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Short Communication

Beyond the Anastomosis: Understanding Anterior Resection Syndrome and Its Impact on Survivorship

Olesen G, Shalhoub B, Richter F, Mackay F, Maghami J
Department of Colorectal Surgery,Poland
***Corresponding Author:** Richter F, Department of Colorectal Surgery, Poland
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Abstract
Anterior Resection Syndrome (ARS) is a multifactorial bowel dysfunction that commonly develops after sphincter-preserving surgery for rectal cancer, particularly low anterior resection. Despite advancements in colorectal surgery and oncological outcomes, many patients continue to experience persistent postoperative bowel disturbances that significantly impair quality of life. ARS encompasses symptoms such as fecal urgency, incontinence, clustering of stools, fragmented defecation, constipation, and frequent bowel movements. The syndrome arises due to structural and functional changes involving rectal reservoir loss, nerve injury, altered colonic motility, and effects of neoadjuvant radiotherapy. This article explores the pathophysiology, clinical presentation, diagnostic approaches, risk factors, and current management strategies for ARS. Emphasis is placed on multidisciplinary rehabilitation, including dietary modification, pelvic floor therapy, pharmacologic treatment, transanal irrigation, and emerging neuromodulation techniques. Increased awareness and early intervention are essential to improve postoperative functional outcomes and long-term survivorship in rectal cancer patients.

Introduction

Rectal cancer management has evolved considerably over the past few decades, with increasing emphasis on sphincter-preserving procedures and improved survival outcomes. Low anterior resection (LAR) has become a preferred surgical approach for many patients with mid and low rectal cancers because it avoids permanent colostomy while maintaining oncologic safety. However, preservation of the anal sphincter does not necessarily guarantee preservation of normal bowel function. A substantial number of patients experience a constellation of bowel symptoms collectively termed Anterior Resection Syndrome (ARS), also commonly known as Low Anterior Resection Syndrome (LARS). ARS represents one of the most challenging postoperative complications affecting colorectal cancer survivors. Although not life-threatening, it can severely compromise physical, psychological, and social well-being. Patients often report embarrassment, anxiety, social isolation, and reduced work productivity due to unpredictable bowel habits and fecal incontinence. Recognition of ARS as a chronic functional disorder is crucial for comprehensive postoperative care.

Pathophysiology

The pathogenesis of ARS is complex and multifactorial. Several anatomical and physiological changes contribute to postoperative bowel dysfunction.

Loss of Rectal Reservoir Function

The rectum normally acts as a storage reservoir for feces. Surgical removal of all or part of the rectum reduces compliance and storage capacity, resulting in frequent bowel movements and urgency.

Autonomic Nerve Damage

Pelvic surgery may damage sympathetic and parasympathetic nerves responsible for bowel motility and continence. Nerve injury can impair anorectal coordination and sensory perception

Internal Anal Sphincter Dysfunction

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Partial injury to the internal anal sphincter during surgery can reduce resting anal pressure and contribute to fecal leakage.

Effects of Radiotherapy

Neoadjuvant radiotherapy can cause fibrosis, ischemia, and reduced rectal elasticity. Radiation-induced neuropathy may further worsen anorectal dysfunction.

Altered Colonic Motility

Changes in colonic transit and abnormal motility patterns after surgery may contribute to stool fragmentation and clustering.

Risk Factors

Several factors increase the likelihood of developing ARS:

- Low tumor location
- Total mesorectal excision
- Neoadjuvant chemoradiotherapy
- Temporary ileostomy
- Anastomotic leakage
- Advanced age
- Female gender in some studies
- Extensive pelvic dissection

Patients undergoing ultra-low anterior resection are particularly vulnerable because minimal rectal tissue remains after surgery.

Diagnosis and Assessment

Diagnosis is primarily clinical and based on symptom evaluation. A detailed postoperative history should assess bowel frequency, continence, urgency, and impact on quality of life.

Important assessment tools include:

- LARS score
- Wexner incontinence score
- Quality-of-life questionnaires
- Anorectal manometry
- Endoanal ultrasonography
- Defecography in selected cases

These investigations help identify functional abnormalities and guide individualized management

Management Strategies

Dietary and Lifestyle Modification

Dietary adjustment is often the first-line intervention. Patients are advised to:

- Avoid trigger foods such as caffeine, alcohol, and spicy meals
- Increase soluble fiber intake
- Maintain adequate hydration
- Consume small, frequent meals

Food diaries may help identify symptom-provoking foods.

Pharmacologic Therapy

Medications commonly used include:

- Loperamide for diarrhea and urgency
- Bulking agents for stool consistency
- Bile acid sequestrants in selected patients
- Probiotics for gut microbiota modulation

Drug therapy should be individualized based on predominant symptoms

Pelvic Floor Rehabilitation

Pelvic floor muscle training and biofeedback therapy can improve continence and bowel control. Physiotherapy aims to strengthen sphincter function and enhance rectal sensitivity

Transanal Irrigation

Transanal irrigation helps empty the distal colon and reduce clustering and incontinence episodes. It is increasingly used for patients with severe symptoms refractory to conservative treatment

Sacral Neuromodulation

Neuromodulation techniques stimulate sacral nerves to improve bowel function. Early studies demonstrate promising outcomes in carefully selected patients

Surgical Options

In severe refractory cases, permanent colostomy may be considered to improve quality of life. Although often viewed as a last resort, some patients experience significant relief after diversion.

Psychological and Social Impact

The psychosocial burden of ARS is substantial. Patients may avoid social gatherings, travel, and professional

activities due to fear of incontinence. Depression, anxiety, and impaired self-esteem are common but frequently underrecognized.

Comprehensive survivorship care should therefore include psychological counseling, patient education, and support groups. Open communication between clinicians and patients is essential for reducing stigma and improving treatment adherence.

Conclusion

Anterior Resection Syndrome is a common yet often underestimated complication following sphincter-preserving rectal surgery. Although survival rates for rectal cancer have improved significantly, postoperative bowel dysfunction remains a major determinant of patient quality of life. Early recognition, standardized assessment, and multidisciplinary management are critical for optimizing functional recovery. Continued research into preventive strategies and novel therapeutic approaches will play an important role in improving survivorship outcomes for patients undergoing rectal cancer treatment.

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