingual abscess is a rare clinical entity defined as an infectious process within the tongue parenchyma. A lingual abscess may occur in the anterior two thirds or posterior aspect of the tongue. Historically, there are differences in causation, presentation and management between anterior and posterior based abscess. This systematic review aims to critically analyse differences between anterior and posterior lingual abscess.

Methods: A systematic review was conducted using the terms “lingual abscess”, and “tongue abscess” across the databases PubMed, SCOPUS, Medline, Embase and Google Scholar. Further articles were identified through citation screening of the selected articles. The authors included articles published from 1970 to 2023, published in English that reported cases of lingual abscess. Risk of bias was assessed using a standardized tool.

Results: A total of 53 studies with 73 cases of lingual abscess were identified. There were 45 (61.6%) anterior, 26 posterior (35.6%) and 2 (2.8%) total aspects of the tongue. Clinical presentation of otalgia (25.9% *vs.* 2.2%, $P=0.002$) and sialorrhoea (18.5% *vs.* 4.3%, $P=0.047$) was significantly more likely in a posterior located abscess, along with involvement of the epiglottis compared to anterior abscess (18.5% *vs.* 0.0%, $P=0.002$). An anterior abscess was significantly more likely to have no radiographic imaging (41.3% *vs.* 7.4%, $P=0.002$) or ultrasound (17.4% *vs.* 0.0%, $P=0.022$), whereas a posterior abscess was significantly more likely to receive computed tomography scanning (85.2% *vs.* 34.8%, $P<0.001$). No significant difference was seen between anterior and posterior lingual abscess in relation to drainage management, isolated pathogens, or antimicrobial prescribing.

Conclusions: A low threshold for imaging should be considered when patients present with signs and symptoms consistent with a posterior lingual abscess. Management principles should involve maintaining airway patency, drainage of the abscess and antimicrobial therapy.

Keywords: Lingual abscess; tongue abscess; tongue; abscess; posterior lingual abscess

Received: 27 March 2023; Accepted: 04 August 2023; Published online: 30 August 2023.

doi: 10.21037/ajo-23-13

View this article at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21037/ajo-23-13>

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Introduction

Lingual abscess is a rare clinical entity defined as an infectious process within the tongue parenchyma (1,2). The tongue has many protective mechanisms against trauma and foreign pathogen such as keratinized epithelium, rich vascular supply plus lymphatic drainage, thick musculature, and the antimicrobial properties of saliva. A lingual abscess may occur in the anterior two thirds or posterior aspect of the tongue. Posteriorly located abscesses may pose more clinical uncertainty in diagnosis compared to those located anteriorly. The formation of a lingual abscess is likely due to the dysfunction and/or disruption of the inherent protective features and mechanisms associated (1). An abscess located anteriorly may be associated with local trauma, odontogenic infections and penetration of foreign bodies as opposed to a posterior location with factors such as pharyngitis/tonsillitis and infected thyroglossal cysts (1,3,4).

Lingual abscesses present an increased risk of airway compromise and therefore should be assessed and treated promptly to reduce morbidity and mortality. In the pre-antibiotic era, lingual abscesses had a mortality rate of 3%, now in the modern era with antibiotic treatment and advanced imaging techniques an improvement in overall mortality rate is difficult to determine due to limited case reports (5). The vast majority of the literature are case reports with little consensus on aetiology, clinical characteristics, and management. This systematic review will critically analyse the clinical presentation, investigations, and management, with a particular focus on the differences between an anterior and posterior lingual abscess.

Methods

A systematic review was conducted on the 2nd of January 2023 using the terms “lingual abscess”, and “tongue abscess” across the databases PubMed, SCOPUS, Medline, Embase and Google Scholar. The protocol of this systematic review was published online at the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) under registration number CRD42023396816. The inclusion criteria were confirmed cases of a lingual abscess published in case reports or case series. All articles within the published literature between 1970 and 2022 were eligible for inclusion. The exclusion criteria were articles not published in English, no reported management, and review articles. Search results were reviewed independently by both reviewers based on title and abstract, with subsequent full-

text screening of potentially eligible articles to determine inclusion. The expertise of senior surgical colleagues was available if uncertainty arose. We present this article in accordance with the PRISMA reporting checklist (available at <https://www.theajo.com/article/view/10.21037/ajo-23-13/rc>) (6). The Joanna Briggs Institute checklist, standardized tool to assess risk of bias for case reports and case series was used to assess for risk of bias and is provided in [Figure S1](#) (7).

For included studies, data extraction was conducted independently by one author and crosschecked by another. Data extracted from eligible studies included patient characteristics, clinical presentation, radiological evaluation, abscess location, predisposing risk factors, management and perioperative morbidity and mortality. In addition, antibiotics treatment used, and any pathogen confirmed from investigative cultures.

