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COMPREHENSIVE INSIGHTS INTO BRAIN TUMORS: CLINICAL PRESENTATION, DIAGNOSIS, AND MANAGEMENT

Rizwanullah[1*], Henna Patel[2], Rabail Irfan[3], Waqar Khan[4], Hafiz Muhammad Irfan Razzaq[5], Sidra Naeem[6], Karthiga Vasudevan[7], Shahnaz Ajmal Khan[8], Kashif Ali[9], Habiba Chand[10]

[1*]Department of Medicine, Hayatabad Medical Complex, Peshawar, Pakistan
[2]Department of Medicine, GMERS Hospital, Gujarat, India
[3]Department of Medicine, Hayatabad Medical Complex, Peshawar, Pakistan
[4]Department of Medicine, Hayatabad Medical Complex, Peshawar, Pakistan
[5]Department of Neuroscience, Punjab Institute of Neurosciences (PINS), Lahore, Pakistan
[6]Department of Medicine, St Mary's Imperial Healthcare Trust, London, UK
[7]Department of Medicine, Yerevan state medical university , Yerevan ,Armenia
[8]Department of Medicine, Hayatabad Medical Complex, Peshawar, Pakistan
[9]Department of Medicine, Lady reading hospital, Peshawar, Pakistan
[10]Department of Medicine, Khyber Medical College, Peshawar, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Rizwanullah
*Email address: urizwn600@gmail.com

Abstract
Brain tumors, encompassing both primary and secondary types, represent a diverse group of neoplasms that can arise from various tissues within the cranium. This review explores the pathophysiology, risk factors, clinical presentations, diagnostic methods, grading, and treatment modalities of brain tumors. Primary brain tumors, which can be benign or malignant, originate within the brain and vary widely in their growth patterns and invasiveness. Secondary or metastatic brain tumors spread from cancers elsewhere in the body and are more prevalent than primary tumors. Key symptoms result from localized tissue disruption and increased intracranial pressure, leading to neurological deficits.
Advances in molecular pathobiology have improved our understanding of these tumors, aiding in the identification of potential risk factors, including genetic predispositions and environmental exposures. Diagnosis primarily involves imaging techniques, such as MRI, and histopathological analysis through biopsy. Treatment strategies are tailored to the tumor's type, grade, and location, as well as the patient's overall health, ranging from surgical resection to radiation and chemotherapy. Recent innovations in surgical techniques and targeted therapies have significantly enhanced treatment outcomes. This review provides a comprehensive overview of brain tumors, emphasizing current knowledge and emerging advancements in their management.

Keywords: brain tumors, primary brain tumors, secondary brain tumors, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, surgical management, pathophysiology of brain tumors, brain tumor diagnosis

Introduction
A brain tumor is an abnormal proliferation of cells that can develop in any tissue within the cranium, including the brain, cranial nerves, meninges, skull, pituitary gland, and pineal gland.

These tumors are categorized into two main types: primary tumors, which originate in the brain, and secondary tumors, also known as metastatic tumors, which spread to the brain from other parts of the body (1).

Primary brain tumors can be either benign or malignant. Benign tumors grow slowly, have well-defined margins, and seldom spread. However, they can still pose significant risks if they are situated in critical areas of the brain, where they can disrupt vital functions. Malignant tumors, by contrast, grow rapidly, have irregular boundaries, and invade adjacent brain tissues. Though often referred to as brain cancer, malignant brain tumors do not spread beyond the brain and spinal cord. These tumors include a variety of malignancies, such as gliomas, medulloblastomas, primary CNS lymphomas, and brain metastases (2). Brain metastases are secondary tumors that form when cancer cells from a primary tumor in another part of the body spread to the brain through the bloodstream. These metastases are more prevalent than primary brain tumors, and their incidence has been rising since the 1970s (3). In adults, the most common sources of brain metastases are cancers of the lung, breast, melanoma, and colon. In children, these metastases typically develop from sarcomas and germ cell tumors (4).

Diagnosis usually involves the use of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and a biopsy. Treatment strategies for brain tumors depend on various factors, including the type, size, and location of the tumor, whether it has metastasized, and the patient's age and overall health. The goal of treatment can range from eradicating the tumor to managing symptoms and enhancing the quality of life. Many brain tumors are treatable, and recent advancements in therapy have led to better outcomes for patients (5).

