

Fluoroquinolone Induced Tendinopathy: Report of 6 Cases

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ABSTRACT. We describe 6 cases of fluoroquinolone induced Achilles tendinitis in 4 women and 2 men, mean age 68.6 years. Patients presented with pain and swelling of sudden onset, which was most often bilateral. Tendon rupture was frequent, accompanied by nodules and ecchymoses. The diagnosis was clinical, occasionally ultrasonography was helpful; the role of magnetic resonance imaging has yet to be defined. Certain risk factors were found, particularly association with longterm steroid therapy, and close surveillance of high risk subjects is mandatory. Although proper dosage and duration of treatment were respected, the principal fluoroquinolones were clearly incriminated. We found no correlation between treatment duration and the degree of involvement. Nevertheless, immediate discontinuation of the antibiotic and placement of both Achilles tendons at rest is essential. Early and appropriate management did not prevent prolonged recovery times and there was always a risk of functional sequelae. This side effect is class related and rare. Its physiopathologic mechanism is poorly understood. (*J Rheumatol* 1996;23:516-20)

Key Indexing Terms:

FLUOROQUINOLONE TENDINOPATHY TENDINITIS TENDON RUPTURE

New generation fluoroquinolones are synthetic antibiotics that act by inhibiting bacterial DNA gyrase (topoisomerase II)¹. These antibiotics have had increasingly widespread use due to their excellent gastrointestinal absorption, widespread tissue diffusion, a long half-life (allowing 2 daily doses), bactericidal action with low minimal inhibitory concentration, and wide spectrum^{1,2,4,5}. Nevertheless, their indications should be limited to urinary and prostatic infections, serious intestinal infections, bronchopulmonary infections in predisposed individuals, invasive otitis externa, osteomyelitis, septic arthritis, or septicemia due to gram negative organisms.

Side effects are infrequent (usually 4 to 8%, exceptionally 16%), often minor (only 1 to 2.8% require cessation of treatment), dose dependent, and reversible^{1,2,4,6}. Studies of the adverse effects have revealed similar results: gastrointestinal (1 to 7%), rash (0.5 to 2.5%), central and peripheral neurologic disorders (0.1 to 0.3%, even as high as 6.3% for others), gait disturbances (<1%), elevation of serum transaminases (1.8 to 2.5%), and very rare hematologic abnormalities^{1,2,4,7}.

Rheumatologic involvement is rare and consists of myalgia (<0.8%), arthralgia, and arthritis (0.4%); a single study

reported a frequency of 7%⁷. These joint lesions (known since the first generation quinolones⁸ and described during preliminary animal studies) consist of nonerosive bilateral symmetric oligoarthropathy, mechanical in nature, that affects primarily the lower extremities. The clear yellow joint fluid reveals predominantly lymphocytes^{9,12}. This condition preferentially occurs in adolescents during their pubertal growth spurt during longterm treatment (> 3 months); in these cases incidence may reach 45%⁹. Related to quinolone toxicity (direct or indirect) against chondrocytes, the lesions subside upon discontinuation of the antibiotic and recur when it is reintroduced^{13,9,14}. For this reason this class of drugs is contraindicated during pregnancy, breast feeding, and adolescence. Finally, cases of tendinitis have been described. We report 6 cases observed in our department over one year.

CASE REPORTS

Patient 1. A 68-year-old man with peripheral vascular disease was hospitalized in urology for prostatitis. He had received norfloxacin (800 mg/day) for 2 days, then pefloxacin intravenously (800 mg/day) for 4 days. On the 6th day he complained of pain in both Achilles tendons upon walking. Palpation revealed a tender swelling with no signs of tendon rupture. Fluoroquinolone was discontinued and he was placed on strict bed rest. After 6 days, the pain disappeared as well as the edema; walking was resumed without difficulty.

Patient 2. A 92-year-old woman with a history of hyperuricemia presented with the abrupt inability to walk. Examination revealed bilateral rupture of the Achilles tendons with edema and ecchymoses. She had been receiving ofloxacin (400 mg/day) for 48 h for an upper respiratory tract infection. Ultrasonography and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) confirmed bilateral tendon rupture. No other causes could be implicated. The antibiotic was discontinued and below the knee casts were placed for one month. At 6 weeks, walking was exceedingly difficult despite physical therapy.