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.0 (IBM, New York, NY, USA). Continuous variables were expressed as mean, and standard deviation. The differences between proportions for anterior and posterior abscess groups were analysed using Chi-square test and a student *t*-test for categorical and continuous variables, respectively. The level of statistical significance was set at P value of 0.05. Ethics approval was not required for this study. Because of the retrospective nature of the research, the requirement for informed consent was waived.

Results

Study selection

A total of 53 studies were included in the present review ([Figure 1](#)). Forty-two articles were case reports and 11 were case series, reporting on a total of 73 cases of lingual abscess. Nineteen studies originated from Asia, 16 from North America, 15 from Europe and the remaining 3 from Africa ([Table 1](#)).

Patient characteristics

Of the 73 patients diagnosed, the mean age was 42 (± 19) years with a male predominance ($n=46$, 63.0%). Poor oral hygiene was reported in 23 patients (31.5%) with other noted risk factors including diabetes mellitus ($n=9$, 12.3%) and immunocompromise ($n=4$, 5.5%). The location of the abscess was reported in 45 (61.6%) anterior, 26 posterior

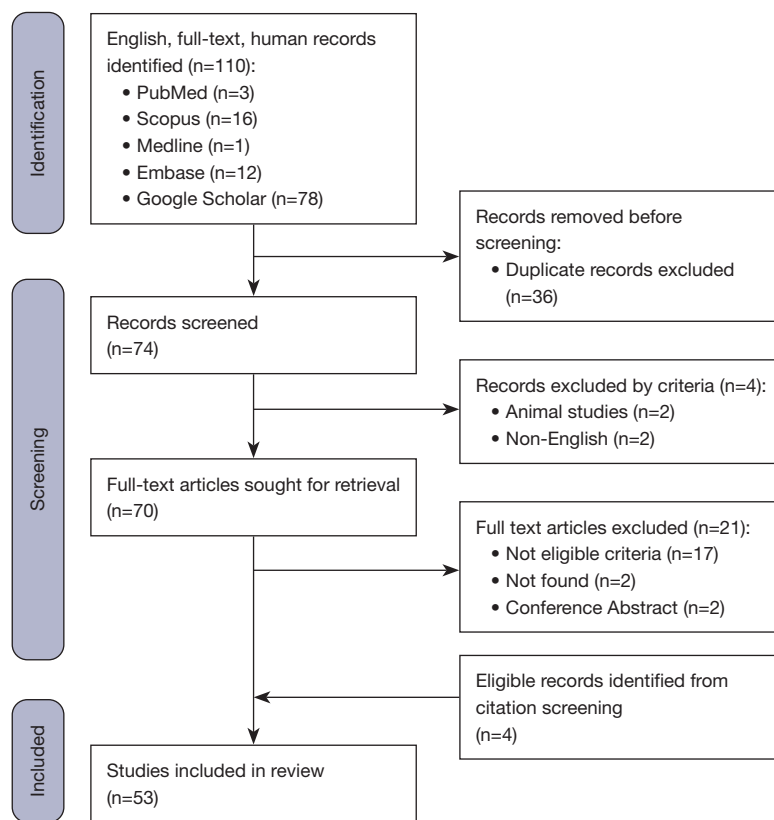


Figure 1 PRISMA flow diagram.

(35.6%) and 2 (2.8%) involving the entirety the tongue (Table 2).

Clinical presentation

The most prevalent reported symptoms included tongue swelling (n=68, 93.2%), dysphagia (n=40, 54.8%), odynophagia (n=38, 52.1%) and localised tongue pain (n=31, 42.5%). Less common symptoms included dysphonia (n=16, 21.9%), dyspnoea (n=9, 12.3%), otalgia (n=8, 11.0%) and sialorrhoea (n=7, 9.6%) (Figure 2). A posterior lingual abscess was significantly more likely to report symptoms of otalgia (25.9% vs. 2.2%, P=0.002) and sialorrhoea (18.5% vs. 4.3%, P=0.047, Table 3) than an anterior based abscess. Airway obstruction of any degree was reported in 17 (23.3%) patients with no significant difference between anterior and posterior lingual abscess (19.6% vs. 29.6%, P=0.326, Table 3).

There were no known predisposing factors to lingual abscess formation reported in 37 (50.7%) cases. Known predisposing factors included trauma (n=12, 16.4%), foreign body (n=9, 12.3%), odontogenic infections/caries (n=7,

9.6%), recent pharyngitis and/or tonsilitis (n=4, 5.5%) and one reported case of oro-motor dysfunction attributed to underlying bulbar amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS).

