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PREVENTION OF COMPLICATIONS OF OPEN FRACTURES OF THE TIBIA IN PATIENTS WITH MULTIPLE AND COMBINED TRAUMA

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Abstract. Open fractures of the tibia are among the most challenging injuries in orthopedic and trauma surgery due to their high risk of infection, delayed bone healing, and soft tissue complications. The complexity increases significantly when they occur in patients with multiple or combined trauma, where systemic physiological responses, poly-organ damage, and prolonged immobilization create additional risks. This article examines the biological and clinical mechanisms underlying complications in open tibial fractures, identifies major risk factors, and reviews evidence-based strategies for their prevention. Emphasis is placed on early multidisciplinary management, optimized debridement, infection control, stabilization techniques, and modern reconstructive approaches aimed at preserving limb function and reducing disability rates.

Keywords: open tibial fracture, multiple trauma, infection prevention, debridement, osteomyelitis, external fixation.

INTRODUCTION

The tibia, being a subcutaneous bone along most of its length, is highly vulnerable to open fractures during high-energy trauma such as traffic accidents, industrial injuries, or falls from height. These fractures are often accompanied by extensive soft tissue damage, contamination, and vascular compromise. In polytrauma patients, open tibial fractures frequently coexist with other life-threatening conditions — cranio-cerebral injury, thoracic trauma, or abdominal bleeding — which complicate both diagnosis and early surgical intervention.

The prevention of complications in such cases is a critical aspect of modern traumatology. Delayed or inadequate initial treatment can lead to deep infection, chronic osteomyelitis, nonunion, or even amputation. According to recent data, the rate of infectious complications in open tibial fractures varies from **10% to 50%**, depending on the degree of soft tissue injury and the timeliness of surgical management. Therefore, a systematic, multidisciplinary approach that integrates orthopedic, surgical, and intensive care principles is essential to minimize post-traumatic morbidity and improve functional recovery [1].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Open tibial fractures represent not only mechanical disruption of bone continuity but also a complex biological insult that affects the entire limb. The loss of skin and muscle coverage exposes the bone to contamination, leading to colonization by aerobic and anaerobic microorganisms. In patients with combined trauma, the systemic inflammatory response syndrome (SIRS), tissue hypoxia, and metabolic acidosis further impair local immunity and wound healing.

Among the major risk factors for complications are [2]:

- The degree of soft tissue injury (Gustilo–Anderson classification, types IIIB–IIIC);
- Delay in initial debridement (beyond 6–8 hours);

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- Inadequate antibiotic prophylaxis or broad-spectrum misuse;
- Poor vascularization and tissue necrosis;
- Multiple fractures and concomitant injuries leading to systemic instability;
- Diabetes mellitus, smoking, and malnutrition as aggravating factors.

Each of these risk factors contributes to impaired osteogenesis, higher susceptibility to infection, and longer rehabilitation periods. Understanding their interaction is key to developing effective preventive strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The “golden period” for managing open fractures remains the first six hours after injury. Early and meticulous debridement is the cornerstone of infection prevention. The goal is to remove all devitalized tissue, foreign materials, and contaminants while preserving viable structures. In patients with multiple trauma, the “damage control orthopedics” principle is applied — prioritizing stabilization of life-threatening conditions before definitive fracture management [3].

Wound irrigation using large volumes of isotonic saline under low pressure is recommended to minimize bacterial load without causing tissue trauma. Some studies indicate that the combination of debridement with vacuum-assisted closure (VAC) therapy reduces bacterial contamination and promotes granulation tissue formation. Moreover, repeating debridement within 24–48 hours, if necessary, helps prevent progression to deep infection.

Antibiotic therapy should begin as early as possible, ideally within the first hour after hospital admission. A combination of first-generation cephalosporins (e.g., cefazolin) for Gram-positive coverage and aminoglycosides (e.g., gentamicin) for Gram-negative organisms is commonly recommended. In cases of severe contamination, particularly with farm or soil exposure, metronidazole is added for anaerobic coverage.

The duration of antibiotic administration typically ranges from 48 to 72 hours, but in high-grade injuries or in the presence of delayed closure, the course may be extended. However, overuse of antibiotics should be avoided to prevent the development of resistant strains. In some centers, local antibiotic delivery systems, such as gentamicin-impregnated cement beads or collagen sponges, are used to achieve high local concentrations at the wound site [4].