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Patient 3. A 75-year-old man with adenocarcinoma of the prostate with longterm steroid therapy had been receiving norfloxacin (800 mg/day) for 6 days for a urinary tract infection. Four days after beginning the antibiotic, he developed pain in both Achilles tendons, then difficulty in placing the left foot. Examination revealed a tender swelling of both Achilles tendons with ecchymoses over the left tendon and apparent weakness of the triceps surae muscle. Ultrasonography confirmed the finding of bilateral tendinitis complicated by a partial tendon rupture on the left side. With discontinuation of the fluoroquinolone, rest, and the use of a heel piece, walking with difficulty was recovered at 3 weeks.

Patient 4. A 75-year-old woman having longterm steroid therapy for rheumatoid arthritis (RA) had taken pefloxacin (800 mg/day) 15 days previously for a bronchopulmonary infection. Examination revealed bilateral, painful, swollen Achilles tendons with no signs of tendon rupture. Discontinuation of the antibiotic and rest (initially in bed) led to recovery in 6 weeks.

Patient 5. A 69-year-old woman with RA that required longterm steroid therapy had pefloxacin (800 mg/day) for 48 h for a bronchopulmonary infection. Since the previous evening she had been complaining of pain in her right Achilles tendon. The tendon was swollen, without ecchymoses, and very tender to palpation. Discontinuation of the fluoroquinolone and rest permitted recovery in 8 days.

Patient 6. A 34-year-old woman was treated with pefloxacin (800 mg/day) for 3 months for osteomyelitis of the left calcaneum. She had pain in the right Achilles tendon upon walking of 15 days' duration. The tendon was tender to palpation and swollen, but with no signs of infection. Ultrasonography confirmed the diagnosis of uncomplicated right Achilles tendinitis. With rest and discontinuation of the antibiotic, recovery was obtained in one month.

In these 6 cases (Table 1) fluoroquinolones were implicated, according to Bégaud¹⁵, very probably in Patients 1, 3, 5, probably in Patient 2, and possibly in Patients 4 and 6.

Despite our small number of cases of fluoroquinolone induced tendinopathy, we compared our findings with those reported in the literature.

DISCUSSION

In 1983, Bailey reported the initial cases of tendinitis in patients with kidney failure who had received treatment with norfloxacin¹⁶. MacEwan reported in 1988 a case of bilateral Achilles tendinitis caused by ciprofloxacin¹⁷. The first reports of tendon rupture in a patient taking pefloxacin were by Ribard^{18,19}, Perrot²⁰, and Jorgensen¹⁴ in 1991. Thereafter, a cause and effect relationship for pefloxacin was recognized and published in *Le Vidal* (the physician's desk reference of drugs in France) in 1992. In July 1992, a drug monitoring study found about 100 cases in France^{21,22}; until that time only about 15 cases had been published and 21 cases had been reported to the World Health Organization.

Incidence (per instance of fluoroquinolone use). Fluoroquinolone induced tendinopathy is estimated to be 15 to 20/100,000²¹.

Predisposing factors. Our series comprised 4 women and 2 men, which does not correspond to the usual male:female ratio of 2:3. However, 5 of our 6 cases were over 68 years of age, in agreement with 2 of 3 reports, which involved subjects over 60 years of age^{6,14,20-25}. Longterm steroid therapy was the principal associated risk factor we found (3 of 6 cases), an association that has often been reported^{6,7,21,23,26-28} and is to be avoided. More rarely, one finds peripheral vascular disease (as with Patient 1), kidney failure, gout (Patient 2, however, had hyperuricemia without gout), and spondyloarthropathy (here, it was 2 patients with RA), which are classical causes of tendinitis^{23, 25,27,29}.

Table 1. Summary of patient presentation and outcome.