The most common imaging modality utilised included computed tomography (CT) (n=39, 53.4%), followed by ultrasound (n=8, 11.0%), magnetic resonance imaging (n=7, 9.6%), plain radiography (n=3, 4.1%). On presentation two patients underwent flexible nasopharyngoscopy as part of the investigative work-up. Twenty-one patients (28.8%) did not undergo any form of imaging during investigation. A posterior lingual abscess was significantly more likely to have CT compared to the anterior cohort (85.2% vs. 34.8%, P<0.001, Table 3). Comparatively, ultrasound was significantly more likely to be used with an anterior based abscess than posterior (17.4% vs. 0.0%, P=0.022, Table 3). Furthermore, an anterior based abscess was significantly more likely to not have imaging compared to a posterior abscess (41.3% vs. 7.4%, P=0.002). Oedema and/or cellulitis of pharynx, epiglottis, sublingual, and submental areas were reported in 16 (21.9%) cases. A posterior lingual abscess was significantly more likely to have involvement of the

Table 1 Included studies reporting cases of lingual abscess arranged in chronological order

Study	Year
Jain (8)	1970
Palestini (9)	1981
Eames (10)	1983
Legget (11)	1987
Roberge (12)	1989
Sands (4)	1993
Renehan (13)	1993
Hehar (14)	1996
Jungell (15)	1996
Muñoz (16)	1998
Olsen (17)	2001
Brook (18)	2002
Eviatar (19)	2004
Antoniades (20)	2004
Balatsouras (21)	2004
de Waal (22)	2004
Kim (23)	2006
Kiroglu (24)	2006
Boon (3)	2009
Nariai (25)	2010
Tajudeen (26)	2011
Vellin (27)	2011
Byahatti (28)	2011
Veloo (29)	2011
Harrington (30)	2012
Pallagatti (31)	2012
Barrueco (32)	2012
Kikidis (33)	2012
Solomon (34)	2012
Kulkarni (35)	2013
Burnham (36)	2013
Varghese (37)	2013
Kettaneh (38)	2014
Coughlin (39)	2014

Table 1 (continued)**Table 1** (continued)

Study	Year
Ozgur (40)	2015
Lefler (41)	2016
Pandey (42)	2016
Kuge (43)	2017
Bekele (44)	2017
Al-Anee (45)	2018
Gama (46)	2018
Potigailo (47)	2018
Srivanitchapoom (1)	2018
Tewari (48)	2018
Schweigert (5)	2020
Akin (49)	2020
Araidy (50)	2020
Mesolella (51)	2021
Wong (52)	2021
Bülbul (53)	2021
Carotenuto (2)	2022
Mesfin (54)	2022
Little (55)	2022

epiglottis than an anterior based abscess (18.5% vs. 0.0%, $P=0.002$).

Management

All but two cases underwent aspiration (45.8%) or incision and drainage (62.5%). There was no significant difference between these management options in an anterior versus posterior location ($P>0.05$, *Table 3*). A tracheostomy was performed on 8 (11.0%) patients in this cohort. In the cases that reported bacterial cultures, gram-positive organisms were most common (48.8%), followed by mixed growths (34.9%) and gram negative (16.3%). There was no significant difference in isolated pathogens in these categories when comparing an anterior and posterior lingual abscess ($P>0.05$, *Table 3*). The most common individual isolated pathogens reported included *Fusobacterium nucleatum* (7.0%) and *Streptococcus viridans* (7.0%) (*Table 4*).

Table 2 Summary of clinical variables for lingual abscess

Clinical variables	Values
Demographic data	
Age (years), mean (SD)	41.8 (18.8)
Sex	
Male	46 (63.0%)
Female	27 (37.0%)
Abscess location	
Anterior	45 (61.6%)
Posterior	26 (35.6%)
Anterior + posterior	2 (2.8%)
Symptoms and signs	
Tongue swelling	68 (93.2%)
Odynophagia	38 (52.1%)
Dysphagia	40 (54.8%)
Dyspnoea	9 (12.3%)
Dysphonia	16 (21.9%)
Sialorrhoea	7 (9.6%)
Otalgia	8 (11.0%)
Localised tongue pain	31 (42.5%)
Airway obstruction	17 (23.3%)
Surrounding structure involvement	
Total	16 (21.9%)
Sublingual	6
Pharynx	4
Epiglottis	5
Submental	1
Predisposing factors	
Not specified	40 (54.8%)
Trauma	
Dentition/tongue bite	6
Medical/dental procedure	4
Other	2
Foreign body	
Fish bone	6
Other	3