In this review article, we will study the various types of brain tumors, discussing their pathophysiology and the risk factors associated with their development. We will also analyze the clinical presentations of these tumors based on the regions of the brain they affect. Additionally, we will cover the grading system used to classify brain tumors, the diagnostic methods employed to detect them, and the spectrum of treatment options available. This comprehensive overview aims to provide a deeper understanding of brain tumors and highlight the latest advancements in their management.

Review

Pathophysiology of brain tumors

Recent research has increasingly concentrated on the molecular pathobiology and pathophysiology of brain tumors, aiming to understand how these lesions deviate from normal tissue and contribute to neurological disorders. Symptoms generally progress due to two primary mechanisms: localized disruption caused by the tumor and increased intracranial pressure (6).

Mechanisms of Neurological Symptoms

Localized Disruption

Tumor growth can obstruct the brain’s blood supply, leading to tissue necrosis. Seizures may occur as a result of neuro-sensitivity changes due to tumor invasion and compression, which also disrupts cerebral blood flow. Tumors may also form cysts that compress adjacent brain structures, exacerbating focal neurological issues.

Increased Intracranial Pressure:

Several factors contribute to elevated intracranial pressure:

- **Mass Effect:** Expanding tumors displace brain tissue within the rigid confines of the skull.
- **Edema Formation:** Malignant tumors can induce edema, although the exact mechanisms remain partially understood. Edema often results from osmotic imbalances and venous obstruction, damaging the blood-brain barrier and increasing intracranial volume.
- **Cerebrospinal Fluid Disruption:** Changes in cerebrospinal fluid circulation further contribute to increased intracranial pressure (6).

Compensatory Mechanisms and Complications:
Compensatory mechanisms, such as reductions in intracranial blood volume, cerebrospinal fluid volume, and intracellular fluid content, typically take days or months to become effective. Rapid increases in intracranial pressure can exceed these compensatory mechanisms, leading to severe complications.
One significant complication is brain herniation. In one form, the medial temporal lobe may shift downward through the tentorial notch due to a mass in the brain hemispheres. This can press on the brainstem, potentially resulting in loss of consciousness and neurological deficits. In another form, the cerebellar tonsils may herniate downward through the foramen magnum, compressing the medulla oblongata and possibly causing respiratory failure (7).

Risk factors
The precise cause of brain cancer remains largely elusive. While genetic predispositions and environmental factors might play a role, the risk factors for brain cancer are not as well-defined as those for other types of cancer (8).
Likelihood and General Risk Factors
The probability of developing primary brain cancer is relatively low, with the American Cancer Society estimating a lifetime risk of less than one percent. Although risk factors can affect the likelihood of developing brain cancer over one's lifetime, they do not guarantee its onset.

General Factors
Gender
The risk of brain cancer varies by type. For instance, meningiomas are twice as prevalent in women, whereas medulloblastomas are more frequently observed in males.

Age
The incidence of brain cancer generally rises with age, particularly among those 65 and older. The risk is influenced by tumor type and location, with meningiomas and craniopharyngiomas being more common in adults over 50, though these tumors can occur at any age.

Body Factors
Compromised Immune System
Individuals with weakened immune systems are at an increased risk of developing brain lymphomas.

Genetic Factors
A family history of certain rare brain tumors can affect susceptibility. Inherited conditions such as Von Hippel-Lindau disease, Li-Fraumeni syndrome, and Neurofibromatosis (NF1 and NF2) are associated with a higher risk. However, evidence that brain cancer is hereditary is limited.

Exposure Factors
Exposure to specific industrial chemicals or solvents has been associated with an elevated risk of brain cancer. Although the evidence is not conclusive, individuals working in industries such as oil refining, rubber manufacturing, and drug production may experience a higher incidence of certain brain tumors.

Signs and symptoms
At diagnosis, brain tumors commonly present with persistent headaches, nausea, vomiting, and cognitive impairments. Headaches are often the most noticeable symptom and can worsen upon waking, become more intense with activities like coughing or physical exertion, or occur during sleep, sometimes accompanied by vomiting or disorientation.

Seizures can also indicate a brain tumor, and mental function changes, such as personality shifts, difficulty concentrating, increased drowsiness, memory lapses, and impaired reasoning, may be primary manifestations.
Additional symptoms may include progressive loss of movement or sensation in an arm or leg, hearing loss with possible dizziness, speech difficulties, visual disturbances like vision loss or double vision, balance issues, and weakness or numbness. The severity and type of symptoms can vary based on the tumor's size, location, and growth rate (9). Signs and symptoms based on tumor location given in Table 1.