	Patients					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
	M, 68 yrs Prostatitis	F, 92 yrs Sinusitis	M, 75 yrs Cystitis	F, 74 yrs Bronchopulmonary infection	F, 69 yrs Bronchopulmonary infection	F, 34 yrs Left calcaneum osteomyelitis
Symptoms	Bilateral Achilles tendinitis	Bilateral Achilles rupture	Bilateral Achilles tendinitis with left partial rupture	Bilateral Achilles tendinitis	Right Achilles tendinitis	Right Achilles tendinitis
Imaging	Not done	Pathological ultrasonography and MRI	Pathological ultrasonography	ND	ND	Pathological ultrasonography
Fluoroquinolone: dose mg/24 h (T/d), duration of treatment, delay of onset	Norfloxacin 800 (2) 36 h, delay 5 days pefloxacin IV 800 (2) 4 days, delay 5 days	Ofloxacin, 400 (2), 48 h, 48 h	Norfloxacin, 800 (2), 6 days, tendinitis: 4 days, rupture: 6 days	Pefloxacin, 800 (2), 15 days, 10 days	Pefloxacin, 800 (2), 48 h, 24 h	Pefloxacin, 800 (2), 3 mo, 2.5 mo
Risk factors	Lower extremity peripheral vascular disease	Hyperuricemia	Longterm steroid prostatic neoplasia	RA with longterm steroid	RA with longterm steroid	None
Treatment (after stopping fluoroquinolone)	Rest	Rest and below the knee casts	Rest and heel piece	Rest	Rest	Rest
Outcome	Recovery in 6 days	Walking difficult at Week 6	Walking difficult at Week 3	Recovery in 6 weeks	Recovery in 8 days	Recovery in 4 weeks
Imputability* (Bégaud ¹⁵)	Very probably, 14B3	Probably, 13B2	Very probably, 14B2	Possibly, 12B3	Very probably, 14B3	Possibly, 12B3

* I: intrinsic imputation (I0 to I4); B: bibliographic imputation (B1 to B3).

Manifestations. Fluoroquinolone induced tendinitis is distinguished from other forms of tendinitis by its abrupt onset and sharp pain that occurs spontaneously, upon walking or palpation. It may occasionally arise only hours after the initial dose of fluoroquinolone²⁷. We noted substantial swelling; signs of inflammation that mimic phlebitis have been reported¹⁹. Involvement is frequently bilateral (2/3 of our cases)^{6,19,21,24}. There is a predilection for the Achilles tendon, but other tendons have been reported: the quadriceps^{6,30}, extensor pollicis longus²⁷, peroneus brevis¹⁴, and those of the rotator cuff³⁰⁻³². This distribution emphasizes the role that mechanical forces play in the pathophysiology of this tendinopathy. Tendon rupture is almost always preceded by pain, and may be partial or complete, spontaneous or after an effort, at the bony insertion or 2 to 3 cm above (a poorly vascularized area)²³. Rupture is often accompanied by a diminution of the pain. Tendon palpation reveals edema and occasionally nodules¹⁴; we noted associated ecchymoses (Patients 2 and 3). Difficulty or inability to perform plantar flexion of the foot points to the diagnosis (Thompson's sign). Our results were similar to others, since this complication arose in one-third of our cases^{6,19,21}.

Mode of onset. This side effect first appeared in France with pefloxacin, and most cases occurred in connection with it. This fluoroquinolone may have been too frequently used in our country, where it had been mostly marketed. But this side effect is class related²⁷ and can thus occur with all the fluoroquinolones (norfloxacin, ofloxacin, and pefloxacin are 3 commonly used fluoroquinolones in France) at normal dosage and duration of treatment (a mean of 20.5 days in our cases; 15 days for Borderie¹⁹).

The severity is usually proportional to treatment duration. Uncomplicated tendinitis is seen when treatment duration has been less than 5 days, with increased frequency of tendon rupture after the 3rd week of treatment^{6,21}; however, this delay was variable (from a few hours to 2.5 months in our series, as high as 90 days in others²³).

Imaging techniques. The diagnosis of tendinopathy is essentially clinical. Ultrasonography (with a high frequency probe) can occasionally confirm partial or complete tendon rupture. It appears that MRI, useful in other forms of tendinopathy³⁵, can be helpful in establishing an early diagnosis by providing precise information about the lesion (as in Patient 2). On T1 weighted images, intermediate signal flame shaped intratendinous foci can be visualized. An increased signal surrounding the lesion is seen on T2 weighted images. With recent ruptures, one can see edema, hemorrhage, and fiber discontinuity, since the torn ends have an increased signal on spin-echo imaging. By providing precise information concerning the degree of involvement, MRI could allow more appropriate management^{30,34,36}. Nevertheless, MRI has frequently disclosed intratendinous foci during treatment with fluoroquinolones in the absence

of any clinical signs^{30,34}. Do these represent edema or preexisting degenerative lesions?

Diagnosing fluoroquinolone induced tendinopathy requires ruling out other causes (infectious, inflammatory, traumatic, iatrogenic, idiopathic, and the presence of microcrystals). This is problematic only when more than one cause is possible; in these instances, Bégaud's criteria are helpful¹⁵.