Table 2 (continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Clinical variables	Values
Odontogenic infections/caries	7 (9.6%)
Recent pharyngitis/tonsillitis	4 (5.5%)
Oro-motor dysfunction (neuromuscular disease)	1 (1.4%)
Reported risk factors	
Poor oral hygiene	23 (31.5%)
Immunocompromised	4 (5.5%)
Diabetes mellitus	9 (12.3%)
Imaging	
Computed tomography	39 (53.4%)
X-ray	3 (4.1%)
Ultrasound	8 (11.0%)
Magnetic resonance imaging	7 (9.6%)
Nil	21 (28.8%)
Flexible nasopharyngoscopy	2 (2.7%)
Management	
Aspiration	33 (45.8%)
Incision and drainage	45 (62.5%)
Not drained	1 (1.4%)
Unknown	1 (1.4%)
Anesthesia	
Local	40 (56.3%)
General	30 (42.3%)
None	1 (1.4%)
Airway management	
Endotracheal tube	13 (17.8%)
Nasotracheal tube	1 (1.4%)
Tracheostomy	8 (11.0%)
None	44 (60.3%)
Unknown	7 (9.6%)
Morbidity	
Recurrence	3
Sepsis	1
Mortality	
	1 (1.4%)

SD, standard deviation.

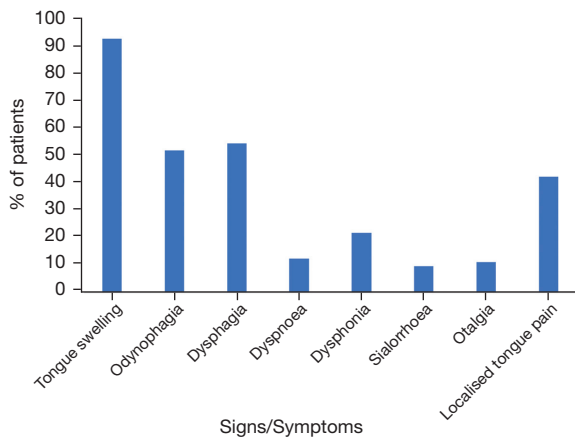


Figure 2 Signs and symptoms of lingual abscess.

The three most common antibiotics utilised included amoxicillin-clavulanic acid (21.9%), ceftriaxone (21.9%) and metronidazole (21.9%) (Table 5). There was no significant difference in antimicrobial prescribing practices between an anterior versus posterior lingual abscess ($P>0.05$, Table 3).

Discussion

We identified that a posterior lingual abscess significantly differs in its clinical presentation and use of imaging with increased risk of surrounding tissue involvement compared to an anterior based lingual abscess. The literature highlights that lingual abscess formation is more common in males (1,8,19) with a strong male predominance seen in

Table 3 Comparison of anterior and posterior lingual abscess on clinical variables and outcomes

Clinical variables	Anterior abscess (n=46)	Posterior abscess (n=27)	P value
Demographic data			
Age (years), mean (SD)	40.5 (19.8)	44.1 (17.1)	0.448
Male	28 (60.9%)	18 (66.7%)	0.620
Female	18 (39.1%)	9 (33.3%)	
Symptoms and signs			
Tongue swelling	43 (93.5%)	25 (92.6%)	0.885
Odynophagia	21 (45.7%)	17 (63.0%)	0.153
Dysphagia	22 (47.8%)	18 (66.7%)	0.118
Dyspnoea	6 (13.0%)	3 (11.1%)	0.808
Dysphonia	10 (21.7%)	6 (22.2%)	0.962
Sialorrhoea	2 (4.3%)	5 (18.5%)	0.047*
Otalgia	1 (2.2%)	7 (25.9%)	0.002*
Localised tongue pain	23 (50.0%)	8 (29.6%)	0.089
Predisposing factors			
Trauma	9 (19.6%)	3 (11.1%)	0.341
Foreign body	6 (13.0%)	3 (11.1%)	0.808
Odontogenic infections/caries	5 (10.9%)	2 (7.4%)	0.628
Recent pharyngitis/tonsillitis	1 (2.2%)	3 (11.1%)	0.105
Airway obstruction	9 (19.6%)	8 (29.6%)	0.326

Table 3 (continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Clinical variables	Anterior abscess (n=46)	Posterior abscess (n=27)	P value
Surrounding structure involvement			
Sublingual	5 (10.9%)	1 (3.7%)	0.282
Pharynx	1 (2.2%)	3 (11.1%)	0.105
Epiglottis	0 (0.0%)	5 (18.5%)	0.002*
Submental	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.7%)	0.189
Imaging			
Computed tomography	16 (34.8%)	23 (85.2%)	<0.001*
Plain radiography	3 (6.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0.175
Ultrasound	8 (17.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0.022*
Magnetic resonance imaging	4 (8.7%)	3 (11.1%)	0.735
Nil	19 (41.3%)	2 (7.4%)	0.002*
Flexible nasopharyngoscopy	0 (0.0%)	2 (7.4%)	0.061
Management			
Aspiration	18 (39.1%)	15 (55.6%)	0.173
Incision and drainage	31 (67.4%)	14 (51.9%)	0.187
Pathogen			
Gram positive	11 (23.9%)	10 (37.0%)	0.232
Gram negative	5 (10.9%)	2 (7.4%)	0.628
Mixed growth	11 (23.9%)	4 (14.8%)	0.353
Antibiotics			
Penicillin	4 (8.7%)	1 (3.7%)	0.415
Penicillin + gram-negative cover [†]	13 (28.3%)	3 (11.1%)	0.087
Broad spectrum [‡]	28 (60.9%)	21 (77.8%)	0.138
Morbidity	3 (6.5%)	1 (3.7%)	0.377
Mortality	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.7%)	0.189