Tumor location	Presentation
Frontal lobe	Difficulty in Concentration, Speech, Language Use, Emotional Control, Executive Functions, Memory, Inhibition, Social Cognition, Weakness, Olfaction
Temporal Lobe	Difficulty in Hearing, Speaking, Identifying and Categorizing Objects, Learning New Information, Correctly Recognizing Emotions in Others, Memory Loss, Seizures or Blackouts, Sensations of Strange Smells
Parietal Lobe	Difficulty in Bringing Together Information from Different Senses, Recognizing Faces or Objects, Coordinating Movements, Spatial Awareness, Speaking, Understanding Words, Writing and Reading, Numbness on the Opposite Side of the Body from the Tumor
Occipital Lobe	• difficulty with vision e.g. identifying objects or colours, loss of vision on one side.
Cerebellum	Difficulty with Balance, Loss of Coordination, Difficulty Walking and Speaking, Difficulty Using Executive Functions, Flickering of the Eyes, Vomiting, Stiff Neck, Problems with Dexterity
Brainstem	• unsteadiness and difficulty walking, facial weakness, double vision, difficulty speaking and swallowing.

Table 1: Signs and symptoms base of tumor location (10)

Types of Primary Brain Tumors
Primary brain tumors are classified based on their cell type or location within the brain. Many of these tumors start in glial cells and are collectively known as gliomas.

In adults, the most common types are
- **Astrocytoma**: Originating from astrocytes, which are star-shaped glial cells, astrocytomas can vary in grade:
  - **Grade I or II Astrocytoma**: Often termed a low-grade glioma.
  - **Grade III Astrocytoma**: Sometimes called a high-grade or anaplastic astrocytoma.
  - **Grade IV Astrocytoma**: Known as glioblastoma or malignant astrocytic glioma.
- **Meningioma**: This tumor arises in the meninges and can be graded I, II, or III. Most meningiomas are benign (grade I) and tend to grow slowly.
- **Oligodendroglioma**: This tumor originates from the cells that produce the fatty substance covering nerves and usually occurs in the cerebrum. It is most common in middle-aged adults and can be graded II or III (11).

In children, the most frequent types are
- **Medulloblastoma**: Typically found in the cerebellum, this tumor is sometimes called a primitive neuroectodermal tumor and is classified as grade IV.
- **Astrocytoma**: In children, this tumor is usually of low grade (grades I or II) and can appear throughout the brain. The juvenile pilocytic astrocytoma is a common variant.
- **Ependymoma**: Often located lining the ventricles or the central canal of the spinal cord, this tumor is prevalent in children and young adults and can be graded I, II, or III.
- **Brain Stem Glioma**: Found in the lower part of the brain, this tumor can be either low-grade or high-grade, with diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma being the most common type (11).

Grading System of brain Tumors
The term "grade" refers to how much the tumor cells differ from normal cells when examined microscopically. The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies brain tumors on a scale from 1 to 4, with higher grades indicating more rapid growth and increased aggressiveness (12).

Grades	Characteristics
I	Slow growing cells Almost normal appearance Least malignant Usually associated with long-term survival
II	Relatively slow growing cells Slightly abnormal appearance Can invade nearby tissue Sometimes recur as a higher grade
III	Actively reproducing abnormal cells Abnormal appearance Infiltrate normal tissue Tend to recur, often as a higher grade
IV	Rapidly reproducing abnormal cells Very abnormal appearance Area of dead cells (necrosis) in center Form new blood vessels to maintaigrowth

Table 2: WHO grading system for brain tumors

Diagnosis of Brain Tumors

Diagnosing a brain tumor typically requires a neurological exam, brain imaging, and/or analysis of brain tissue samples. For years, detecting brain abnormalities has relied on various medical imaging techniques. These methods are categorized into structural and functional imaging (13). Structural imaging focuses on measuring brain anatomy, tumor location, trauma, and other brain conditions (14). Functional imaging, on the other hand, captures finer details such as metabolic changes, lesions, and brain activity. Techniques like CT, MRI, SPECT, positron emission tomography (PET), functional MRI (fMRI), and ultrasound (US) are employed to determine the size, location, shape, and other characteristics of brain tumors (15).

A biopsy is a surgical procedure where a tissue sample is removed from the tumor site and analyzed under a microscope. This examination reveals the types of abnormal cells present in the tumor. The main goal of a biopsy is to determine the tumor's type and grade. It is considered the most precise method for obtaining a diagnosis.