Effective infection prevention also depends on environmental control — maintaining sterile operative conditions, minimizing repeated wound exposure, and ensuring timely coverage of the defect with well-vascularized tissue.

Stable fixation of the bone fragments is essential to promote healing and prevent further soft tissue damage. In the setting of multiple injuries, external fixation is often preferred as the primary stabilization method due to its rapid application, minimal invasiveness, and accessibility for repeated wound care.

Once the patient’s general condition stabilizes, conversion to internal fixation (intramedullary nailing or plate osteosynthesis) may be considered. The optimal timing for conversion remains controversial, but most authors recommend waiting until infection risk is controlled and soft tissues are sufficiently healed.

Biomechanical studies have shown that stable fixation reduces micromotion at the fracture site, enhances vascular ingrowth, and promotes callus formation. On the contrary, unstable fixation contributes to nonunion, delayed consolidation, and chronic infection.

Soft tissue reconstruction plays a decisive role in the prevention of complications. The tibia’s anteromedial surface has minimal muscular coverage, which makes it prone to necrosis and infection.

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Early closure of the wound — preferably within 72 hours — significantly reduces the risk of infection. However, premature closure without adequate debridement may trap bacteria and lead to abscess formation.

Reconstructive options include [5]:

- Local rotational flaps for small to moderate defects;
- Free microvascular flaps (latissimus dorsi, anterolateral thigh) for extensive soft tissue loss;
- Split-thickness skin grafts after achieving a healthy granulation base.

VAC therapy, as a temporary solution, can be used to bridge the period between debridement and final closure, enhancing perfusion and wound bed preparation. Collaboration between orthopedic and plastic surgeons is critical to ensure optimal aesthetic and functional results.

Patients with multiple or combined trauma experience complex metabolic changes that can hinder fracture healing. Systemic inflammatory response, protein catabolism, anemia, and impaired oxygen delivery all affect bone regeneration. Early nutritional support, correction of electrolyte imbalance, and maintenance of adequate perfusion are vital for recovery.

Physiotherapy and controlled mobilization should begin as soon as possible to prevent joint stiffness, muscle atrophy, and thromboembolic complications. Psychological support also plays an important role, as prolonged hospitalization and repeated surgeries often lead to anxiety or post-traumatic stress symptoms.

The process of bone regeneration in open tibial fractures is a complex biological cascade influenced by both local and systemic factors. In the setting of multiple trauma, this physiological process is frequently disrupted. Bone healing normally progresses through three overlapping phases: inflammation, repair, and remodeling. However, in patients suffering from polytrauma, systemic hypoperfusion, tissue hypoxia, and immune dysregulation impair each of these stages.

During the initial inflammatory phase, cytokines such as TNF-α, IL-1β, and IL-6 are released to initiate vascular permeability and cell migration. In the polytraumatized patient, excessive systemic inflammation may paradoxically suppress local reparative responses, leading to delayed granulation and poor angiogenesis. The repair phase, characterized by callus formation and osteoblast proliferation, depends heavily on adequate oxygenation and nutrient delivery. When these are compromised due to shock or anemia, the quality of the callus deteriorates, and the risk of nonunion increases. Finally, during the remodeling stage, osteoclastic and osteoblastic balance is often disturbed by prolonged immobilization and metabolic imbalances common in critical care settings.

CONCLUSION

Prevention of complications in open tibial fractures among patients with multiple and combined trauma requires a multidisciplinary, stepwise, and individualized approach. The key principles include early and thorough debridement, rational antibiotic therapy, appropriate fracture stabilization, and timely soft tissue reconstruction. External fixation remains the preferred method in the acute phase, while reconstructive surgery ensures functional and cosmetic restoration.

At the systemic level, maintaining hemodynamic stability, adequate oxygenation, and nutritional support is essential to optimize bone healing. Infection prevention is not limited to antibiotic use but encompasses all aspects of wound care, surgical discipline, and postoperative management.

In conclusion, modern trauma care must focus not only on saving the limb but also on preserving its function and minimizing long-term disability. Through coordinated teamwork between trauma surgeons, orthopedists, anesthesiologists, and rehabilitation specialists, the rate of complications in

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open tibial fractures can be significantly reduced, thereby improving patient outcomes and quality of life.

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