[†], classified if stated as such or prescribed cephalosporin, quinolones and antimetabolites in varying combinations, e.g., ceftriaxone + cephalexin, amoxicillin-clavulanic acid + ceftriaxone; [‡], classified if prescribed aminopenicillins with beta-lactamase inhibitor +/- gentamicin, e.g., ampicillin-sulbactam, ampicillin-cloxacillin, penicillin + gentamicin; *, P<0.05. SD, standard deviation.

this cohort (63.0%) and an average age of 42 (\pm 19) years. Our review currently highlights no significant difference in male or female predominance when it comes to an anterior versus posterior lingual abscess ($P>0.05$, Table 3). The literature reports that an anterior abscess is often more associated with trauma, odontogenic infections and foreign bodies as opposed to posterior associated with surround tissue infection (tonsils, pharynx) (1,3,4). However, the

formation of a spontaneous abscess of unknown aetiology has been reported in the majority of reported cases, with no predisposing factor found in 37 cases (50.7%) within the current review (19,30). In one case Lefler reported an abscess formation was attributed to recent oral antibiotic injections, while Tajudeen and colleagues reported a case of anterior abscess attributed to a retained suture from a lingual procedure 2 years prior (26,41). Our review

Table 4 Summary of pathogens reported in cases of lingual abscess

Pathogen	Values
Unknown	16 (22.5%)
No growth	12 (16.9%)
<i>Fusobacterium nucleatum</i>	5 (7.0%)
<i>Streptococcus viridans</i>	5 (7.0%)
Mixed oral flora	4 (5.6%)
Gram positive cocci	4 (5.6%)
<i>Streptococci</i>	4 (5.6%)
<i>Bacteroides</i> spp	3 (4.2%)
Prevotella	3 (4.2%)
<i>Streptococcus anginosus</i>	3 (4.2%)
Anaerobes	2 (2.8%)
Gram negative anaerobes	2 (2.8%)
<i>Peptostreptococcus</i>	2 (2.8%)
Staphylococci	2 (2.8%)
<i>Staphylococcus aureus</i>	2 (2.8%)
<i>Streptococcus faecalis</i>	2 (2.8%)
<i>Streptococcus haemolyticus</i>	2 (2.8%)
<i>Acinetobacter lwoffii</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Bacteroides ureolyticus</i>	1 (1.4%)
Beta-haemolytic non-group A, B, D	1 (1.4%)
<i>Candida albicans</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Enterococci</i>	1 (1.4%)
Gram positive anaerobes	1 (1.4%)
Group B Streptococcus	1 (1.4%)
Group D beta-haemolytic streptococci	1 (1.4%)
<i>Haemophilus aphrophilus</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Haemophilus parainfluenzae</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Klebsiella ozaenae</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Neisseria</i>	1 (1.4%)
Porphyromonas	1 (1.4%)
<i>Prevotella melaninogenica</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Staphylococcus epidermidis</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Streptococcus agalactiae</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Streptococcus intermedius</i>	1 (1.4%)
<i>Streptococcus pyogenes</i>	1 (1.4%)

Table 5 Summary of antibiotic prescribing in cases of lingual abscess

Antibiotic	Values
Unknown	17 (23.3%)
Amoxicillin-clavulanic acid	16 (21.9%)
Ceftriaxone	16 (21.9%)
Metronidazole	16 (21.9%)
Clindamycin	14 (19.2%)
Penicillin	7 (9.6%)
Cefazolin	3 (4.1%)
Amikacin	3 (4.1%)
Phenoxymethylpenicillin	2 (2.7%)
Cefuroxime	2 (2.7%)
Amoxicillin	2 (2.7%)
Gentamicin	2 (2.7%)
Vancomycin	2 (2.7%)
Ampicillin-sulbactam	2 (2.7%)
Piperacillin-tazobactam	2 (2.7%)
Cephalexin	1 (1.4%)
Ceforanide	1 (1.4%)
Trimethoprim-sulfamethoxazole	1 (1.4%)
Ticarcillin-clavulanic acid	1 (1.4%)
Cloxacillin	1 (1.4%)
Linezolid	1 (1.4%)
Piperacillin	1 (1.4%)
Ampicillin-cloxacillin	1 (1.4%)
Teicoplanin	1 (1.4%)

did not find any of the above factors more likely to predispose a patient to an anterior compared to a posterior lingual abscess ($P>0.05$, *Table 3*). Poor oral hygiene, immunocompromised states and chronic disease such as diabetes mellitus may also play a role for predisposition to abscess formation (1,20,30).