Treatment

Treatment options for brain tumors depend on various factors, including the tumor's type, grade, size, and location, as well as whether it has spread, and the patient's age and overall health. Treatment goals may be either curative or palliative, aimed at relieving symptoms. Often, treatments are combined to achieve the best outcome. Surgical intervention aims to remove as much of the tumor as possible to reduce the risk of recurrence. For tumors that cannot be entirely removed through surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy are utilized to address the remaining cancer cells (16, 17, 18, 19)

Medical Management

Medications play a crucial role in managing some common side effects associated with brain tumors. Corticosteroids, such as dexamethasone (Decadron), are often prescribed to reduce swelling and inflammation around the tumor. To counteract potential side effects of steroids, such as stomach ulcers and gastric reflux, medications like famotidine (Pepcid) or pantoprazole (Protonix) are used to lower stomach acid production. Additionally, diuretics like furosemide (Lasix) or mannitol (Osmitrol) may be employed to manage edema and intracranial pressure. To prevent or control seizures, anticonvulsants are commonly prescribed, with phenytoin (Dilantin), valproic acid (Depakote), carbamazepine (Tegretol), and levetiracetam (Keppra) being among the most frequently used (16).

Surgical Management

Surgery is the preferred treatment for brain tumors that are accessible without significant risk to critical brain areas. It can aid in refining the diagnosis, removing as much of the tumor as possible, and alleviating pressure within the skull. Even partial tumor removal can provide symptom relief, and any remaining tumor cells may be addressed with radiation or chemotherapy. Advances in surgical techniques, including image-guided surgery, intraoperative MRI/CT, and functional brain mapping, have enhanced a surgeon's ability to accurately locate the tumor, delineate its boundaries, avoid damage to essential brain regions, and verify the extent of tumor removal during the procedure (17).

Radiation Therapy

Radiation therapy employs high-energy rays to treat brain tumors by damaging the DNA within the tumor cells, which inhibits their ability to divide and grow. The primary aim is to target the abnormal cells with maximum dose while minimizing damage to surrounding healthy tissues. The effects of radiation therapy develop gradually rather than immediately, with aggressive tumors that grow rapidly generally responding faster to treatment. Radiation can be administered in two main forms:

Stereotactic radiosurgery (SRS) involves delivering a concentrated dose of radiation in a single session, despite the term "surgery," no physical incision is made. Fractionated stereotactic radiotherapy (FSR) provides lower doses of radiation spread over multiple sessions, with patients typically attending daily over several weeks to complete the full course of treatment. Whole brain radiotherapy (WBRT) involves administering radiation to the entire brain and it is often used to treat multiple brain tumors and metastases (18).

Chemotherapy

Chemotherapy targets and disrupts cell division, affecting both tumor and normal cells, which leads to side effects, particularly in rapidly dividing cells such as those in the hair, digestive tract, and blood. Treatment is administered in cycles, with intervals in between to allow the body to recover and regenerate healthy cells.

Chemotherapy drugs can be given orally in pill form, intravenously (IV), or directly into the tumor via a surgically placed wafer. Commonly used drugs for brain tumors include carmustine (BCNU), lomustine (CCNU), and temozolomide (Temodar). These drugs can also act as radio-sensitizers, enhancing the effectiveness of radiation therapy by increasing tumor cell death. For high-grade gliomas, effective agents often include procarbazine, platinum analogs (cisplatin, carboplatin), nitrosureas (BCNU, CCNU), and alkylating agents (temozolomide, vincristine). BCNU, when applied locally to the tumor bed post-surgery, has shown effectiveness by targeting the affected area directly, which minimizes systemic side effects. Chemotherapy is generally not used for benign tumors (19).

Conclusion

In conclusion, brain tumors encompass a diverse group of neoplasms with varying origins, behaviors, and treatment responses. This review highlights the complexity of brain tumors, which can range from benign growths with limited impact to highly malignant and aggressive cancers that significantly affect neurological function and patient outcomes. Advances in understanding the molecular pathophysiology of these tumors have led to more targeted and effective therapies, improving both survival rates and quality of life for many patients. Despite these advancements, the management of brain tumors remains challenging due to their location within critical areas of the brain and the potential for severe neurological deficits. Multimodal approaches, including surgery, radiation therapy, and chemotherapy, tailored to the specific characteristics of each tumor and patient, are essential for optimizing treatment outcomes. Ongoing research into the genetic and molecular underpinnings of brain tumors will likely lead to further innovations in diagnosis and therapy, offering hope for better prognosis and quality of life for affected individuals.

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