Treatment. Treatment consists of immediate discontinuation of the fluoroquinolone with placement of the tendons at rest²⁸, which may prove difficult when there is bilateral involvement (as in Patients 1 and 4, who required one week of strict bed rest with its attendant risks in the elderly). Forearm crutches, heel pieces, splints in case of partial rupture (Patient 3), and even below the knee casts if the rupture is complete (Patient 2) are helpful for periods of 6 weeks to 6 months^{19,20,29,37}. Early and prolonged physical therapy is often necessary in these elderly patients. Our 2nd case illustrates the possible serious consequences. Surgery is rarely performed and there is a paucity of information concerning results^{14,26,27}, which are sometimes good¹⁹. This method is apparently being abandoned in elderly subjects⁶ because the local involvement³³ renders the repair unreliable. Thus, prevention is crucial, requiring close surveillance of high risk patients.

Outcome. In general, with early diagnosis and management, tendinitis heals slowly. Edema can persist for several weeks. Delays in healing of 1 to 3 months have been reported^{17,19,24}; in our series, the mean recovery time was 3 weeks (only 6 days for Patient 1, 6 weeks to resume normal walking for Patient 4). In the drug monitoring study, 50% had recovered in 30 days²¹. However, early management does not always prevent tendon rupture, which can occur after discontinuation of the fluoroquinolone^{20,23,26,27,33,37}. When tendon rupture occurs, healing time is considerably lengthened. It was 4.5 weeks in our study, 2 to 3 months for Cohen²⁴, 3 to 6 months for Perrot³⁷. In these instances, functional sequelae are frequent: A favorable outcome was obtained in only 55% in the drug monitoring study²¹ and a total temporary incapacity in 44%⁶. Our 2 cases with tendon rupture (Patients 2, 3) still had difficulty walking after one month followup. The reintroduction of fluoroquinolones must be proscribed⁶.

Pathophysiology. The precise pathophysiological mechanism remains unknown. Few histological studies exist. Jorgensen¹⁴ described degenerative lesions with numerous fissures, interstitial edema with no cellular infiltrate, and tendon necrosis with signs of neovascularization; the Achilles tendon was involved as well as the adjacent peroneus brevis tendon. Upon surgical intervention, Chaslerie and Franck reported that the injured tendons appeared necrotic^{26,27}. These lesions lack specificity and closely resemble those found with idiopathic tendon rupture³⁸. They most likely involve an ischemic process^{14,23,27}. This mecha-

nism may provide at least partial explanation for cases of enthesitis with multiple tendon involvement, with rupture that occurs 2 to 3 cm above the point of tendon insertion or that occurs after discontinuation of fluoroquinolone, and the predisposing role of arthritis obliterans and its associated arthritis (osteocondrosis with punched out lesions and vesicles in the intermediate germinal zone without signs of inflammation)^{51,53}. MRI abnormalities in asymptomatic subjects may correspond to this edema secondary to ischemia. Furthermore, the role played by mechanical stress is not negligible (involvement primarily of the Achilles tendons), nor is that of prior subclinical lesions (accounting for the sudden onset in certain cases, the occurrence in areas of pressure, the predisposing role of steroids and old age). Finally, a toxic effect on collagen may also occur during muscle, joint, and tendon involvement²⁰. An autonomic nervous system disturbance or immunoallergic phenomena (as seen during rare cases of subacute synovitis) related to therapy with fluoroquinolones cannot be excluded¹⁴. The origin is thus probably multifactorial. Discovery of the precise mechanism will allow for more appropriate preventive measures.

A rare side effect with sometimes serious consequences, fluoroquinolone induced tendinopathy was recognized tardily after the substantial rise in the prescription of these antibiotics. The indications must be well defined to avoid new complications and increasing drug resistance (chromosomal in nature) of these potentially mutagenic molecules³⁹. They should not be employed as a first-line drug for nosocomial infections unless they are used in association with other drugs²⁴. Numerous resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* have already appeared.

In conclusion, fluoroquinolone induced tendinopathy is manifested by the sudden onset of swelling and tenderness, which is often bilateral and complicated by tendon rupture in 1 of 3 cases (with nodules and ecchymoses). High risk patients require close surveillance, especially those under corticosteroid therapy and the elderly, in whom there is enhanced risk of functional sequelae as well as the dangers of prolonged bed rest. Management consists of immediate discontinuation of the fluoroquinolone and placement of both tendons at rest. A history of tendinitis or arthritis due to these antibiotics represents a new contraindication to their use. Patient selection for these drugs must take this potential complication into account.

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