Patients with a reported lingual abscess may present with one or combination of signs and symptoms (*Table 2*). An anterior abscess typically presents withodynophagia, dysphagia, localised pain, dysphonia and tongue swelling (19-21,51,52). Whereas, a posterior abscess clinically

may be difficult to diagnose in comparison and present with symptoms of otalgia, sialorrhoea and painful tongue protrusion (1,21,27). The posterior tongue, internal tympanic membrane and portions of the middle ear are supplied by the glossopharyngeal nerve and the suggested mechanism of referred pain from the posterior lingual abscess to the ear (3). We confirmed these findings showing that a posterior lingual abscess was significantly more likely to report otalgia and sialorrhoea compared to an anterior abscess ($P < 0.05$, *Table 3*). Given the less overt clinical signs and the potential sequelae, we recommend any patients presenting with tongue swelling and/or localised pain in combination with either one or both symptoms of otalgia and sialorrhoea have posterior lingual abscess on the list of differential diagnoses. Harrington and colleagues emphasized that there was an increased potential for airway obstruction in cases of posterior lingual abscess, while Srivanitchapoom reported impending airway obstruction upon presentation of an anteriorly located abscess (1,30). We reported no significant difference in airway obstruction for an anterior versus posterior abscess. However, the potential spread of the infection to surrounding soft tissue and structures may increase the risk of airway obstruction. The involvement of the epiglottis was only seen in cases of posterior lingual abscess in this current review. This is thought to be due to the lymphatic drainage of the posterior tongue to deep cervical lymph nodes as opposed to the anterior aspect drainage to submental and submandibular lymph nodes. With confluent collection from the posterior tongue to the pre-epiglottic region, deep cervical space infection can often have rapid onset and life-threatening complications including airway compromise (56). Timely diagnosis is needed in cases of posterior lingual abscess as the potential for surrounding tissues involvement is greater compared to an anterior presentation. Surrounding structure involvement may be underestimated given the proportion of patients (28.8%) did not receive some form of radiographical imaging.

A comprehensive clinical history and physical exam, including lingual palpation can aid in the diagnosis, particularly in cases of an anterior located abscess without the need for imaging. Several studies reported patients undergoing more than one imaging modality during investigations (23,27,35,43,51). Our review showed it was significantly more likely to identify an anterior tongue abscess based on clinical examination and/or ultrasound compared to a posterior abscess (41.3% vs. 7.4%, $P = 0.002$, *Table 3*). In a posterior based abscess, the ability to

confidently diagnose and exclude deep seated infections or malignancy can be challenging (3,4,19,21,27). We found that posterior abscess patients were significantly more likely to undergo CT compared to an anterior abscess (34.8% vs. 85.2%, $P < 0.001$, *Table 3*). This is attributed to the difficulty in visualization of posterior tongue structures on clinical exam, whereby only 2 cases reported the use of nasoendoscopy with no airway obstruction reported (21,51). In these cases, we recommend a clinical algorithm to aid in the diagnosis of a lingual abscess and if radiographic imaging is warranted (*Figure 3*). It outlines key differences that may be associated with a posterior lingual abscess to minimise the risk of a missed diagnosis. In cases with tongue swelling and pain without evidence of collection we advocate for airway monitoring due to high risk of impending compromise.

The cornerstone of lingual abscess management includes: (I) airway protection; (II) abscess drainage; and (III) antimicrobial therapy (1,19,27,38). Akin and Antoniadis both highlight that patients presenting with signs of airway compromise including dyspnoea require immediate airway management and potentially tracheostomy (20,49). While aspiration might be recommended for abscess located anteriorly, incision and drainage may be required for posterior abscess, given access constraints. In some cases, patients underwent both aspiration and subsequent incision and drainage if resolution was not achieved with one management technique (18,20,30,32,33,36,42). We did not identify any differences in surgical approach between an anterior and posterior lingual abscess treatment using incision and drainage (67.4% vs. 51.9%, $P = 0.187$, *Table 3*). The method of drainage may vary depending on the resources and clinical expertise. Only one reported mortality outcome was reported by Schweigert and colleagues which was attributed to a missed posterior lingual abscess (5). No significant difference was seen in morbidity or mortality rates, however more data is needed to ascertain any true correlation of increased risk based on location. For management, we recommend incision and drainage under general anaesthetic for posterior lingual abscess due to high risk of airway compromise (*Figure 3*). Clinician experience, patient co-morbidities and presences of systemic systems may also guide imaging and drainage decisions.

The literature reports empirical treatments should be commenced with broad-spectrum antibiotics typically covering the most common offending organisms within the oral cavity (*Streptococcus* spp, *Staphylococcus* spp, anaerobes and gram-negative) (2,21,41,42,54). Native

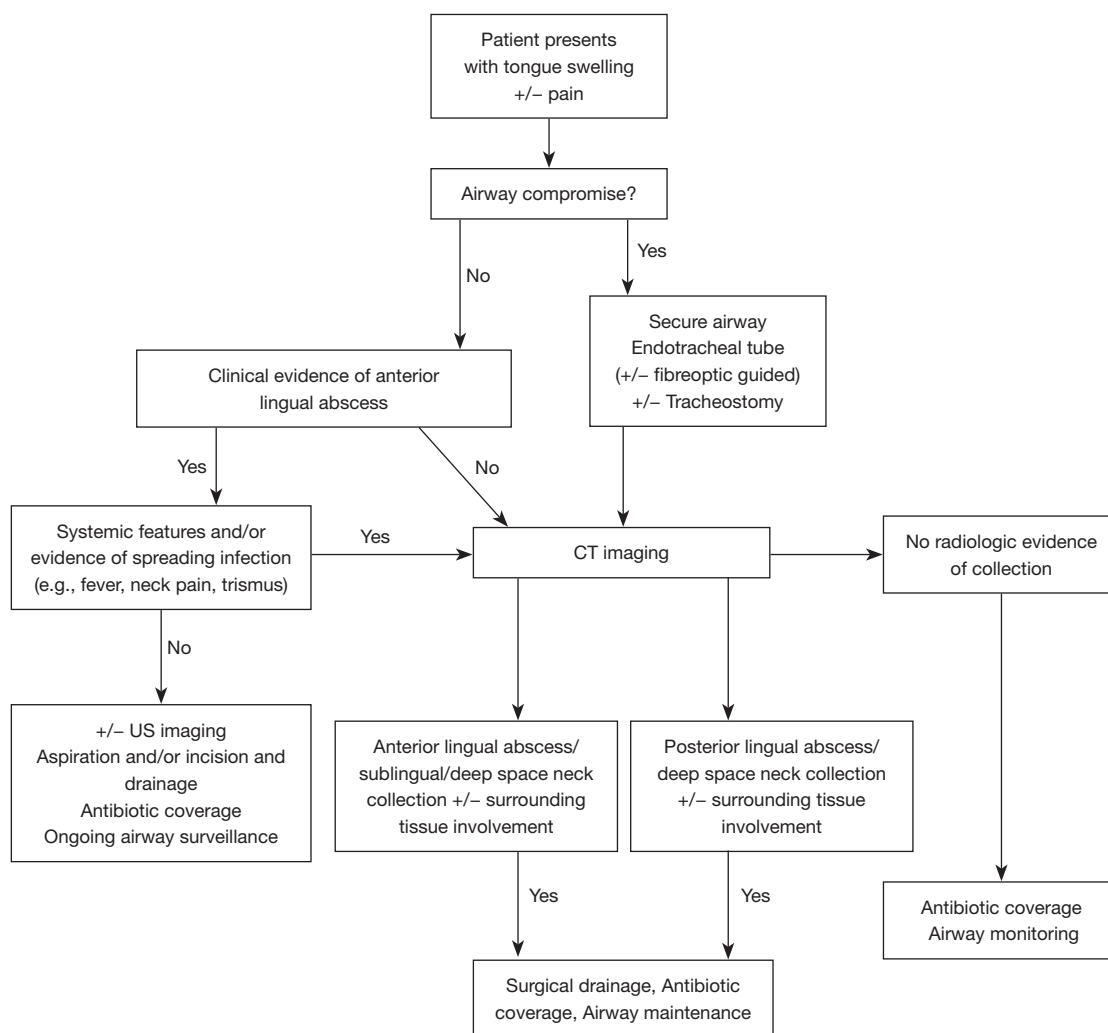


Figure 3 Flow diagram for lingual abscess workup and management. CT, computed tomography; US, ultrasound.

oral and oropharynx flora such as *Streptococcus* spp, *Staphylococcus* spp, *Haemophilus* spp, *Fusobacterium* spp, *Bacteroides* spp and anaerobes are commonly reported in cases of lingual abscesses (1,16,27,30,38,44). *Table 4* outlines the pathogens isolated, with some rarer organisms reported such as *Acinetobacter iwoffii* and *Klebsiella ozaenae*. In this review cases reported as mixed oral flora (5.6%), unknown (22.5%) or no growth (16.9%) account for just under 50%. This may be due to inaccurate reporting in the case report or series and the early administration of antibiotics affecting culture. Amoxicillin-clavulanic acid, clindamycin and ceftriaxone as multiple agents or combined with metronidazole were commonly prescribed across the literature (1,3,4,21,30). This review saw similar prescribing patterns however no significant difference was noted in

prescribing based on location of abscess. To our knowledge, no specific guidelines on empirical antibiotic treatment regimens exist for lingual abscess, however empirical treatment for odontogenic infections recommends amoxicillin and clavulanate acid as a single preparation or metronidazole used in combination with a penicillin (amoxicillin or phenoxymethylpenicillin) (57). The duration of antibiotic therapy remains unclear and was poorly reported across the literature, it is recommended however that patients show improvement in 3–5 days on whatever regime has been prescribed (1). With almost a quarter of cases not reporting specific antibiotic, we recommend that antibiotic stewardship is in line with local health guidelines that appropriately manage odontogenic infections.

The reported mortality of lingual abscess is low (1.4%),

with a single case of misdiagnosed posterior lingual abscess affecting the airway (1). With a comprehensive assessment and appropriate imaging in posterior abscesses allowing early diagnosis and definitive management (*Figure 3*), the morbidity and mortality should remain very low. The limitations of this review include the inconsistent reporting of data across the literature including biochemical markers on presentation, clinical observations, and other significant medical and/or surgical history.

Conclusions

Although anterior abscesses are largely a clinical diagnosis, posterior lingual abscesses are more likely to present with otalgia and/or sialorrhoea with CT imaging to guide involvement of surrounding structures and clarify the diagnosis. A comprehensive history and clinical assessment should accompany early airway assessment and protection as required. Thereafter the mainstays of management are the drainage of collections and antimicrobial therapy.

Acknowledgments

Funding: None.

Footnote

Reporting Checklist: The authors have completed the PRISMA reporting checklist. Available at <https://www.theajo.com/article/view/10.21037/ajo-23-13/rc>

Data Sharing Statement: Available at <https://www.theajo.com/article/view/10.21037/ajo-23-13/dss>

Peer Review File: Available at <https://www.theajo.com/article/view/10.21037/ajo-23-13/prf>

Conflicts of Interest: All authors have completed the ICMJE uniform disclosure form (available at <https://www.theajo.com/article/view/10.21037/ajo-23-13/coif>). The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Ethical Statement: The authors are accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved. Ethics approval was not required for this study. Because of the retrospective nature of the research, the requirement for informed

consent was waived.

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doi: 10.21037/ajo-23-13

Cite this article as: Wilson Z, Diab J, Ashford B. Clinical decision making for anterior and posterior lingual abscess: a systematic review. *Aust J Otolaryngol* 2023;6:21.

Study	Year	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	JBIScore
Jain	1970	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	7/10
Jungell	1996	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	7/10
Antoniades	2004	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	7/10
Balatsouras	2004	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	7/10
Kim	2006	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	8/10
Kiroglu	2006	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	7/10
Byahatti	2011	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	7/10
Pandey	2016	Green	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	7/10
Srivanitchapoom	2018	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	8/10
Akin	2020	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	8/10
Araidy	2020	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Red	8/10
Palestini	1981	Green	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	5/8
Eames	1983	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Legget	1987	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Roberge	1989	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Renehan	1993	Green	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	5/8
Sands	1993	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Hehar	1996	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Muñoz	1998	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Olsen	2001	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Brook	2002	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
de Waal	2004	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Eviatar	2004	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Boon	2009	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Nariai	2010	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Tajudeen	2011	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Vellin	2011	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Veloo	2011	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Kikidis	2012	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Harrington	2012	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Solomon	2012	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Barrueco	2012	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Pallagatti	2012	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Kulkarni	2013	Green	Red	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	5/8
Varghese	2013	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Burnham	2013	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Coughlin	2014	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Kettaneh	2014	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Ozgur	2015	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Lefler	2016	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Kuge	2017	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	8/8
Bekele	2017	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Al-Anee	2018	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Gama	2018	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	8/8
Potigailo	2018	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Tewari	2018	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Schweigert	2020	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	6/8
Mesoilella	2021	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Wong	2021	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Bülbül	2021	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8
Little	2022	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	8/8
Carotenuto	2022	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	8/8
Mesfin	2022	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Green	Red	Green	Black	Black	7/8

Figure S1 Risk of bias assessment of included case reports and series. Green: yes; red: no; yellow: unclear or N/A; black: questions not included in cases series checklist. The JBI checklist for case reports and series consists of 8 and 10 questions respectively and is available online from <https://jbi.global/critical-appraisal-tools>. JBI, Joanna Briggs Institute; N/A, not applicable.